

Jonathan Edwards and Revivals: Contours, Conflicts, and Consequences

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It will come as no surprise that in the course of biblical history, the people of God have experienced spiritual advances as well as spiritual setbacks. Israel's prayers have been captured in exultant praise as well as despairing lament. Though the Lord was confessed as the keeper of Israel, not allowing his people's feet to stumble (Ps 121), on occasions they also had cause to beseech him to act in power to revive their nation and to restore their fortunes (Ps 85). Formed by promissory hope, the people of God longed for the day when cosmic harmony would be reestablished, as we note for example when the disciples inquired of Jesus in Acts 1 as to when the Kingdom would be restored to Israel. Just as the natural world experiences different seasons in regular sequence, so it was assumed God would honor his covenant to bring abundance again after periods of pruning. Was not such a divine posture central to the experience and expectation of his people when he vowed to be their God by drawing close to them in blessing (Num 6:24–26)?

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), preacher, pastor, and theologian of revival in Northampton, Massachusetts, witnessed, nurtured and supervised several extended periods of revival among God’s people. There had previously been five different seasons of revival, known as “harvests,” in the town during the sixty-year ministry of his grandfather Solomon Stoddard (1670–1729), but there was something distinctly new about the revivals which Edwards himself cultivated in 1734–35, and 1740–41. Edwards did not intend to overthrow the theological convictions of his Puritan forebears—he was a conservative Protestant in the Reformed tradition after all—but he did want to inflect those same commitments with a renewed and contemporary sense of direct access to the divine, or divine closeness experienced in blessing. In his estimation, the Congregational church of New England needed revival to shed its ossified structures and to refocus its spiritual life. The Puritan errand to the wilderness, a journey navigated originally with distinct spiritual coordinates, needed new maps to recalibrate its course. Edwards’s own powerful experience of the Lord in 1720 as he walked in the fields and woods near his family home in East Windsor, recounted in his *Personal Narrative* of 1739, provided a template for renewal which he projected onto the larger historical drama. He had longed for an experience of the “power of godliness” that had not up to now been part of his religious duties or experience, a longing which he lamented was absent in his pastoral circles, and a longing not dissimilar from many in our own day. He wanted to see revival in his church.

Though many Christians throughout history have experienced longings for renewal, the precise contours of Edwards’s longing and opportunities for fulfilment in his church in Northampton (or later in Stockbridge on the frontier between 1750–1758) were of course textured by the modern world in which they were located. This was a period in which Enlightenment philosophy had attempted to marginalize divine activity in the world, either cautiously or caustically according to the temperament of the thinker. This was a period in which old forms of commerce were giving way to new global markets in which the cash economy would reign supreme, and in which people consequently developed a new sense of autonomy and authority, economic or political, to make their own way in the world. This was a period when natural philosophy saw advances in medicine, physics, and psychology, reshaping how an individual might make sense of their bodily interactions

and spiritual inclinations within their experience of time and space. Doug Sweeney usefully describes this context as generating “Protestantism with an eighteenth-century twist,” and Catherine Brekus speaks of the rise of this kind of revivalist Christianity as a “vector of modernity.”¹ To examine Edwards and the revivals is not only to ask theological questions, but to situate possible theological answers within a context which suggests historical contingency. Revivals look different in various social locations. By extension, any longing for revival must acknowledge that God is free to do things differently from the past, and can answer prayers for renewal in any way he sees fit.

For this reason, a comparison with the nature of revival in the Reformation is instructive. Strikingly, renewal of the church in Electoral Saxony in the sixteenth century did not involve mass gatherings in public places, nor did it lead in its wake to extraordinary experiences of physical epiphenomena. Indeed, to gather any such large group in the marketplace of Wittenberg for instance would have been regarded as seditious. Crowds did accumulate to ransack and burn some churches, inspired by von Karlstadt in Luther’s absence in 1522, but this was not a posture of revival but of anger, destruction and frustration at the slow pace of reform permitted by Luther’s prince, Frederick the Wise. As a consequence, Luther was called back from his involuntary captivity under house arrest in the Wartburg (1521–1522) to restore order. Luther preached in consecrated ecclesiastical spaces, for example in the Black Monastery in Wittenberg or in St Mary’s parish church, and not in open fields nor in church cemeteries or private homes. Indeed, the opposite was the case: due to territorial politics, his travelling and appearances were severely constrained by papal edict. Freedom of movement and of expression was not his experience. He could only visit synods or colloquies in those places where there was to be found a sympathetic prince. Here was no itinerant who sailed oceans or who gathered an audience in convenient outdoor locations. He offered no easy precedent to the revivalists of the eighteenth century.²

The revivals that Edwards supervised are therefore best described as artefacts of modernity, a way that God chose to revive his church under uniquely modern conditions. This article has the goal to present both Edwards’s theological reflection on the revivals, and to outline some of the concrete ways that he sought to revive the church of his day. For Edwards,

the revivals were not merely the result of human connivance, nor were they unfocused or random in their outcomes. Their goal was to empower individuals for the sake of the prosperity of the church. He remains an example of a leader for whom both head and heart, truth and light, were to be coordinated in daily experience and exemplified in the revivals themselves.

