Historical Background

Jonathan Edwards’ Religious Affections

Jonathan Edwards Center Brasil 2014
Religious Affections in Context

- Edwards’ Early Revival Theology
- The Awakenings
- Edwards’ Writings on the Awakenings
Jonathan Edwards’ Early Revival Theology

A Divine and Supernatural Light (1734)

“There is such a thing, as a spiritual and divine light, immediately imparted to the soul by God, of a different nature from any that is obtained by natural means.”

What is this Light?

“A true sense of the divine excellency of the things revealed in the Word of God, and a conviction of the truth and reality of them, thence arising.”
Jonathan Edwards’ Early Revival Theology

Edwards’ revival theology was built on his conviction that there were three fundamental pillars of human knowledge.

- Scripture
- Reason
- Experience
“The Calvinistical scheme is in perfection about 100 miles from this place [Boston]. Conversions are talked of, ad nauseam usque. Sixty in a place undergo the work at once. Sadness and horror seize them, and hold them some days; then they feel an inward joy, and it first shews itself in laughing at Meeting. Others are sad for want of experiencing this work; and this takes up for the present the thoughts and talk of that Country; and the canting question trumped about is, Are you gone through? i.e. Conversion.”

-Timothy Cutler, 1735
The Significance of A Faithful Narrative

“Without exaggeration one may say that the Narrative did for bewildered English Nonconformists of 1736 what Goethe’s Werther did for young German romantics: it perfected a formula for escape from an intellectual dilemma by opening an avenue into emotion and sensibility.” -- Perry Miller

“...Edwards’s Faithful Narrative became the primary textbook for revivalistic Christianity in his age and long after. Out of his sentimentalist conviction that reading about the experiences and emotions of others would illuminate one’s own heart and relationships, Edwards wrote a masterpiece that has shaped the whole course of modern evangelicalism.”  --- Christianity Today review of Mark Noll’s Rise of Evangelicalism

“The Faithful Narrative established a new religious genre, creating a model of American revival narratives for a century to come.” -- Michael Crawford
The Significance of A Faithful Narrative

In short, *A Faithful Narrative* made Jonathan Edwards famous as a revivalist and chronicler of revival throughout the colonies and Europe.

But there was a problem...
After the Connecticut Valley Awakening, Edwards developed some serious concerns about his congregation and its reputation.

“When there has been a great and very remarkable work of God amongst a people, the notable miscarriages, and unsuitable and wicked behavior of a few particular professors, may very, very much wrong the credit and reputation of the whole work, and all the profession that is made. These inferences are known abroad, and the world is ready to pass their judgment of all the rest, what they see in them.”

-- “City on a Hill,” preached 1736
Church in Decline

The Rationalization of Religion: or “How do you know what you believe you know?”

So he commenced strenuous remedial efforts...
Divine Light and Divine Living

“Not only the first act of faith, but after-acts of faith, and perseverance in faith, do justify the sinner.”

Sermonic Campaigns that told the “big story”

Charity and Its Fruits, History of the Work of Redemption
Wise and Foolish Virgins, and others...

News from Abroad

“I hope, if God preserves my Life, to see something of that Salvation of God in New-England which he has now begun, in a benighted, wicked and miserable world and Age & in the most guilty of all nations.”

-- Edwards to George Whitefield, 1740
The beginning of the Great Awakening is usually associated with the colonial preaching campaigns of George Whitefield, especially the ones that he undertook in the Middle Colonies and the Northeast in 1739 and 1740.

Jonathan Edwards spent time with George Whitefield in Northampton in October 1740. Whitefield preached in Edwards’ church, and Edwards wept at his words.
Whitefield’s Preaching

- highly dramatic and intense; he never really left the theater behind...he just moved it to the pulpit.
- simple, gospel conversion messages
- open air or in a church, it didn’t matter to him (see portable pulpit at left).
- preceded by mass media campaigns orchestrated by his publicist, including publications of his diary entries from the week prior to his arrival.
Whitefield’s Preaching

demanded and elicited an incredible response, the biggest gatherings in colonial history in which people professed to profound and often instantaneous spiritual transformation (like Nathan Cole of Middletown CT).

