

# **Jonathan Edwards and The New Side/Old Side Presbyterian Schism**

(Years of Schism, 1742-58)

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*On How the thought and writings of Jonathan Edward's  
helped to bring resolution to the great conflicts  
that occurred during The Great Awakening  
in the American Colonies in General  
and to The Old Side/New Side Presbyterian Schism in particular.*

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**1998 – My Personal Introduction to the New Side/Old Side Debate**  
*Should we preach the Gospel of Justification to Covenant Children?*

In the summer of 1998 I was working as the Director of Youth Ministry for the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Synod. Among my duties was the responsibility to plan, staff, and oversee the summer conferences for our Middle School and High School Students. That summer we had planned an exciting High School Conference that featured an engaging program, a popular band to lead in us in worship, a group of accomplished seminar leaders, and a dynamic, young Reformed speaker. The conference was a rousing success. The evening speaker, in particular, connected deeply with students while beautifully presenting the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We had told the speaker before hand that we wanted him to help the students to rightly understand the idea of Justification by Faith and the extent of Christ's work on the Cross. He did an excellent job - placing special emphasis on the wrath of God and helping the students understand the doctrine of propitiation. Toward the end of the week, as the speaker closed his sermon, it was obvious that the Spirit of Christ was working in a powerful way among us. The young pastor, recognizing that God was working in the hearts of many students, invited anyone who wished further counsel or prayer to come to the front. To our amazement, nearly a third of the students made their way through the crowd. I invited pastors and youth leaders to come to the front to help us counsel and pray with students. For the next 30-40 minutes we prayed with students who were heartbroken over their sin. Many of them confessed that they had grown up in church but never understood the Gospel. I even spoke with a couple of youth leaders who admitted that they also had never understood the Gospel before that moment. They asked me to pray with them to receive Christ. It was an amazing evening. One I will not soon forget.

However, I later discovered that many of the pastors who attended the conference were angry. Nothing was said to me during the week, but in September of that year, two months after the conference, I attended our bi-annual board meeting. I expected a typical "nuts and bolts" meeting. Was I ever surprised! Several pastors were there to address a letter that they had sent to our board; a letter outlining a list of complaints that they had about our student conference. Even though the Gospel had been clearly proclaimed from a solid Reformed perspective, the pastors were incensed by the "emotionalism" of the evening. They felt that their particular

ministry had been undermined. Many of them said that they had taken their students through catechism and communicant's class and "how dare we suggest" that their students had no relationship with Christ. I sat at the table with my board members staring at me and wanting answers. I was caught totally unprepared. I tried to explain that the evening's emotion was not "emotionalism" but a genuine response to the proclamation of the Gospel. We had not planned or tried to manipulate such a response. It just happened. I couldn't understand why these pastors were angry instead of encouraged at how the Spirit of Christ had worked in the hearts of their students. Yet, it seemed that the more I spoke, the angrier the pastors became. This is when I first heard the term "New Side/Old Side". One of the pastors said to me, "How dare you undermine the work of the Church by imagining that our students are not Justified by Christ already. It is not your place to question the spiritual condition of our students. That is our job! This year's conference felt much like the old time Baptist camp meetings during the Great Awakening. After all this time, we're right back at the New Side/Old Side Controversy."

Of course, at that time, I had no idea what he was talking about. As I said, I had never before heard the phrase "*New Side/Old Side*". Soon after that meeting, I felt the need to resign from my position in order to preserve the peace and purity of the Church. I had become the face of the debate and our disunity was beginning to hinder the ministry. That following summer I took a position in a local ARP Church where I continued to do Youth Ministry; however, I have not forgotten the issues that led to my resignation. In the days following, I studied the Great Awakening in general and the New Side/Old Side debate in particular. As I read through articles and books I discovered that the pastor was right – "After all this time, we were right back at the New Side/Old Side debate." The issues and counter perspectives were almost identical. What a quandary! Were the Pastors correct in accusing us of undermining their ministry? Was it not our place to proclaim Justification by Faith to covenant children because it assumed that some of them were not regenerate? Or were we led of God to proclaim the Gospel to students who may have, prior to the conference, only been hearing a "form of religion" in their particular churches.

Were those particular pastors angry because they had been exposed? Or was there another option? Could it be that we were all preaching the Gospel, but Christ simply chose to

work powerfully on that particular night? For several years thereafter, I struggled with those questions. I certainly and firmly believe in the Reformed perspective concerning covenant children. I believe it is the responsibility of every church and every pastor to proclaim the Gospel, rich and powerful, to their covenant children in the godly hope that Christ would work in their hearts to bring them to regeneration. But what is regeneration if it is not regeneration of heart. Isn't it true that only Christ can do this great and mysterious work? If this is true, we must admit that no amount of intellectual assent to catechism, or right answers in a communicant's class, or presence at Church meetings, or attendance on mission trips, nor should any emotional experience, or intellectual adherence, or behavioral response positively indicate whether one has become regenerate. So, the question then is this: What are the indicators of true regeneration?

What a help Jonathan Edwards was to me as I worked through these questions! It was during those years following that I became familiar with Jonathan Edwards and his writings on Religious Affections. And, what a phenomenal help he was and is to those who continue to do battle on each side of this issue. Furthermore, though few seem to acknowledge Edward's contribution in this direction, his writings on Religious Affections were a great help to the resolution of the New Side/Old Side Controversy. Before we look at Edward's contributions, however, let's first consider the issues surrounding the Great Awakening. Was the Presbyterian Church the only Church denomination to find itself embroiled in conflict or were divisions created on a grander scale? And where exactly does Edwards arrive on the scene? One thing is certain - the Great Awakening in Colonial America, just like my summer experience in 1998, caused a great deal of conflict over the issue of regeneration, piety, and godly affections; and due to his unique role, his astounding intellect, and his clarity of thought, Jonathan Edwards found himself right in the middle of the debate.