EDWARDS DEFENDS PATTERNS OF DIVINE AGENCY IN THE REVIVALS

The revivalist tradition is now a significant feature of American, and by extension global, evangelicalism. It has shaped and reshaped expressions of conservative Christianity in vastly different contexts and has given to them common genetic material. But before there was revivalism there were revivals, and Edwards's role in the revivals of the eighteenth century is not only load bearing for later expressions of revivals, but distinct from them as well, for Edwards did not come to this mode of evangelism with a particular model in mind. He was not aiming to confect a particular sociological strategy to achieve revival. Indeed, he frequently referred to the events he experienced as this "surprising work of God," acknowledging thereby that divine freedom must be given priority in interpreting experiences of awakening, regeneration, and conversion.³ Of course, Edwards was aware of the seasons of revival that had visited Northampton under his grandfather's ministry, and no doubt hoped for just another such visitation, but this did not mean that he could anticipate exactly how or when God might pour out his Spirit afresh, nor would any prayer for revival invariably expedite any such outpouring. The Connecticut River Awakening of 1734–35 was in Edwards's mind linked to his preaching on justification through faith in that same season, no doubt with Reformation precedent in mind, but he was not simply trying to replicate the experience of John and Charles Wesley and their confrontation with Luther's preface to the Romans at the Moravian meeting house on Aldersgate Street May 48, 1738, for this happened later!⁴ In his preaching, Edwards wanted to defend the gratuity of grace against Arminian incursions in New England, but this was not the same as curating an experience of revival. He instead seems to have been caught on the hop when God moved powerfully to bring revival to his town.

Though Edwards was apparently unprepared for revival when it came, a major part of his whole theological project had nonetheless been to

resacralize the world, which in contemporary philosophy was increasingly explained without reference to the divine.⁵ It is not that Enlightenment philosophy was necessarily atheistic, but in the English-speaking world it was moving in an inductivist direction with confidence attached to human capacity to use sense perception to investigate and interpret experience. For Edwards, God was close to the creation for it was an emanation of the divine, and his handiwork was visible to those trained to see it, even if this was a minority report among thought leaders of his day.⁶ Indeed, it can be argued that the whole evangelical agenda of the eighteenth century could be built around that “one thing needful,” the encounter of the individual with God who had made himself accessible to the human soul.⁷ In resacralizing the world, or at least in asserting that God had not been evacuated from it, Edwards is doing more than merely describing divine propinquity within the world, but is also thereby asserting divine sovereignty over it. Time and space are creatures which are subject to the God who made them.

Edwards fashioned a historical framework to understand revivals in his treatise *History of the Work of Redemption*, a series of sermons preached in 1739, and published posthumously in 1774. Here he presents an overview of all human history, beginning with the creation and preceding to his own day, showing how God’s purposes in time and space both proceed in an orderly sequence and yet are not to be understood mechanically but as an expression of God’s freedom to pour out his Spirit and to revive his church at any particular moment in the fashion that he chooses. In reviving his people, God oversaw a series of lockstep advances, a kind of revolution with a ratchet, that advanced the Kingdom of Christ which could not thereafter be annulled or reversed: “It may here be observed that from the fall of man to this day wherein we live the Work of Redemption in its effect has mainly been carried on by remarkable pourings out of the Spirit of God . . . The Scriptures hold forth as though there should be several successive great and glorious events by which this glorious work shall be accomplished.”⁸

Though understanding providential history through such distinct and demarcated stages might appear foreign to us, Edwards was persuaded: “The setting up the Kingdom of Christ is chiefly accomplished by four successive great events.”⁹ He believed that in the first instance the Kingdom came when Christ ministered on the earth. Secondly, the Kingdom came when the Roman Empire gave a new legal position to Christians under the rule

of Constantine. Thirdly, the Kingdom came when in the Middle Ages Satan sustained a final though not immediately fatal blow that led to the faithful witness of the Reformers. And fourthly, the Kingdom had come with the revivals of his own day, or at least the experience of revival of which the first fruits were evident around him, which heralded the arrival of the millennium in the not-too-distant future. These eighteenth-century birth pangs would last yet some centuries, culminating in the physical return of the Lord Jesus at the end of the age when the millennial Kingdom would be inaugurated. These revivals were according to Harry Stout “simultaneously tangible events, prophetic signs, and portents of coming triumphs.”¹⁰ Avihu Zakai has argued that Edwards’s understanding of divine visitation by his Spirit is quite simply an assertion of divine agency and divine sovereignty in history, a critique of Enlightenment as well as Arminian assumptions concerning human capacity. He writes:

In both dimensions [the world of nature and the experience of time] Edwards strove to find an agent—the atom in the physical realm and revival in history—through which to affirm God’s absolute sovereignty ... Conceived in such terms, history evidently has no particularist center, in the form of a state or a nation, as previous ecclesiastical historians had portrayed it. God’s absolute sovereignty and majesty is the locus of history, and the dynamism underlying the historical process is the universal power of the divine agency.¹¹

Edwards (with his eighteenth-century compatriots) superimposed millennialism onto earlier understanding of revivals to create something theologically distinct from previous models, as Crawford Gribben has suggested: “These early American evangelicals generated their own eschatological traditions, and, throughout the early and mid-eighteenth centuries, recycled older expectations of the revival or true religion in an overtly eschatological context.”¹²

It is significant as well that in justifying the necessity and urgency of revivals to forward God’s plans, Edwards does not chiefly appeal to human responsibility. Nor does he especially use the text of Matthew 28:16–20 as today we might have expected of him. Before William Carey’s focus on the Great Commission, Edwards’s global Gospel vision (which happily for this Antipodean author does include “terra Australis”!) was framed

and promoted by the language of the Kingdom of God acknowledging both its universalizing and personalizing scope.¹³ If the revivals do more than awaken and convert individuals, but in addition reform and refresh churches and towns, then the divine public presence that the Kingdom of God betokens is a central explanatory trope in his thinking. The Kingdom of God is not something that we build but is something that the Lord creates. Divine freedom or the priority of the divine will is secured in explanations of the awakening.¹⁴

God expresses his power in both time and space when he pours out his Spirit to revive his people. Indeed, we note how pneumatology plays such a significant role in Edwards's anatomy of revivals. Though we might imagine that the incorporeal language of "spirit" does not require reflection on spatial reality, quite the contrary is true: for the Spirit is poured out like a fluid, the Spirit fills the human soul like a substance, and the Spirit shapes communities like an artisan at work at the wheel. The Spirit works to achieve the grand harmony, in which all created reality finds its true purpose and rest.¹⁵ In just the same way that the millennium coordinates the horizons of time and space—a period of one thousand years with Christ reigning unopposed on the earth—so the ministry of the Spirit in generating the new birth of individuals and thereby nurturing corporate revival enables insights into the sovereignty of Christ within all of daily experience. Tucker Adkins has well argued that dimensions of time and of space are embedded within Edwards's vision for ministry in general and for the revivals in particular. Engaging in distinctly modern ways with these dimensions was critical to explanation of the revivals:

Through their manipulation of bodies, buildings, and terrain, revivalists manifested new birth religion and invigorated their critique of established Christianity. Awakened believers' shrill, marathon awakenings in fields, streets, and houses functioned less as byproducts of theological convictions, and more as the means by which evangelicalism became legible in lived experience ... it was through the rearrangement of spaces and bodies that early evangelicals dissented from established religious culture and crafted alternative authority structures, beliefs and practices.¹⁶

The revivals are not random events within the historical record but patterned expressions of God's initiative, power, and ordered design to prosper the people of his covenant.

EDWARDS VALIDATES PATTERNS OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE IN THE REVIVALS

As we have seen, Edwards defended divine freedom as the foundation of God's "surprising work" to bring revival. But his theological reflection on the revivals worked nonetheless to provide a sense of order and patterned expectation, within which both individuals and local congregations could situate their experience of God's freedom. God had a "grand design" for the world identified ultimately as the Kingdom of Christ, which both incorporated the church in its prospects and validated the vicissitudes of revival.¹⁷ Edwards averred: "If it were not for the church, the world would be destroyed, inasmuch as all things here below are for the church's sake."¹⁸ Edwards believed that the world was to be ordered to the church, which was the primary category of human experience and historical design in the Scriptures, under whose banner all else was to be explained. The revivals provoked many challenging, perhaps confusing, pastoral and personal scenarios, but this did not mean that there would be no providential order as their outcome.

