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**The Soul's Conversion and Social Concern:
Edward's Theology of Revivals and its Ethical Implications**

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I. Introduction

A logical connection exists between Jonathan Edwards' understanding of the Trinity, creation, salvation, and a believer's religious affections. Diffusion, delight, and deification are at the heart of Edwards' theology. God creates the world not just to rescue human beings from sin but to unite them to himself, and this union must be lived out and expressed in ethical action. This paper continues this line of analysis by asking if Edwards' thoughts on revival, conversion, and ethics adequately reflects his previous theological and soteriological commitments. If Edwards were consistent, the subsequent links in the chain would be that when God directly intervenes in the world, sinners are revived and converted; consequently, sustained by their religious affections and God's direct agency, they engage the world's ills with individual, ethical responsibility. I will argue, however, that Edwards' writings at this juncture is qualified by a deflationary realism that seems to expose his more confident account as unworkable or unsustainable. Rather than relying on revival and religious affections alone, Edwards attempts to ensure social change through the cold power of church covenants and dispassionate government involvement. A litany of qualifications weakens the force of Edwards' most intriguing and impressive claims. In the end, the exuberant accounts of revival and affection are reduced to a pragmatic approach of covenant and government.

II. The Surprising Work of Revival

According to Edwards, revival is a temporal work of God consonant with God's eternal inner being. If God is a fountain of holiness and delight, and if God has created the world to share his life with human beings and providentially guides it to this end, then revival is God's proper and fitting work. Furthermore, if God is a being of infinite joy and holiness, conversion

should involve an intense and decisive turning away from sin and a joyful embrace of God. For example, if we claim to have spent a summer day at the beach without sunscreen yet do not appear sunburnt, our friends will question our claim. As Edwards puts it: if spiritual things are so great and of such vast and infinite concern, it is absurd to think that people will only be “moderately moved and affected by them.”¹

In a letter written in 1737, Edwards chronicled the experience of revival in Northampton, calling it “the surprising work of God”² and “a very extraordinary dispensation of Providence,” in which “God in so remarkable a manner took the work into his own hands.” In this letter, Edwards notes that this work of God went beyond God’s usual mode of operation in at least five ways: its universality, effect, speed, degree, and extent.³ As he outlines the roller coaster ups and downs of the process that leads to conversion, Edwards insists that conversion is not the result of the preacher’s homiletic skill or the sinner’s moral strivings; it is God’s “own peculiar and immediate work.”⁴

In relation to Edwards’ larger corpus, there is already a hint of dissonance here in the words “surprising” and “extraordinary.” Perhaps this is a question simply of the limited, human perspective, or the blunt, psychological effect catching the firsthand witnesses off guard (as when someone steps outside a dark room into the noonday light and is surprised by how bright it is), or a matter of personal, intellectual development (perhaps Edwards would later understand this

¹ Jonathan Edwards, “The Distinguishing Marks,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 4 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1972), 234.

² Jonathan Edwards, “A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God,” in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 64, 67.

³ Edwards, “Faithful Narrative,” 64-67.

⁴ Edwards, “Faithful Narrative,” 87. Edwards is a little ambiguous on this point. On the one hand, he claims that conversion is “a thing too great for second causes to be concerned in” (121). On the other hand, Edwards refers to himself as one of many who “have been blessed of God to be the instruments of it” (86).

work differently)⁵. But given his theological commitments to a diffusive ontology and divine occasionalism, to call the work of revival “surprising” or “extraordinary” is itself surprising.

And yet two additional surprises confront us regarding revivals, and these two realities threaten to undermine Edwards’ most impressive claims. First, as suddenly and dramatically as revival begins, like a lightning strike that sets a grain field ablaze, just as suddenly it can end. At the end of this letter, Edwards mentions that “the Spirit of God was gradually withdrawing from us.”⁶ Edwards attributes this withdrawal to three factors: 1) a suicide that greatly unsettled the community, 2) a case of “strange enthusiastic delusions” that wounded public perception of religion, and 3) the most damaging of all, the ordination of an Arminian minister (the Springfield quarrel). But are not such events paltry compared to God’s mighty operation and efficient causality in revival? If we take Edwards seriously regarding his claims about meticulous sovereignty, divine occasionalism, and God’s overflowing goodness, how can any human failing or resistance “cause” God to withdraw? This account of divine withdrawal due to human happenings seems to call for a more nuanced account of the interaction of divine and human agency than Edwards provides, one which complicates the monergistic strands in his writings.