**1720 - The Great Awakening Begins:  
*T.J. Frelinghuysen and The Dutch Reformers***

By many opinions, Jonathan Edwards, a Puritan Calvinist Congregationalist, is credited with striking the match on the First Great Awakening in colonial America (late 1720's-1770). However, Edward's contribution did not truly emerge until the middle of the movement. His noted

sermon, "*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*" was first preached in Enfield, Connecticut on July 8, 1741, more than ten years after the movement began. In truth, the great Colonial Revival really began in the middle colonies in the winter of 1720 as a result of the powerful preaching of Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen. Frelinghuysen was a Dutch Reformed Domine (Pastor), who ministered to several congregations among the Dutch settlers in the Raritan Valley of central New Jersey, with his primary duties being bound to the congregation at New Brunswick. Before arriving in America, Frelinghuysen was educated at the University of Lingon in Germany, where he was especially impacted by the pietistic thought of theologian Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676), which emphasized demonstrative religious experiences as proof of regeneration. While Frelinghuysen was being educated at Lingon, the students at the University experienced a powerful spiritual awakening that resulted from these teachings.

Right off the heels of this spiritual movement, Frelinghuysen arrived at his first pastorate. The young domine was stunned at the spiritual complacency that he found in New Brunswick. He found the parishioners in his congregations to be spiritually cold and apathetic toward Christ, a people who seemed more concerned with protecting Dutch nationalism and culture than with the work and heart of their Savior. Frelinghuysen felt that the Church had become a social institution designed to protect the "Dutch" way of life. The Bride of Christ had drifted from the heart of her husband.

Prior to the Great Awakening, Christianity in the Colonies had almost become the sole practice of the educated and wealthy. Churches had become institutionalized and exclusive. Pastors seemed more concerned with social position and wealth than spiritually shepherding the Lord's flock, operating more as the "hired hands" spoken of in John 10:12. The Dutch Domine Frelinghuysen, observing this atmosphere among the more learned and wealthy of his congregation, decided to address the apathy with a series of dynamic first sermons that concentrated on an inner "heartfelt" piety that exemplified true religion rather than a simple adherence to outward religious observances. He turned his attention specifically to the poor and young people who were more spiritually attuned to the Gospel message. Needless to say, this prophetic style of Gospel preaching was very well received by a great number of people, but not

by all. In fact, as the churches in Frelinghuysen's care began to grow, a serious schism formed, with great discord between the elderly, educated, and wealthy on one side and the young, uneducated and poor on the other.<sup>1</sup> The former group, opposing Frelinghuysen, complained to Domine Henricus Boel, one of the influential Dutch Ministers of New York. Boel took issue with Frelinghuysen's negligence of using the Lord's Prayer in public worship and he took further offense at the young pastors' preaching style, which Boel commonly referred to as "howling prayers". But Boel's resistance did nothing to slow the young Domine. In an unprecedented act of "defiance", Frelinghuysen caused an uproar among the Dutch Reformers when he denied communion to a number of his congregants who were unable to give testament to having a religious experience of regeneration. When Boel heard this, he took his complaint against Frelinghuysen to the highest courts of the Dutch Reformed Church. Yet, Frelinghuysen continued to preach and he published sermons that defended his views. Converts continued to stream into his Church and eventually Frelinghuysen was able to persuade many of his former critics.<sup>2</sup> The threshold of the Great Awakening was opened in 1726 when the ingathering of new converts became so large that Frelinghuysen's popularity garnered him the support of the majority of Dutch ministers. This, in turn, drove a deep wedge in the denomination; a division so deep in fact, that it was not healed until the end of the colonial period.

**1726 - The seeds of Awakening among the Presbyterians:  
*William Tennent and The Log College***

Completely separate from what was happening in New Jersey, seeds of revival were being planted in what is now Warminster Pennsylvania. The Reverend William Tennent, a Presbyterian Pastor, began formally educating his sons, starting with his oldest, Gilbert, along with John, William Jr., and Charles. The Reverend Tennent felt moved of God to equip all four of his sons to be ministers of the Gospel. At the time, no seminary education was available in the colonies; so then, to be properly prepared for ministry, it was necessary to go to Europe for seminary instruction. Due to the expense, pastoral training was only possible for the rich and

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<sup>1</sup> David Steven Cohen, *"The Dutch-American Farm"* (New York Press, 1992), 172.

<sup>2</sup> David Steven Cohen, 173-174.

privileged. Tennent was frustrated by this arrangement and, in 1727, began teaching his sons, as well as a number of other students, in his home in Northampton Township. At that time, William Tennent was regularly serving as a Pastor for several congregations in Northampton. However, due to health reasons, in 1730 Tennent gave up his pulpit and the whole Tennent family moved to a plantation in Warminster, Pennsylvania. The Reverend Tennent and his sons then built a structure for his school on the northeast corner of the plantation where they lived. Again, his school was initially established primarily for the education of his own sons, but later other young men were admitted. It hardly needs bearing out that this unconventional arrangement was frowned upon by many Pastors in the Presbyterian Synod of Philadelphia.

Before long, many of Tennent's adversaries derisively referred to the school as "*The Log College*". Yet, though certainly primitive and unsophisticated, the classical training administered at the Log College was anything but light. It was rigorous indeed. Here, in a "log house, about twenty feet long and near as many broad," Tennent drilled his pupils in the ancient languages of the Bible, filling them with a scholar's mind and an evangelist's heart. The intellectual rigor of The Log College was validated by the scholarly attainments of its graduates, many of whom were vital in forming what is now Princeton Seminary.<sup>3</sup> However, the primary quality of the men who were trained at the school was their heart for Christ. In the years following, these Log College graduates were preaching an infectious message of Gospel regeneration among all the Presbyterians in Pennsylvania and Central New Jersey; a message that streamlined perfectly with the "unctuous" preaching of the Dutch Reformer, Frelinghuysen.