Edwards was committed to expounding this order. Confronted by opposition to the revivals from traditionalists like Charles Chauncy in Boston, and concerned by unhinged promotion of the revivals by radicals like James Davenport from Long Island, Edwards set himself the goal of analyzing spiritual manifestations and commending spiritual empowerment in his teaching and writing. Powerful experience of the Lord was not necessarily at odds with his will and purpose, in contrast with the position of Chauncy who, as Reklis explains, saw enthusiasm as tantamount to rebellion.¹⁹ Essentially, Edwards sought to highlight the difference between true and false Christians drawing on contemporary psychological theories and using nuanced theological reflection. He was a theologian of regenerative experience in the revivalist mode. He wrote *The Faithful Narrative* (1737), not only to give an account of events in Northampton, but also to suggest how previous Puritan thinkers had forced experiences

of conversion onto a Procrustean bed, assuming that all conversions should proceed through the same sequence of steps.²⁰ In *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival* (1742), he sought to explain how the experiences of those enjoying revivalist power should not be seen as deluded Christians under spiritual attack. First a sermon series of 1742–3 then a treatise published in 1746, his magnum opus, *Religious Affections*, contains a series of philosophically shaped and theologically defined conclusions regarding what experiences are certainly not from the Lord, and which experiences certainly are. Strong impressions, for example, are not a sign that a person has been born again, but growth in godly virtues do represent a sure sign of the new birth. Of course, to categorize experience in these taxonomic ways might be regarded as a modern, perhaps scientific approach to the affairs of the soul, but beyond this methodology Edwards was engaging with a profoundly systematic concern which transcended his historical moment, namely how the doctrine of regeneration should be understood in relation to the doctrine of revelation. Fundamentally, the question was raised whether a person who had experienced the new birth, known pejoratively as an “enthusiast”—an entailment of the “Puritan desire to access God directly”—was equivalent to “one who falsely claimed to be inspired.”²¹ This was a dangerous accusation, emerging first in the earliest days of settlement in Puritan New England.²²

Not limited to the abstract issue of the nature of revelation, a further anxiety was provoked in the revivals of the eighteenth-century by the very concrete matter of “dreams, visions, and involuntary bodily movements,” and whether they could be explained “in terms of mental illness rather than heresy.”²³ Unusual physical manifestations resulting from emotional preaching brought disrepute on the movement generally. For example, during a tag-team preaching weekend in Enfield on a hot July day in 1741, Edwards could not finish his sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* for the meeting house where he was preaching was filled with cries, screams, shouts, and even barking.²⁴ Convulsions on the floor of the church were not exceptional. Indeed, though this occasion was most unusual—a parish without a minister had convened a showcase of itinerant preachers in the height of the summer—Edwards has frequently been identified with this sermon alone out of the thousands he preached! Despite a myriad of decontextualized quotations or ungenerous assumptions, this

sermon was decidedly not typical of his ministry. On the contrary, when James Davenport and his cohort in 1743 decided to burn books that were counted as dishonoring of the Lord, igniting a bonfire of the vanities in New London, Connecticut, and provocatively parading down the main street without clothes, Edwards was called upon to calm nerves and chastise ringleaders. He may not have been keen to prolong such physical expressions of newfound faith, but he did nevertheless believe that the body was not independent of the affections, or soul, and should in the end be integrated with other experiences of the Spirit. Kathryn Reklis, in her book on the relationship between beauty, physicality, and the project of modernity, writes positively of Edwards's contribution:

Bodily ecstasy was not just an effervescent effect of a spiritual experience, but was at the heart of a theological system, one marked by consummation in God's overwhelming sovereignty, which Edwards colloquially described as 'being swallowed up in God' ... more importantly, he was also the foremost defender during the revivals of bodily ecstasy as an experience of salvation, writing explicitly about the role of the body in theological knowledge, the centrality of affect in spiritual experience, and anchoring all of this in a theological system grounded in beauty as his governing concept of divine reality.²⁵

Tucker Adkins has also recently argued that the Great Awakening must be understood not simply as a recovery of doctrine, but more complexly as the affirmation of God's work in time and space: "born-again men and women across the Atlantic world understood early evangelical religion as a corporeal, sonic, and spatial phenomenon. Early awakeners did not see the Holy Spirit's raining down as a theological abstraction."²⁶ Further, wherever it occurred, such bodily reactions might be understood as a kind of resistance to English models of physical propriety and decorum:

English evangelicals contributed to a stream of transatlantic Protestant revivalism whose practical and theological trademarks harshly dissented from the ... expectations of the well-to-do Britishness their country proudly perfected. The impulse to contradict the physical signs of national identity and social refinement was a persistent theme within early evangelicalism.²⁷

New appreciation of the physical and encouragement of the experiential were endemic in validations of quotidian Christian life in early modernity.