He preached all over England and Scotland but his greatest impact was in the colonies.
Whitefield’s Preaching

As he preaches open-air revival meetings up and down the coast of North America from Georgia to Maine, hundreds of thousands of people come out to hear him, and many profess conversion experiences under his ministry.

He becomes the first international media star, crossing the Atlantic five times on preaching tours.
So what was so great about the Great Awakening?

* It takes place outdoors not inside a local parish church. Is it an anti-establishment movement?...What about church community covenants?

* It inverts the rhetorical pyramid. Instead of the ministers analyzing and criticizing the people, it begins to work in reverse, as in the case of James Davenport and Gilbert Tennent. Is it anti-clerical?

* It uses mass media campaigns to promote and extend its reach. Whitefield’s visits were without doubt the biggest media events the colonies had ever seen. Mass assemblies of relative strangers have never been seen up to this point in colonial history. People are banding together not around relationships but rather around a common cause.

* It incorporates a highly dramatic, extemporaneous preaching style which promotes the value of personal experience, occasionally superceding Scripture and rationality.

* It provokes itinerancy and lay ministry, giving voices even to women, Native Americans, Africans, and African Americans.
Social tensions begin to boil as the effects of the Great Awakening take hold in the colonies, creating a major split between opponents and supporters of the revivals.

(Charles Chauncy, 1705-87) vs. (Gilbert Tennent 1703-64)
Old Lights

Against Revivalism was a bitter excoriation of the practices of Whitefield, Tennent, Edwards, Davenport, and others involved. Chauncy sought to impugn not only their theology but also their characters, alleging sexual impropriety, pride, superstition, disorder, and so on.

(Charles Chauncy, 1705–87)

“Against Revivalism” 1742
This cartoon (London, 1763) attacked Whitefield and his peers, alleging that his ministry was marked by illicit sexuality, avarice, and a suspect desire for fame and inspiration, represented by the two demons over his shoulders. It also mocks his crossed eyes.
The Great Awakening

New Lights

~ Gilbert Tennent
~ James Davenport
~ United Congregational Church (newlights.org)
~ and many others...
Predominant concern with the New Birth, over against social order.

Aggressive corrective to what they see as formal, rational religion (Arminianism).

Living God, not divine system.

New Puritanism; reforming.
Where is Jonathan Edwards on all of this?

He is excited about the revivals.

In fact, he believes that the revivals are one of the primary vehicles by which God advances human history. He believes that in the Great Awakening, he is seeing the hand of God directly interact with human experience, “turning the wheels of Providence,” and accelerating the advancement of the Kingdom of God on earth unto the millennial reign of Christ.

Edwards throws himself into revival preaching campaigns, and even becomes something of revival celebrity himself after the dramatic effect of preaching “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” at Enfield in 1741. (see Sinners manuscript at left, print at right)
Where is Jonathan Edwards on all of this?

He is jaded by the laxity of his own congregation.

Even in the midst of the Great Awakening, and Edwards’ major preaching successes away from home, the Northampton congregation never again responds to his preaching as they did in 1734 and 1735.

In fact, the only time that they are notably moved in the revival context is when Edwards leaves town and a student of Edwards’ named Samuel Buell comes to preach.
Where is Jonathan Edwards on all of this?

He is very critical of revival excesses.

Old Lights
- bad theology
- tradition-driven critiques of new things in the church

New Lights
- because they often acted out of their passionate experiences in unchristian, unscriptural ways
- because they often careened from “being revived” to falling into obvious sin
- because they often forgot the three epistemological pillars: Scripture, Reason, Experience (in that order)
Where is Jonathan Edwards on all of this?

So Edwards begins to reflect in public on the revivals...defending them as works of God against Old Lights, but critiquing the excesses of the New Lights as well.

Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival of Religion (1743)

and finally...

A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections (1746)
Faithful Narrative of a Surprising Work of God (1737)

Distinguishing Marks of a work of the spirit of God (1741)

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