**1737-1741 - The New Side/Old Side Debate Emerges:  
Gilbert Tennent, The Presbytery of New Brunswick, and the arrival of George Whitfield**

Gilbert Tennent was by far the most dynamic preacher to emerge from the Log College. He seemed destined by God to be at the heart the Great Awakening among the Presbyterians. Evangelist George Whitfield affirmed Tennent's preaching prowess when he said of the young Presbyterian Minister:

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<sup>3</sup> Alexander Leitch, "*A Princeton Companion*" (Princeton University Press 1978).

*"I never before heard such a searching sermon. He convinced me more and more that we can preach the Gospel of Christ no further than we have experienced the power of it in our own hearts. Being deeply convicted of sin, by God's Holy Spirit, at his first conversion, he has learned experimentally to dissect the heart of a natural man. Hypocrites must either soon be converted or enraged at his preaching. He is a son of thunder, and does not fear the faces of men."*<sup>4</sup>

In 1726, by divine providence, Tennent was installed as Pastor of the Presbyterian Church at New Brunswick, New Jersey. Domine T.J. Frelinghuysen was at the very height of his revival, and the Dutch minister extended a very vocal and very public welcome to Tennent. The two men became fast friends and formed a Gospel fellowship with one another that for all intents and purposes formed the nucleus of the Great Awakening. The spiritual movement that was happening among the Dutch Reformers, now easily spread to the Presbyterian Churches in the region. Tennent and Frelinghuysen were instrumental in supporting and encouraging the young preachers who were coming out of the Log College, giving them ample opportunities to preach in their churches. Among the old guard, however, uneasy waters began to stir.

During this period in the colonies, the Presbyterian Church operated under the authority of the Synod of Philadelphia. The Synod was divided into three Presbyteries: the Presbytery of New York; the Presbytery of Philadelphia; and the Presbytery of New Castle. However, Gilbert Tennent's affiliation with Frelinghuysen soon became stronger than any ties he had to his own Presbytery. A further strain was felt when the pastors who held to the Log College brand of theology began to distance themselves from Presbyterian pastors who criticized the revival movement. The pro-awakening pastors of the Log College began to identify themselves as the "New Side" and their critics became known as the "Old Side".<sup>5</sup>

By the year 1737 the cold war began to turn hot. The Old Side pastors worked to pass a motion that limited the practice of itinerant preaching by requiring permission from the governing presbytery to agree to the traveling minister. This was obviously a move that was aimed at censuring the Log College preachers. Soon after, the Synod passed another motion that required a "proper" college diploma prior to a candidate's ordination for ministry. For those unable to attend a so called proper college, two committees were set up who would examine the candidate

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<sup>4</sup> Milton J. Coalter, Jr., *"Gilbert Tennent, Son of Thunder: A Case Study of Continental Pietism's Impact on the First Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies"* (Greenwood Press 1986), 73.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Webster, *"History of the Presbyterian Church in America"* (Joseph Wilson, Philadelphia, 1857).

and certify them as ready or not. Gilbert Tennent thought the act about college diplomas was specifically directed at his father, William Tennent, and at the graduates of the Log College.

The New Side would not fail to respond. In 1738 the New Brunswick Presbytery was formed, made up of five evangelical ministers, three of whom were Log College men. It was the first presbytery controlled by the New Side.<sup>6</sup> The formation of the New Brunswick Presbytery allowed the Log College men to license and ordain men who were cut from the New Side cloth. John Rowland, a Log College graduate, was immediately licensed by the New Brunswick Presbytery, a decision that was obviously aimed at the conservatives. The lines were now clearly drawn. Over the next few years, the New Side members of the Synod continued to disregard the Itinerate Minister Act of 1737 and the two factions gradually became more polarized.

This was the general situation among Presbyterians in the middle colonies when George Whitefield appeared on the American scene. In August 1739, Whitefield arrived from England and immediately began his first American evangelistic tour. The preaching ability of the young George Whitfield cannot be exaggerated. Nothing great too look upon (it is documented that he suffered with crossed eyes), Whitfield overcame whatever shortcomings he might have possessed in his appearance, with an almost other worldly preaching skill. In reference to the thundering delivery of Whitefield, historian Joseph Tracy says, "Probably, in simple delivery, no man since Demosthenes, has ever surpassed Whitefield as a public orator."<sup>7</sup>

Whitefield arrived in Pennsylvania in the winter months of 1739, his first visit to the Northern Colonies. It was said that "his voice was distinctly heard on the Jersey shore, and so distinct was his speech that every word was understood on board a shallop at the Market Street wharf, a distance of upwards of four hundred feet from the court house. All the intermediate space was crowded with his hearers."<sup>8</sup>

In these months, Whitfield's greatest and most impacting acquaintance was with the old gray haired William Tennent. The aged founder of the Log College had made the journey of twenty miles from Neshaming to hear this great spiritual leader. Impressed by Whitfield, William

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 137-138.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Tracy, "*The Great Awakening*" (The Christian Review, September, 1844).

<sup>8</sup> F.G. Beardsley, "*A History of American Revivals*" (American Tract Society, New York, 1904), 36.

invited him to New Brunswick and introduced him to his son Gilbert. Whitefield preached in the younger Tennant's Church and was received with much fanfare. A few weeks thereafter, when Whitfield was preaching in New York at the Presbyterian Church, he had his first opportunity to hear the young Gilbert Tennent preach. Whitfield was so impacted by the sermon that his own style of preaching was changed. The result of these positive interactions was an alliance between Whitefield, the Tennent Family, and the New Brunswick Presbyterians. With Frelinghuysen included in their fellowship, the high tide of the Great Revival broke upon the colonies.