And these concerns were not exotic questions for Edwards, for he acknowledged in *Some Thoughts* that a woman unnamed in the text—but known to us as his wife Sarah—experienced rapturous movements of the Spirit, with some suggestion of her experiencing levitation. Within his own home he had to negotiate what appears to be extreme physical ramifications of spiritual experience. The recent discovery of a text written in her own hand describing the event in the first person has reinforced the belief that Sarah was a “new light,” someone for whom the indwelling of the Spirit was a powerfully visceral experience.²⁸ In his account of her experience, however, Edwards first recognized how she was “frequently attended with very great effects on the body,” before qualifying them by pointing out that their impact was felt “without [her] being in any trance, or being at all deprived of the exercise of the bodily senses.”²⁹ Though Edwards did not want to “discredit bodily exercises or visions entirely,” he understood them as at best incidental accompaniments of authentic conversion.³⁰ More generally, it had become common for pastors like Edwards to affirm “the central importance of affective response” to preaching.³¹

In all these cases and more, Edwards approached those experiencing the revivals as a physician of the soul, wielding a scalpel rather than a club. His posture of leadership was not to quench the possibility of the Spirit being at work, but to circumscribe how the Spirit’s work might be understood, both in the short term and in the long term. His genius was to identify and encourage patterns of experience which were open to fresh movements of the Spirit without condoning any experience for which the Spirit’s inspiration was claimed. Edwards was self-consciously taking a mediating position between the “Old Light” and the “New Light” factions. Thomas Kidd has well observed that the revivals in New England in the 1730s and 1740s did not pit two parties against each other, but rather that there was a more complicated relationship between these two parties and a third, of which Edwards was an eloquent spokesman.³² Weeds were growing among the wheat, as it were, and Edwards’s task was to identify the plants that were rooted in good soil, requiring astute observation and patient explanation. He was both permission-giving and experience-denying in the kinds of leadership he exercised. He not only prayed and preached

for revival, he also was called up to explain the revivals in theological terms, a significant combination.³³

EDWARDS NURTURES PATTERNS OF MINISTRY RENEWAL IN THE REVIVALS

The experience of regenerate life encountered by Edwards and others was such a treasured gift that new patterns of ministry were encouraged, even devised, to nurture the “power of godliness” that God had freshly made available. Edwards did not deviate from the traditional Protestant ecclesiological position that made sermon and sacrament the focus of human appropriation of grace, but he did recognize that the church had to rethink its ministry structures to accommodate new contexts and challenges.³⁴ For Edwards, the center of the church was unchanging, though the perimeter of the church was plastic. The church was like a tree in Edwards’s revised ecclesiology: rooted doctrinally, but responsive to its environment in its ministry shape.

Even with such an ecclesiological anchor, Edwards was swept along by a maelstrom of ministry pressures which encouraged his innovations. The local revival in the Connecticut River valley of 1734–35 had been extended in the “Great Awakening” of 1740–41, confronting Edwards with a new set of demographic and spiritual realities, requiring his response. George Whitefield, an Anglican clergyman who was not licensed to a particular parish, exercised an itinerant ministry which took in England, Wales, countries of the Caribbean, as well as all thirteen of the American colonies. Where once there had been a settled relationship between the “parson” and his people, now preaching was detached from that set of relational assumptions concerning authority. Sermons were now in one sense free-floating moments which superimposed a new kind of contingent authority on the preacher and his audience simultaneously. Whitefield, for example, imagined himself as the one from whom the divine presence radiated as he preached in the fields, with the corollary that he saw his auditors structured as encircling gradations of holiness the closer or the further they stood away from him as he declared and embodied the presence of the Lord. The pre-publicity he sponsored before he arrived in a town, sponsored by his travel companion William Seward, was likewise a

foreign way of conceiving how to initiate a pastoral relationship with those who were to place themselves voluntarily under his itinerant authority. In fact, Whitefield was not alone as an itinerant exhorter. A revived sense of agency through the experience of new birth led to many exhorters taking up ministries, either settled or itinerant, to preach regeneration and the power of godliness. A new world of mobility and agency would demand revisions of outdated ministry structures, as Timothy Hall comments of itinerants who placed themselves within a “mobile, dynamic, expansive, and potentially unbounded community.”³⁵ New kinds of authority structures, essentially more democratic, were being born, though it should also be acknowledged that ministry out of doors had found an earlier expression in the “holy fairs” or public, expansive, sacramental occasions in Scotland—a necessary precursor to less settled and more itinerant evangelistic events.³⁶

Further, in New England, meetinghouses assumed hierarchically ordered seating arrangements, with—not surprisingly—the wealthier offering their tithe for better seats closer to the preacher, and the poorer members paying for theirs further away, possibly even in the balcony. However, out of doors, this kind of structured auditorium was of course impossible. Family members did not necessarily stand together in the fields. Indeed, men and women who were not from the same family would likely have stood in close proximity to each other, with the old and young, rich and poor, black and white commingling as they gathered. Though John Butler and Frank Lambert have argued against the notion that there was anything that the various experiences of revival might have in common (instead affirming that the revivals were a later literary or theological construct), Stout has made the case that revivals did indeed represent something bigger, both in terms of common experiences and disruptive practices.³⁷ This was a “Great Awakening” for it profoundly impacted both ministry assumptions as well as ministry activities in many different locations almost simultaneously. As Mark Valeri has argued, a new “social solidarity” and “connections to a wider moral community ... that transcended particular congregations, towns and parochial discipline” were features of Edwards’s theological vision as a consequence of the revivals.³⁸ Indeed, despite Puritan congregations focusing on the meetinghouse as a center of discipline and order, their heirs prized the common dislocating experience of being born again as a way of expressing their bonds with other believers.³⁹ The imperatives of

evangelism and discipleship might render the constraints of traditional ecclesiology redundant, or at least compromised.