But a more surprising contradiction surfaces in Edwards’ writings. We might conceive of revival as God’s intermittent new creation, in time, of transformed people, who, once created, maintain a holy, pious, and zealous living without deterioration, sustained by the power of their God-infused religious affections (like the eternal motion of Aristotle’s fixed stars that are moved by love as they ceaselessly contemplate the unmoved mover). After all, Edwards claims that the

⁵ Edwards’ first “negative sign” of the distinguishing marks of the Spirit’s work regards what we consider unusual and extraordinary. See Edwards, “The Distinguishing Marks,” 228: “What we have been used to... is not a rule by which we are to judge whether a work be the work of God.”

⁶ Edwards, “Faithful Narrative,” 84.

divine infusion of supernatural light, “yea, *the least glimpse* of the glory of God... reaches to the bottom of the heart, and changes [our] nature, [and] so it will effectually dispose to an universal obedience.”⁷ Certainly, the extraordinary divine work of revival exceeded this “least glimpse.” Revivals were extraordinary in outward manifestation but even more so in inward effect. In the renewing work of the Spirit, God imparts to individuals a new principle of life, which functions as a habitual law in the soul and produces “exercises in a continued course.”⁸ Since, for Edwards, the affections govern the human will, the converted soul of transformed affections should ceaselessly choose God as its highest good *and*, therefore, its neighbor who is also in God’s image and with whom they are united and dependent.⁹ The very personal experience of revival cannot remain self-contained—like a vector, the soul’s spiritual magnitude comes from regeneration, but its direction points beyond itself to others. This is fitting if, as Edwards claims, regenerated people participate in God, who, because infinitely good, flows out to others’ benefit.

III. Replacing Revival with Policy

Edwards spelled out the Christian’s ethical duty to the poor in 1733, the same year that he preached his more theoretical sermon, “A Divine and Supernal Light.” As Mark Valerie observes, “spiritual regeneration and social reformation” were interwoven for Edwards. He did not advocate “a retreat into the world of spiritual affections... [but] looked to the revivals to spark social benevolence.”¹⁰ During the swell of revival in 1735, all seemed well. Edwards reports that

⁷ Edwards, “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” 123-124 (emphasis added).

⁸ Edwards, “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” 108.

⁹ Edwards, “The Duty of Charity to the Poor,” *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 17 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1999), 376.

¹⁰ Mark Valeri, “The Economic Thought of Jonathan Edwards,” *Church History* 60, no. 1 (March, 1991): 44.

the revival “made a glorious alteration in the town,”¹¹ pointing to the inescapably public and social dimension that revival contains within itself.

And yet a few years later, in 1743, in another letter about revival, Edwards reports that not only had God withdrawn from Northampton, but many who seemed to have been converted in the revival had returned to their old ways. This decline and shameful loss of vigor in religion among Edwards’ parishioners undermines Edwards’ earlier triumphalist claims about revival and caused him to worry that “a considerable number... have woefully deceived themselves.”¹² While this turn of events led to a crucial insight for Edwards—“that it is not the degree of religious affections, but the nature of them that is chiefly to be looked at”¹³—it nonetheless seems to call into question his decade-long promotion of revivals, which remains a major emphasis in modern evangelicalism today. Two significant shifts followed. In the short term, the ethical work that was supposed to flow spontaneously from religious affections (which now seemed dubious) was replaced by and grounded in social contracts, both ecclesial and political. In the long term, this disappointment prompted Edwards to refine and clarify his notion of the relation between the spiritual and the communal life in his last great work at the end of his life, “On the Nature of True Virtue” (1755).

After the waning of the revival in the late 1730s, we begin to detect a chastened optimism and despondency in Edwards, who now seems to rely on human promises, the gritty effort of willpower (wasn’t this the Arminian slippery slope all along?), and social pressure to provoke ethical living. In 1741, Edwards convinced his congregation to sign a church covenant, in which

¹¹ Edwards, “Faithful Narrative,” 63.

¹² Edwards, “To The Rev. Thomas Prince of Boston,” *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 4 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1972), 555-556.

¹³ Edwards, “To The Rev. Thomas Prince of Boston,” 557.

they made a series of grand promises regarding their public behavior.¹⁴ Has the freedom of the Spirit been swapped for coercion and formalization? Has divine diffusion been replaced with human demand? This is a far cry from the original spontaneous and unregulated movement of the Spirit in the early days of 1736, as described in “A Faithful Narrative.” Yet even this covenant was not successful in the long run, which suggests a fundamental weakness in the approach that depended on individual religious affections alone (or perhaps how Edwards attempted to implement revival through fiery preaching or perhaps his conflicted relationship with his congregation) to sustain Christian practice, as he assured his congregation in 1738: “Charity... tends to all holy practice.”¹⁵