The Tennent Family's union with Whitfield, however, placed an unsalvageable strain on the relationship between the New Side and Old Side conflict of the Presbyterians. A split seemed inevitable. On March 8, 1740, Gilbert Tennent put the final nail in the coffin of the impending schism when he preached his famous sermon at Nottingham entitled "*The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry*." The sermon was a thundering arraignment of men who entered the ministry as a trade, and who, though approved by the public institutions of learning, and regularly admitted by the ecclesiastical authorities, were in truth strangers to Christ and devoid of any authentic religious zeal. Unconverted themselves, they were ultimately unconcerned with the souls of their congregation, yawning as the years passed without so much as seeing a single conversion to Christ. Yet, in Gilbert's words, here these "unconverted" Old Side men were, raging against the so called "frenzied preachers" of the Great Awakening. "The Pharisees of his day", said Gilbert referring to the Old Side ministers, "resembled those Pharisees of old, just as one crow's egg (resembles) another."<sup>9</sup> With these words, the breach in the Presbyterian Church was solidified. The breach was made official on June 1, 1741 when the New Side pastors withdrew from The Philadelphia Synod and eventually formed the New Side Synod of New York. This schism would remain an open wound for the Presbyterians over next seventeen years.

At this point, make no mistake. Though peripheral issues existed, the central issue of the schism centered squarely on the struggle to define what it meant to be regenerate. By and large all agreed that justification came by faith in Christ, but what were the distinguishing marks of a

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<sup>9</sup> Charles H. Maxson, "*The Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies*" (Chicago, 1920), 56.

justifying experience? This was the debate. The New Side pro-awakening pastors grew suspicious of people and pastors whose faith seemed stoic, intellectual, and detached from the heart, emphasizing that religion had to be more than a propositional exercise or a cultural social gathering. Meanwhile, the Old Side anti-awakening pastors, their theological position on justification being Biblical, were defensive about having their affections for Christ being brought into question. They also vocalized justifiable concern that the New Side form of religion might be nothing more than an anti-intellectual, emotional experience.

In 1741, the Old Side ministers outlined a formal protestation against the New Side pastors. There were three main areas of disagreement in the protest – (1) *The Philosophy of Ecclesiastical Government*, which asserted Synodical authority over Presbyteries, (2) *The Conditions of Itinerant Ministry*, and (3) *The Doctrine of Convictions* in Regard to Regeneration. Even the simplest layman could discern the centrality of the dispute. Protest one and two had everything to do with the third protest – the *Doctrine of Convictions*, this being by far the biggest dog in the fight. Under this particular remonstrance, the Old Side charted a laundry list of grievances. With an obvious reference to the infamous sermon of Gilbert Tennent, the Old Side accused the New Side of condemning other Presbyterian ministers as unconverted, of teaching that regularly ordained ministers could do no spiritual good if they were unconverted, of preaching that exaggerated the terrors of God’s Wrath, and of requiring a “conversion narrative” that placed undue emphasis on an emotional religious experience. The wording of the Old Side protest against the New Side revealed their anger and frustration,

*“The preaching (of New Side ministers)...has no precedent in the Word of God, but rather appears to be borrowed from a worse dialect; and so industriously working on the passions and affections of weak minds, as to cause them to cry out in a hideous manner, and fall down in convulsion-like fits, to the marring of the profiting both of themselves and others, who are so taken up in seeing and hearing these odd symptoms, that they cannot attend to or hear what the preacher even says; and then, after all, boasting of these things as the work of God, which we are persuaded do proceed from an inferior or worse cause.”<sup>10</sup>*

These were legitimate concerns. Must true regeneration be certified by such displays of frenetic emotion? The question was even more important for the Church that held to a covenantal view of conversion. What about the covenant person who is brought up in the

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<sup>10</sup> Webster, 168-169.

Church, who loves Christ and is certainly affectionate toward him, yet, who has no distinctive conversion experience? Is their faith in Christ deemed “illegitimate” because they are without such a narrative? The Old Side, again obviously frustrated, brought these questions to bear. They wrote, “(The New Side maintains that) a person must be able to give a narrative of the time and manner of their conversion, or else they conclude them to be in a natural or graceless state...”<sup>11</sup>

The Old Side went on to say that those of the pro-awakening doctrines judge the spiritual state of others, not by their profession and life, but rather by an emotional experience. The question almost screams at us from both sides doesn't it? What are the conditions that give proof of a regenerate heart? Must the covenantal convert, who has embraced the love of Christ from an early age, exhibit an emotionally charged experience of regeneration in order to prove their salvation? On the other hand, might a longstanding member of the Lord's Church, one who has been catechized and examined, knowing and giving all the right answers, even elected and called to the office of Elder and Pastor, be yet unrepentant and unregenerate? Should one be considered a believer if his heart remains unmoved. Certainly, these questions get right at the issue. And these questions are still relevant for the Church today. How do we reconcile the two sides of the debate? Enter Jonathan Edwards.

### **1733-1738 Jonathan Edwards and The Northhampton Revival**

*His Experience regarding the early move of God at Northhampton and his Thoughts recorded in “A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton”*

On February 11, 1729, after the death of his grandfather Rev. Solomon Stoddard, Jonathan Edwards took his grandfather's position as the Senior Minister at Northampton Presbyterian Church. This was no small responsibility for Edwards, as Northhampton was one of the largest and wealthiest congregations in the colony, proud of its morality, its culture, and its reputation. In those early years, Edwards was extremely popular with his congregation. Scholarly

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<sup>11</sup> Webster, 170.

and powerful in his preaching, Edwards appealed to the wealthy and educated membership, while also possessing a popular voice among the poor.