A great example of this came in the 1740s when Edwards was approached by clerical colleagues in Scotland to organize a “concert” of prayer, whereby, at predetermined times and days and months, believers would gather in different countries to lift up their voices to pray in concert for the advance of the Gospel and the prosperity of God’s kingdom on the earth. Edwards was most amenable to the idea, and he wrote *An Humble Attempt* in 1747 to explain and justify his hopes for this initiative. It caused great consternation, for it would implicitly critique Sunday services as inadequate in their scope and impact. Why would a new event have to be arranged for prayer? Was not the traditional means of praying sufficient? Indeed, the Concert of Prayer was innovative in other ways, for it gave the opportunity for lay people, both men and women, to exercise their gifts of leadership to advance the cause of global missions. While many of Edwards’s Puritan peers had focused on the local, drawing distinct boundaries between their ministry and the ministries of those around them, Edwards was more inclined to affirm either porous boundaries or global perspectives. As Janice Knight has noted, Edwards represented the minority opinion in New England, belonging to the Sibbesian school, which praised and prized the integrity of the Spirit’s work outside of traditional categories of ministry, so his commitment to revival beyond the local instantiations of church or denomination had both theoretical and practical dimensions:

Edwards watched and worked for the advent of the Kingdom. He believed that increasing the numbers of the faithful was instrumental in bringing forth those glorious days. Exhortations to the saints, unions in prayer, and efforts at international alliances with other churches were some of the ways Edwards labored to knit the churches and bring forth the Kingdom.⁴⁰

It must however be acknowledged that the revivals did not only lead to renewal or revival. There was also the experience of declension and backsliding in individual churches, which caused great grief to their pastoral leadership, as well as division between churches which had taken a different view of threats to institutional authority, physical manifestations of spiritual experience, and the nature of clerical leadership. Edwards,

for example, applied several different strategies to sustain the fervency of the revivals after the initial flames of the Spirit were no longer in evidence. He preached longer sermon series to catch up bigger theological themes and pastoral ownership: *Charity and its Fruit* was preached in 1738 as an exposition of 1 Corinthians 13 when the “Little Revival” was waning. He introduced covenant renewal ceremonies in 1742 to confront those who had been warmed by the Spirit’s visitation to maintain their commitments to spiritual vitality in the context of corporate accountability. When doctrine seemed to fall on deaf ears in his “sermon-proof” congregation, Edwards took up the task of editing the journal of David Brainerd, a young missionary to the Kaunaumee and Crossweeksung tribes, to promote the personal example of a consecrated regenerate life. Though Brainerd had asked him not to publish his writings after his untimely death aged 29, Edwards ignored the plea in order to offer an alternative strategy for sustaining revivalist energy. It wasn’t just that Edwards acknowledged and cultivated new ministry patterns within the revivals, he also recycled or reapplied more traditional ministry patterns to prolong the experience of the revivals when their heat no longer warmed. Not that Edwards obsessed about the dramatic quality of the revivals. He preferred as a consequence of revivalist fervor not to look for shooting stars but planets in the sky, for he believed that a visitation of the Spirit would entail fruit of the Spirit in the longer term.

The division that the Great Awakening generated is of course a more tragic and perhaps unintended dimension of the revivals. Not only did pamphlet warfare between various factions exacerbate division, it also embodied the pain of separation as churches split, friendships were compromised, and much energy was wasted in creating duplicate structures or tending the wounds of spiritual combatants. Exhaustion ensued, which along with the distractions of the revolutionary era from the 1760s extinguished much of the vitality of the mid-century innovations. Yet despite these challenges, Edwards’s own understanding and practice of revival were carried beyond the revolution by many of his mentees into the new century. His commitment to patterns of ministry as enablers of means of grace was transmitted through the likes of Joseph Bellamy, Samuel Hopkins, or even his son Jonathan Edwards Junior, and resurfaced in the nineteenth century in the indigenous school of ministry known as the New Divinity, which in due course was institutionally housed at Andover Seminary. The Second Great

Awakening in New England had much to thank Edwards for. His patterning of divine agency, personal experience, and ministry commitments in a revivalist mode have ultimately had a very long tail.⁴¹