But even Edwards himself, who was so disappointed with his congregation for not living up to his moral vision, failed in the matter of charity, and not simply in a sudden moment of weakness, but protractedly, by owning multiple enslaved people and adroitly defending the practice of an (Arminian!) pastor and, by implication, himself—rhetorically questioning “if there be any” injustice in slavery.¹⁶ Edwards constructed this casuistic defense of slave-owning the same year (1741) that he drew up the church covenant. Even as he foisted this covenant on his community, he was already in flagrant violation of the first promise: to not “willfully or through

¹⁴ Edwards, “To The Rev. Thomas Prince,” 554: For instance, the youth are made to promise “never to allow ourselves in any youthful diversions and pastimes... [anything] that we... judge not well to consist with... the devoutest, and most engage spirit in religion.”

¹⁵ Edwards, “Sermon 10: Grace Tends to Holy Practice,” *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989), 294. This claim is repeated in 1746; see Edwards, “A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections,” *Edwards Reader*, 164: “Gracious and holy affections have their exercise and fruit in Christian practice” and have such an “influence and power” such as to “cause a practice.”

¹⁶ “Jonathan Edwards Sr. Letter on Slavery,” University of Princeton, accessed May 3, 2023, <https://slavery.princeton.edu/sources/jonathan-edwards-sr-letter-on-slavery>.

want of care, injure [our neighbor] in any of his honest possessions or rights.”¹⁷ Slavery is a flagrant violation of a person’s inalienable right to freedom. How could Edwards not see this?

The penultimate development away from his earlier claims about revival and religious affections came in the mid-1740s when Edwards gave up hope in social reform through the voluntary activism of the revived community and instead put his trust in civil policy to impose ethical norms. For a people “stupid as stones”¹⁸ and recalcitrant to even the most extraordinary work of God, it seems that “commerce was as irresistible as grace and more powerful than providence.”¹⁹ Therefore, they couldn’t be counted on. And when God removes not only his vivifying presence in the church but also breaks his strong rod in the government (as he did with John Stoddard’s death in 1748), we can be sure that the days of revival are long gone, and we face a long march “under the late awful frown of divine providence.”²⁰

IV. Conclusion

Edwards’ program of revival and religious affections failed to secure the lasting ethical transformation of society he envisioned. Frustrated and dejected, Edwards put his hope in social contracts and civic leaders, but this too was tenuous and unsatisfactory. Near the end of his life, Edwards continued to wrestle with the disappointments he had experienced in Northampton. His analysis in “True Virtue” may shed light on his understanding of why the revivals, with their religious intensity, failed to produce lasting effects, both spiritually and socially. Edwards defines

¹⁷ Edwards, “To The Rev. Thomas Prince of Boston,” 552.

¹⁸ The title of a biting sermon that Edwards preached to his Northampton congregation in 1731. See Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 17, 176.

¹⁹ Valerie, “The Economic Thought of Jonathan Edwards,” 52-53.

²⁰ Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 25 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2006), 324.

true virtue as that which “radically and essentially”²¹ “consists in love to Being in general.”²² This is in contrast to moral action that stems from self-love—regard for one’s “private interest,” centered on “private affections,” and oriented to a “private system.”²³ A benevolence only concerned with self-interest, cannot transcend the limits of itself or truly concern itself with society, and is not, therefore, true virtue. Perhaps a critical reason why the revivals failed to effect lasting transformation was that, for many people in the fervor of revival, religious affections were nothing more than private affections writ large. Affections, yes, but not directed to the divine telos, the world of love. Perhaps many people were more concerned with escaping hell than embodying heaven. It is not unlikely that Edwards’ frequent fire-and-brimstone preaching could have produced a self-centered myopia in his listeners and activated nothing more than a love for self-preservation. They were content with the gift, not the Giver or the Giver’s goal. Edwards’ argument in “True Virtue” shows that one’s love cannot go from the particular to the general (Being in general), and any love that terminates in the particular will fail to concern itself with the whole of society.²⁴

As the beginning of creation is God’s overflowing goodness, the end of creation is a society overflowing with God’s goodness. God’s self-enlargement does not terminate in regeneration but reaches fullness in regeneration’s effects in society—the loving disposition that wills and delights in others’ good, reflecting heaven as a well-ordered world of mutual love and enjoyment.²⁵ But on this side of the eschaton, all we have is a proleptic and provisional foretaste.

²¹ Edwards, “The Nature of True Virtue,” in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, 253.

²² Edwards, “The Nature of True Virtue,” 246.

²³ Edwards, “The Nature of True Virtue,” 260, 254.

²⁴ Edwards, “The Nature of True Virtue,” 246.

²⁵ Edwards, “Sermon 15: Heaven is a World of Love,” *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989), 375.

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