The church grew swiftly under the young Edwards. Unlike the other leaders of the Great Awakening, Edwards was not an animated or emotional orator. According to most historians, despite whatever vision of Edwards that legend might inspire, the young pastor's style was not "fiery" by any account. In fact, Edwards' manner was said to be "solemn, with a distinct and careful enunciation, and a slow cadence."<sup>12</sup> No one could ever accuse Edwards of "emotional manipulation". He was almost stoic in his delivery. The power of his sermons were not stylistic, but were due almost exclusively to his careful attention to the particulars and implication of the Gospel. Edwards' sermons were famous for their vivid imagery and logical structure. Yet, his understated style, combined with his powerful intellect, gave his sermons an almost hypnotic quality that attracted a huge following.

It is documented by historian George Marsden that,

*"Although Edwards had none of the dramatic gestures of a Whitefield or a Tennent and was said to preach as though he were staring at the bell-rope in the back of the meetinghouse, he could be remarkably compelling. An admirer described his delivery as 'easy, natural and very solemn. He had not a strong, loud voice; but appeared with such gravity and solemnity, and spake with such distinctness, clearness and precision; his words were so full of ideas, set in such a plain and striking light, that few speakers have been so able to demand the attention of an audience as he.' Through sheer intensity he generated emotion. 'His words often discovered a great degree of inward fervor, without much noise or external emotion, and fell with great weight on the minds of his hearers. He made but little motion of his head or hands in his desk, but spake so as to discover the motion of his own heart, which tended in the most natural and effectual manner to move and affect others.' The combination of controlled but transparent emotion, heartfelt sincerity both in admonition and compassion, inexorable logic, and biblical themes could draw people into sensing the reality of ideas long familiar."*<sup>13</sup>

In 1733, quite removed from the work of Tennent or Frelinghysen in the southern parts of New England, and preceding the arrival of Whitfield, a local religious revival began in Northampton, a movement in fact that reached such intensity that it began to undermine the normal business of the town. The revival was shocking to Edwards. He was simply preaching the Gospel, with no expectation of such a unique outpouring of God's Spirit. Edwards carefully recorded the events of that revival in detail in "*A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton (1737)*". In contrast to the emotional

<sup>12</sup> Holly Reed, "Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758)" (The Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia of Modern Western Theology", June 9, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> George M. Marsden, "*Jonathan Edwards: A Life*" (Yale: 2003), 220.

“fits” of dancing and writhing that occurred later on in the movement, the Northampton Revival of 1733 was subdued. Its impact on the community however was quite remarkable. The revival started with the conversion of a young woman whom Edwards referred to as “the greatest company-keeper in the whole town” – a not so subtle indicator of her profession as a prostitute. Yet, her conversion, like the Demoniac of Gerasene, had a profound impact on the townsfolk. Edwards vividly describes the impact of this experience.

*“It was a glorious work of God’s infinite power and sovereign grace; that God had given her a new heart, truly broken and sanctified. I could not then doubt of it, and have seen much in my acquaintance with her since to confirm it...God made it, I suppose, the greatest occasion of awakening to others, of any thing that ever came to pass in the town. I have had abundant opportunity to know the effect it had, by my private conversation with many.*

*The news of it seemed to be almost like a flash of lightning, upon the hearts of young people, all over the town, and upon many others. Those persons amongst us, who used to be farthest from seriousness, and that I most feared would make an ill improvement of it, seemed to be awakened with it. Many went to talk with her, concerning what she had met with; and what appeared in her seemed to be to the satisfaction of all that did so.”<sup>14</sup>*

After this young woman’s conversion, a spirit of revival steadily swept through Northampton, not like a wildfire, but like the slow and gradual swell of a grand tidal wave.

*“The work of conversion was carried on in a most astonishing manner, and increased more and more; souls did as it were come by flocks to Jesus Christ. From day to day for many months together, might be seen evident instances of sinners brought out of darkness into marvellous light, and delivered out of an horrible pit, and from the miry clay, and set upon a rock, with a new song of praise to God in their mouths.”<sup>15</sup>*

We must understand that, at this time, such a move of God was completely foreign to the American Colonies. Edwards had never seen nor heard tell of anything like what was happening in the Church at Northampton. His grandfather, though a faithful preacher of the Gospel, had never imagined such an outpouring of God’s affection in the quiet, reserved, community.

Edwards could hardly keep count of the number of converts who were pouring into his Church.

*“(The number of converts) appears to have been at the rate, at least, of four persons in a day, or near, thirty in a week, take one with another, for five or six weeks together. I received in our community about a hundred before our sacrament...I took in near sixty before the next sacrament day...I believe that more than 300 souls were savingly brought home to Christ in this town in the space of half a year...There are, indeed, few houses in the whole town into which salvation has not lately come, in one or more instances.”<sup>16</sup>*

Edwards’ record and corresponding thoughts on this early work of God are of supreme worth to us. In his words we see a pure pastor’s heart in response to this unadulterated revival.

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<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton”, (London, 1737)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

In his *“Faithful Narrative”*, we hear no language that describes “terrors” or “convulsing” or any such experience. Instead, we see what authentic Gospel regeneration produces...