EDWARDS SHAPES THE NATURE OF VITAL PIETY IN THE MODERN WORLD

Words perdure even when their essential meaning undergoes dramatic change. The word “evangelical” is one such example. In the period of the Reformation, Protestant leaders would use this word to highlight the biblical character of their convictions, or to replace the pope as the center of the church with the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the foundational glue that holds the body together, combining his promises, presence and purposes as the necessary and sufficient focus of life and ministry. I have no quibble with this approach to the Reformation. However, I do want to affirm a subsequent and now common use of the word “evangelical” to refer to the distinct changes which the revivals of the eighteenth century brought to the experience and agenda of conservative Protestants in the north Atlantic world. No longer were ecumenical creeds or confessions of faith adequate by themselves to promote a close experience of the Lord or to capture an experience of the power of godliness, or vital piety. The revivals introduced a new set of expectations concerning authority, new practices to reach the world for Christ, and new insights into religious psychology, which cannot now be undone. Even engagement with the dimension of space became a strategy for such a defense of vital piety: “Evangelicals formed their movement by fastening their ‘new birth’ theological emphasis to profound reassessments of when and where Christian experience took place.”⁴² Modern conditions have shaped, sometimes consciously and sometimes accidentally, the experience of believers and their churches in the Protestant tradition. The revivals of which Edwards was a leader are still powerfully formative of Christian experience, though we must recognize that Christian experience—however it has been formed—is not an endpoint, but rather a means through which we come to praise the God who made and redeemed us in Christ, and who has taken the initiative to draw close to us and consequently to draw us close to himself. Revivals and revivalism as I have presented them here represent artefacts of modernity, merely the “operational vehicle that God

would employ to accomplish his magisterial plan of cosmic redemption,” and therefore are contingent and not constitutive of Christian experience. Evangelicals represent a great crowd of witnesses from all ages who have sought to promote vital piety in their own context even while acknowledging the common life of the Kingdom that is their birthright as believers.⁴³

- ¹ Douglas A. Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story: A History of the Movement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 23–24; Catherine A. Brekus, *Sarah Osborn's World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 8.
- ² Further see Rhys S. Bezzant, “Telling the Story from Luther’s Break of Dawn to Edwards’s Glorious Gospel Light,” in Rhys S. Bezzant (ed.), *Edwards, Germany, and Transatlantic Contexts* (New Directions in Jonathan Edwards Studies 3; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022), 11–29.
- ³ Indeed, the full title of the account of the awakening is *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*. See Jonathan Edwards, “A Faithful Narrative,” in C. C. Goen (ed.), *The Great Awakening* (The Works of Jonathan Edwards 4; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 97–211.
- ⁴ Edwards identified the doctrine of justification as essential to this earlier revival. See Jonathan Edwards, “Preface to *Discourses on Various Important Subjects*,” in Max X. Lesser (ed.), *Sermons and Discourses 1734–1738* (Works of Jonathan Edwards 19; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 793–98, especially 795.
- ⁵ See further Avihu Zakai, “Jonathan Edwards and the Language of Nature: The Re-Enchantment of the World in the Age of Scientific Reasoning,” *The Journal of Religious History* 26, no. 1 (2002): 15–41.
- ⁶ Jonathan Edwards, “Dissertation I: Concerning the End for Which God Created the World,” in John E. Smith (ed.), *Ethical Writings* (The Works of Jonathan Edwards 8; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 399–536, especially 531.
- ⁷ Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Spirit of Early Evangelicalism: True Religion in a Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 5, 48.
- ⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption* (The Works of Jonathan Edwards 9; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 143, 459.
- ⁹ Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, 351. The contours of each of these stages is expounded by Edwards in sermon eighteen of the Work of Redemption series.
- ¹⁰ Harry S. Stout, “Edwards as Revivalist,” in Stephen J. Stein (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards* (Cambridge: University Press, 2007), 125–43, especially 136.
- ¹¹ Avihu Zakai, *Jonathan Edwards's Philosophy of History: The Reenchantment of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* (Princeton: University Press, 2003), 154, 247. Pace Zakai, it has more recently been argued that Edwards’s eschatology did indeed incorporate a particularist center, namely Canaan: Victor Zhu, *America's Theologian Beyond America: Jonathan Edwards, Israel, and China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).
- ¹² Crawford Gribben, *Evangelical Millennialism in the Trans-Atlantic World, 1500–2000* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 17.
- ¹³ See Jonathan Edwards, “Misc. 26,” in Thomas A. Schafer (ed.), *The “Miscellanies”* (Entry Nos. a-z, aa-zz, 1-500) (The Works of Jonathan Edwards 13; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 212–13.
- ¹⁴ Further on the importance of the Kingdom of God, see Rhys S. Bezzant, “A Providential Plumblin for Pastoral Practice: Edwards’s Exposition of the Kingdom of God,” *Jonathan Edwards Studies* 10, no. 2 (2020): 129–136.
- ¹⁵ For further on the work of the Spirit in Edwards’s systematic thinking, see Michael A. G. Haykin, *Jonathan Edwards: The Holy Spirit in Revival: The Lasting Influence of the Holy Spirit in the Heart of Man* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2005).