*“This work of God, as it was carried on, and the number of true saints multiplied, soon made a glorious alteration in the town: so that in the spring and summer following, 1735, the town seemed to be full of the presence of God: it never was so full of love, nor of joy, and yet so full of distress, as it was then. 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 to them; parents rejoicing over their children as new born, and husbands over their wives, and wives over their husbands. The doings of God were then seen in His sanctuary, God’s day was a delight, and His tabernacles were amiable. 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 neighbors. Our public praises were then greatly enlivened; God was then served in our psalmody, in some measure, in the beauty of holiness. It has been observable, that there has been scarce any part of divine worship, wherein good men amongst us have had grace so drawn forth, and their hearts so lifted up in the ways of God, as in singing His praises. Our congregation excelled all that ever I knew in the external part of the duty before, the men generally carrying regularly, and well, three parts of music, and the women a part by themselves; but now they were evidently wont to sing with unusual elevation of heart and voice, which made the duty pleasant indeed.”<sup>17</sup>*

Remember that these events took place before the Great Awakening began to catch hold. In the days ahead, especially after the arrival of Whitfield, the revival would be greatly stained with fleshly and odd responses that distracted from the movement of God and from the Gospel. Edwards then, having experienced true revival in his years at Northampton, was the perfect voice to speak to the events to come. He assumed nothing, but placed every experience, and every movement of the revival, under the scrutiny of Scripture. Imagine Edwards’ situation. Here was a man, widely regarded as a brilliant scholar, a theologian who searched the Scripture with an inexhaustible intellect, who also greatly loved the Church of Christ and longed to see his people incline themselves toward Jesus with true, godly affection. When the revival began to “catch fire” and burn out of control, causing theological rancor and schism, Edwards was uniquely called and equipped of God to guide men to a beautiful middle ground that esteems the value of the intellect while also placing great emphasis on the heart’s affections.<sup>18</sup> So Edwards helps us to respect the narrative of the faithful son – the one who grows up in the church, exhibits a lifestyle of repentance, and gradually matures to faith and he also helps us to respect the narrative of the lost sheep – the one who, either inside of outside the church, immediately cries

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<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *“A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton”* (London, 1737).

<sup>18</sup> Iain H. Murray, *“Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography”* (Pennsylvania, 1987), 204.

out to God in an experiential momentous recognition of their sinful state. Yet, alongside this teaching, Edwards reminds us that these narratives themselves are not as important as the corresponding affection for Christ that should ultimately proceed forth from a regenerate heart. So then, Affection for Christ that comes from faith is what lends credibility to regeneration, not the specific details of a narrative experience. As the Great Awakening gained momentum, the writings of Jonathan Edwards rose to the surface of these troubled waters as a thunderous voice of Biblical reason and good Christian sense.

**1740-1746 Jonathan Edwards and The Great Awakening**  
*Edwards' Writings in regard to the Work of the Holy Spirit, The True Marks of Revival, Regeneration, and Religious Affections*

In the spring of 1735 the movement in Northampton began to subside a bit. But the relapse was brief, and the Northampton revival, which had spread through the Connecticut valley, was followed in 1739-1740 by the heights of the Great Awakening. It was in these years, with Whitfield, Tennent, and Frelinghuysen in their preaching heyday, that the revival began to spin out of control. People routinely exhibited extreme emotional phenomena such as “swoonings and outcries and convulsions.” These “bodily effects”, as they were commonly called, were harshly criticized by adversaries of the movement. Standing counter to the Awakening, and transcending denominational lines, were the Old Side Presbyterians, the conservative side of the Dutch Reformed Church, and Edwards’ own Puritan Congregationalists.

Edwards eventually found himself standing right in the middle of this *New Side-New Light / Old Side-Old Light Controversy*. His chief adversary on the New-Side was Rev. Andrew Croswell of Connecticut. Croswell saw everything about the revival in completely idealistic terms, allowing no room for critique. In his view, if anyone criticized the Awakening in any way, then he himself must surely be unregenerate. On the Old-Side, Edwards’ opponent was fellow Puritan, Rev. Charles Chauncy of Boston. Chauncy hated everything about the revival, viewing it in no possible perspective as a work of God. If parts of the so-called awakening could be proved to be the effects of an ungodly “enthusiastical spirit”, then the whole thing was to be rejected.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> George M. Marsden, “*Jonathan Edwards: A Life*”, (Yale University Press: 2003), 268-271.

Edwards certainly felt the difficulty of standing in between the parties represented by Croswell and Chauncy. As he later noted, when parties are divided, “Satan leads both far out of the right way, driving each to great extremes, one on the right hand, and the other on the left, till the right path in the middle is almost wholly neglected.” Edwards’ response was to find a Biblical middle ground between these two fleshly and simplistic positions. He strongly defended the revival while readily admitting the dangers of experiential excesses.

Edwards made it clear that he was no fan of fits and tremors. He insisted that these extreme experiences were personal expression and not necessarily indicative of a work of God. Yet, he made a strong case for the overall changes in the people who were impacted by the movement. In 1741, Edwards published *“The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God”* that addressed his detractors. Not long after, acknowledging the continued bitterness against the revival in the more strictly Puritan churches, Edwards wrote a second apology, *“Thoughts concerning the Present Revival”*. In 1742, rounding out his defense, Edwards preached a series of sermons that he later published under the title *“A Treatise on the Religious Affections”*.<sup>20</sup> In *“Distinguishing Marks”*, Edwards outlined the overt signs of a move of the Spirit in general and of regeneration in particular. He emphasized that the marks were evident in many of those who were moved upon during the awakening. He wrote:

*“By the Word of God itself, taking what Scripture gives as the ‘distinguishing marks’ of the Holy Spirit’s activity and comparing them with what was then being witness in the land. The Spirit’s true work can be distinguished from that which is false because we know that he always (1) causes a greater esteem for Christ (2) operates against the interest of Satan’s kingdom ‘which lies in encouraging and establishing sin (3) promotes greater regard for the truth and the divinity of the Holy Scriptures (4) brings men to the light of truth and (5) excites love to God and man, making the attributes of God, manifested in Christ, ‘delightful objects of contemplation’.”<sup>21</sup>*

Even more practical help is given in *“Thoughts concerning the Present Revival”*:

*“There being a great many errors and sinful irregularities mixed with this work of God, arising from our weakness, darkness, and corruption, does not hinder this work of God’s power and grace from being very glorious...How unreasonable it is that we should be backward (in our thinking) to acknowledge what God has done, because the devil...has done a great deal of mischief!”<sup>22</sup>*

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<sup>20</sup> Iain H. Murray, 220.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 234.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 235-36.