- 16 Tucker Adkins, "New Birth, New World: Evangelical Space in Eighteenth-Century New England", *Fides et Historia* 53, no. 1 (2021): 17.
- 17 For further exposition of this "grand design," see Jonathan Edwards, "Approaching the End of God's Grand Design," in *Sermons and Discourses, 1743–1758*, ed. Wilson H. Kinnach (The Works of Jonathan Edwards 25; New Haven: Yale University Press 2006), 111–26.
- 18 With silent corrections, Jonathan Edwards, "151. Mt 5:13," in *Sermons, Series II, 1729–1731* (The Works of Jonathan Edwards Online 45; Edwards Center at Yale, accessed January 31, 2025), L.9r, <http://edwards.yale.edu>.
- 19 Kathryn Reklis, *Theology and the Kinesthetic Imagination: Jonathan Edwards and the Making of Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 103.
- 20 For further outlines of individual pieces of Edwards's writing, consult Nathan A. Finn and Jeremy Kimble eds., *A Reader's Guide to the Major Writings of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017).
- 21 Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 18, 16.
- 22 Not long after the European settlement of Massachusetts, the colony was divided by this very question, with Anne Hutchinson, a leading protagonist, at the center of the controversy. See the resources provided by David D. Hall, ed., *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636–1638: A Documentary History* (2nd edn.; Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).
- 23 Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James*, 18.
- 24 Interestingly, no mention is made of speaking in tongues on this occasion.
- 25 Reklis, *Theology and the Kinesthetic Imagination: Jonathan Edwards and the Making of Modernity*, 2, 9.
- 26 Tucker Adkins, *New Birth, New World: Religious Experience in the Awakened Atlantic World* (forthcoming with the University of Georgia Press), 12.
- 27 Adkins, *New Birth, New World*, 140.
- 28 This newly discovered text was donated to the Jonathan Edwards Center in 2019 by a descendant of the Edwards's family, and it is now the basis of a developing biography of Sarah Edwards by Harry Stout, Catherine Brekus, and Ken Minkema.
- 29 Edwards, "Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival," WJE 4:332.
- 30 Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James*, 45.
- 31 Richard Godbeer, *The Overflowing of Friendship: Love between Men and the Creation of the American Republic* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 95.
- 32 See in toto Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
- 33 Martin Lloyd-Jones, "Jonathan Edwards and the Crucial Importance of Revival," in *The Puritan Experiment in the New World: Westminster Conference 1976* (Rushden, Northamptonshire: Westminster Conference, 1976): 103–21, especially 109, 113.
- 34 For further analysis of the development of Edwards's ecclesiology, see Rhys S. Bezzant, *Jonathan Edwards and the Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 35 Timothy D. Hall, *Contested Boundaries: Itinerancy and the Reshaping of the Colonial American Religious World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 7. This book in toto provides an excellent introduction to modern pressures reshaping Protestant ministry.
- 36 See Leigh E. Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scotland and the Making of American Revivalism* (2nd edn.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989). And Kimberly Bracken Long, *The Eucharistic Theology of the American Holy Fairs* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011). It should be noted that itinerancy was not invented in the post-Reformation world, just reimagined, for even in the high medieval period Franciscans and Dominicans had travelled to preach and to evangelize as core to their vocation as friars.
- 37 See further Jon Butler, "Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretative Fiction," *Journal of American History* 69, no. 2 (1982): 305–325, or F. Lambert, "The Great Awakening as Artifact: George Whitefield and the Construction of Intercolonial Revival, 1739–1745," *Church History* 60, no. 2 (1991): 223–246; and Harry S. Stout, "What Made the Great Awakening Great?" in *Turning Points in the History of American Evangelicalism*, Heath W. Carter and Laura Rominger Porter, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 1–18.

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- ³⁸ Mark Valeri, "Forgiveness: From the Puritans to Jonathan Edwards", in *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630–1965*, Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh E. Schmidt, and Mark Valeri, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 35–48, especially 36, 42, 43.
- ³⁹ Douglas L. Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light: Experiencing Religious Awakenings in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 18.
- ⁴⁰ Janice Knight, *Orthodoxies in Massachusetts: Rereading American Puritanism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 208.
- ⁴¹ See also chapter four in Rhys S. Bezzant, *Edwards the Mentor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).
- ⁴² Adkins, *New Birth, New World*, 72.
- ⁴³ Stout, "Edwards as Revivalist," 126.