Edwards goes on to say that the Devil's common device concerning the Christian is to either kill his heart completely so that he is wholly apathetic in his religious affections or, when that is no longer possible, he feeds the heart's affection with lust and pride in order to drive it in an idolatrous direction. When Satan finds that he can keep Christians quiet and secure no longer, then he drives them to excesses and extravagances. He holds them back as long as he can; but then, when the dam has burst, he will push them on, and, if possible, run them forward upon their heads. Now that revival was upon them, Satan's device was to throttle the indiscreet zeal of Christians to such a high pitch that they went to the extremes of outlandish enthusiasm, religious superstition, and severity towards their opposition. Edwards suggested that since Satan could not quell the revival, then he was determined to drive it forward in a fever pitch in order to cast it flying from the rails of Biblical Christianity.

How brilliant was Edward's approach! He spoke to both parties of the Old and New Side Schism by driving the Gospel flag right into the middle of the dispute, and added a healthy dose of common sense. He upheld the revival as a legitimate move of God, which pleased the New Side. However, he left open the very real possibility that even a move of God could be hijacked by the Evil One, a view that obviously appealed to the Old Side. Edwards made it clear that not all emotion was good emotion, especially when it leads to the aforementioned extremes. On the one hand, Edwards said that it was unreasonable to dismiss the Revival as anything other than a genuine movement of God; yet, on the other hand, he was careful to remind everyone that the Awakening should guard against an unthinking, harsh, superstitious emotionalism. He said,

*"It is a grand error for persons to think they are out of danger from the devil and a corrupt, deceitful heart, even in their highest flights, and most raised frames of spiritual joy. For persons, in such a confidence, to cease to be jealous of themselves, and to neglect watchfulness and care, is a presumption by which I have known many woefully ensnared. However highly we may be favoured with divine discoveries and comforts, yet, as long as we are in the world, we are in the enemies' country."*<sup>23</sup>

Edwards continued on in this fashion throughout his first two treatises, which were a great help to all who read them with an open heart and favorable disposition, yet, amid much controversy and rancor, Edwards' thought reached a pristine clarity in 1746 when he penned his great work "*A Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections*". In "*The Religious Affections*",

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<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "*Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival*", (Boston, 1742).

Edwards, far from wanting to avoid the charge that he gave undue importance to the emotions or 'affections', met the opposition head-on with a series of arguments to prove that although the 'holy affections' do not completely define true religion, they are indeed a very great part of it. In "*Affections*", Edwards described the difference between the faculty of '*understanding*', which had to do with the intellect, and the faculty of the '*heart*', which had much to do with the will or the inclinations.

To be clearer, Edwards is saying that God has endued the soul with two faculties:

1. **The Intellect (*The Faculty of Understanding*)** - which is capable of perception and speculation, by which it discerns, and views, and judges things. And...
2. **The Affections (*The Faculty of Heart*)** – which are in some way inclined to the things discerned, or viewed, or considered; either the heart is inclined to them or is disinclined and averse from them.

Edwards argues that even though our Intellect might grasp and *Understand* the Gospel, and our Morality might express a *Show* of Gospel Behavior, and our Emotions might Be *Moved* internally over the Gospel, yet, it is only The Heart or the Inclination or the Religious Affections with which we truly *Embrace* the Gospel. The intellect may perceive the Gospel of Christ, but yet hate Christ, because the heart's affections remain unmoved. So, unless the great truth of that Gospel moves through the intellect and through the emotions and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, breaks the heart and grants it affection for Christ, then that soul remains unregenerate. It is inclination toward Christ that defines Religious Affection, not Knowledge about Christ, nor Service for Christ, nor Emotion over Christ, nor fits nor tremors nor convulsions nor tears nor any other such thing, since all other faculties and affections are a more or less passing thing. In fact, Edwards would say along with Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 that all but love for Christ is passing away. All other affections fade. All other inclinations lose their steam. All other faculties lose their power. They are here today and gone tomorrow. Emotion and Intellect and Morality are not sustainable. Whatever does not spring forth from, and run back into, a growing affection for Jesus is like the grass that withers and fades.

These fleeting affections exemplify one who might weep powerfully at the tragedy of star-crossed lovers in a play or a movie, then, upon leaving the theatre, soon forget what it was that they cried about. Or like one who might laugh at a joke or a pithy comment, then, upon hearing

the same over again, lose whatever it was that made them laugh in the first place. Or like one who might feel great hunger at the anticipation of a feast, and then, once having eaten, lose all taste for food. A like a man who might feel the overwhelming pangs of love for a pretty faced young female, yearning for her with every part of his being, writing notes of endearment, and proclaiming an undying loyalty to her and her alone, yet, when he has attained her, when he has won her affections, or gotten her into his bed, how quickly then does his stale and fleshly emotions wane, so that soon he cares nothing for her, or even disdains the very sight of her, wishing nothing more than to have her out of his sight forever.

This kind of fickle affection is not akin to a true Religious Affection for God. The inclination that moves toward God, powered by the Spirit of Christ, is not like this at all. Rather, Godly Affection leans upon Christ and sheds tears of repentance as a manner of habit, every day learning to come to Jesus. Godly Affection, does not seek simple laughter, but a joy in Christ that leads to more joy at gazing upon Him. Religious Affection feeds upon Christ and gains more taste for the food as it eats, ever growing full, yet never satisfied, always eager to sit at the Table of God. True Christian Affections do not see the face of Christ, and at the sight, grow weary of His visage. Rather, the unveiled face that gazes upon the Savior's Beauty is inclined all the more to Him, from glory unto glory, until its whole being is transformed into the likeness of Christ. These are the Affections of which the Scripture speaks. So often we are like children underneath our dining room chairs, wrestling over scraps and crumbs, while a feast is prepared above us, the table decked with every morsel from God, the Bread of Christ given freely with a Cup that never runs dry.

Edwards calls the men and women on both sides of the Justification/Regeneration debate to stop trusting in these lesser realities, to cease our legalistic measuring and striving and comparing and name calling; and to raise the elevation of our sight, so that we might come to seat ourselves at the Lord's Table where the real meal of Christ is being served; where Christ Himself is the meal.

Edwards words strike right at the very heart of the matter. In *The Religious Affections*, Edwards states...<sup>24</sup>

- *"That religion which God requires, and will accept, does not consist in weak, dull, and lifeless wishes, raising us but a little above a state of indifference: God, in his word, greatly insists upon...a fervent vigorous engagedness of the heart in religion, that is the fruit of a real circumcision of the heart, or true regeneration, that has the promises of life."*  
*Part I, Ch. II, 1*
- *"...Worldly affections are very much the spring of men's motion and action; so in religious matters, the spring of their actions is very much religious affection: he that has doctrinal knowledge and speculation only, without affection, never is engaged in the business of religion."*  
*Part I, Ch. II, 2*
- *"But with respect to love; it is plain by the Scripture, that persons may have a kind of religious love, and yet (if there is no affection for Christ) they have no saving grace."*  
*Part II, Ch. VI*

These words, along with Edwards' entire work on the Affections, surely must have been a tremendous help to those who struggled on both sides of the regeneration issue. Edwards, like a true prophet of old, humbles us all. If we give our life away in service to others and have a reputation as one who is moral and upright, yet have no broken heart toward Christ, then we do not have Christ; for we cannot have Him if He does not have our hearts. And if we have grown up in the Church and we know all catechisms and creeds and hold to the great Westminster Confession, and yet have no affection or inclination to Christ, we are not regenerate. And if we have fits of pure spiritual emotion, accompanied by tears and ravings and wailings, and yet do not possess an enduring and maturing affection for Jesus, then we possess no saving grace.

So then, who is saved? Truth be told, we do not fully know of others, only of ourselves, which is why the Scripture encourages us to refrain from judging others too strictly but rather to examine ourselves to see if we indeed are in the faith. This being said, should the Evangel preach Justification by Faith to the unbeliever and un-Churched in the hopes that they will respond to Christ in repentance? Absolutely and by all means! Should he also preach Justification by Faith to the believing and to the church and to the Covenant Children in the hopes that, if they know not Christ, they should be awakened from their religious slumber to respond to their Beloved Jesus in repentance and true saving faith? Absolutely and also by all means!

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<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *"A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections"* (Edinburgh, 1812).

Edwards brings great clarity to us here. He says that...

*“There are two sorts of hypocrites: one that are deceived with their outward morality and external religion; many of whom are professed Arminians, in the doctrine of justification: and the other, are those that are deceived with false discoveries and elevations; who often cry down works, and men’s own righteousness, and talk much of free grace; but at the same time make a righteousness of their discoveries and of their humiliation, and exalt themselves to heaven with them.”<sup>25</sup>*

May we never find ourselves in any of these graceless dispositions, but may God grant us the spiritual power to see Christ. May Christ be the ultimate affection of our inclination and the deepest joy of our hearts. And may we reach this glorious state, not by our fleshly effort, nor by our sobs and weeping, nor by any pitiful show of self-righteousness, nor by any affiliation with a particular Church or brand of theology, nor by our powers of intellect, nor by our station in the community, nor by our weak professions that mumble the name of Christ in the hearing of ordained men, nor even by our taking of the Holy Communion of Christ’s blessed meal; but may we reach the heights of delight in Christ only by faith in Christ; may we learn to love Jesus, and be inclined toward Him, and have our affections set upon Him, only by trusting in Him and by leaning heavily upon the work that He has accomplished on our behalf. May all else be to us as dirty rags.

### **1758 – Epilogue** ***The Old Side/New Side Schism is Healed***

The fervor surrounding the Great Awakening began to wane in the years to follow, but Edwards’ writings continued to take hold of the colonies and have indeed persevered as classic Christian literature to this day. As the balm of Edwards’ thought sunk into the hearts and minds of pastors and congregations, healing began to take place and a great many fences were mended. At last, 1758 brought about the Reunion of the Presbyterian Church. Some of the old antagonists passed away, while others, like Gilbert Tennent, apologized for their youthful lack of acumen. The terms of reunification affirmed the Old Side concerns of subscription to the Westminster Confession and the legitimate authority of the Synod and its judicatories. On the other hand, it overwhelmingly affirmed the New Side view of revivals and the effect of piety that they produced.

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<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *“A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections”* (Edinburgh, 1812)

They also agreed that candidates for the ministry would have to demonstrate an "experimental acquaintance" with the gospel in addition to having the requisite learning. In regard to the controversy over the Awakening, the Presbyterians recognized the revival as a genuine move of God's Spirit. The synod urged its members to accept one another with a judgment of good will and charity. While assuredly some must have entered this new arrangement with caution, the overwhelming majority rejoiced over the reunion of the denomination.<sup>26</sup>

Sadly, in regard to the reunion, we have no record that the Presbyterians ever gave any formal recognition to the contributions of Jonathan Edwards.

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<sup>26</sup> James H. Smylie, *"A Brief History of the Presbyterians"* (Geneva Press, Kentucky, 1996), 55.

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