

## ENDORSEMENTS

This is an excellent book on an excellent topic: Jonathan Edwards's defense of true revival. Kurt Smith combines fascinating history with sound doctrine to sketch the controversy surrounding the Great Awakening and how Edwards responded with biblical wisdom. Smith also includes illuminating selections from Edwards's sermons and personal letters. May God use this book to teach us about His mighty works in the past, to help us to exercise discernment about claims to revival in the present, and to move us to pray for revival in the future.

**Dr. Joel R. Beeke**

**Chancellor of Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary,  
Pastor of the Heritage Reformed Congregation,  
Grand Rapids, Michigan**

I personally never tire of reading about the revivals that occurred in the long eighteenth century, of which those that took place in relation to the ministry of Jonathan Edwards, "America's Augustine," were some of the most remarkable in the entire history of Christianity. This new study of Edwards's experience and vindication of revival is rich in historical context, primary source material, and footnotes (which I love), but also in spiritual lessons for today. It is eminently readable and I am happy to commend it as an extremely helpful précis of Edwards's involvement in the Great Awakening.

**Michael A. G. Haykin**

**Chair and Professor of Church History,  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary,  
Louisville, Kentucky**

*A Pastor in Revival* is a book that needed to be written, and Kurt Smith is the man to write it. It explains how “America’s Greatest Theologian,” Jonathan Edwards, was himself caught up in the “Great Awakening” of the 1730s and 40s, preached during it and after it, examined its weaknesses and strengths, cautioned about its excesses, and promoted its glories. This book so helpfully answers the frequent questions: (1) What is a revival?; (2) What should be done and promoted during a revival?; (3) What should be avoided and de-emphasized during a revival?; (4) What fruits should be expected from a revival?; (5) What is the difference between fanaticism and true revival?; and several more. This book is historically and theologically faithful, careful to be biblical, and written with the same theology and spirituality as the grand awakeners themselves.

Pastor Smith, a student of history and especially American church history, has published earlier triumphs on *The Gospel Heritage of Georgia Baptists* (highlighting the theology, spirituality, and ecclesiology of the pioneers in Georgia Baptist history impacted by the Great Awakening) and *Thundering the Word* (the profound awakening ministry of George Whitefield, the “Grand Itinerant” of the eighteenth-century revivals). May God be pleased to raise up a new phalanx of gospel preachers through reading and praying over this book and then following the godliness and spirituality of Edwards, Whitefield, and the many others who so impacted America’s founding.

God has not changed His judgment on sinful rebels, the gospel has not changed in its power to save, and the Holy Spirit is still the only one who can change the leopard's spots and renew his heart. May God be pleased to use this book to an exponential increase of His glory!

**Steve Martin**  
**Thirty-One Years a Pastor in Atlanta, Georgia;**  
**Retired Dean of Students,**  
**IRBS Theological Seminary,**  
**Mansfield, Texas**

This compact study is a remarkable storehouse of pastoral wisdom needed in a time of revival. Smith's work presents us with a narrative of the Great Awakening from the point of view of Edwards *as a pastor* who ministered among real people amidst real challenges. To top it off, the book ends with letters and sermons Edwards composed during the Awakening, writings which vividly portray the Awakening from the perspective as one passing through it in real time. A helpful and needed guide for the church today!

**Dr. Robert W. Caldwell III**  
**Professor of Church History,**  
**Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary,**  
**Fort Worth, Texas**

Not every pastor can construct original thoughts to the degree and with the logical impenetrability of reasoning that regularly characterizes the writings of Jonathan Edwards. The greatest philosopher/theologian of American Christianity, so some contend, was first and foremost in his own passion and estimation a pastor. Though the rest of us may not have such power of original thought, we can follow the argument of his thought and gain valuable insight on subjects he considered worthy of mental and spiritual energy. Revival and the nature of genuine religious experience is certainly one of those. Kurt Smith, as he has done for George Whitefield, has made Edwards's eyewitness observations on this subject clear, manageable, and pastorally insightful. This book will be good for the mind and good for the ministry.

**Dr. Tom J. Nettles**  
**Louisville, Kentucky**

# **A Pastor in Revival**

**How Jonathan Edwards Discerned  
& Defended the Great Awakening**



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& Defended the Great Awakening

**Kurt M. Smith**



# A PASTOR IN REVIVAL

*How Jonathan Edwards Discerned & Defended the Great Awakening*

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***To Iain H. Murray –***

*whose books and talks on Christian biography have been the template I've personally followed for writing and teaching in this genre. I am grateful and indebted to his labors, which have served an entire generation in helping us to see the greatness of God through the lives of His faithful saints.*

“Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised . . . One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts.”

Psalm 145:3–4



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## FOREWORD

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) is the most important interpreter of revival and regeneration in all of history. He served as a pastor, missionary, and professor. He mentored younger ministers and published many books. By the time he died at the age of fifty-four, he had sparked a new movement of Reformed evangelicals who played a major role in fueling the rise of modern missions, preaching revivals far and wide, and wielding the cutting edge of American theology. He was the leading theologian of what we call the Great Awakening, a series of revivals that rocked the Western world. Consequently, his burden during the bulk of his ministry was to help others discern the Spirit’s presence in their lives—to “test the spirits,” distinguishing God’s Spirit from the counterfeits (1 John 4:1).

He did so in several publications on revival—*Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741); *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* (1743); *Religious Affections* (1746); and *True Grace, Distinguished from the Experience of Devils* (1753)—which, taken together, represent the most important body of literature in all of Christian history on the challenge of discerning a genuine work of the Holy Spirit. His agenda in these books was to steer people away from the externals of religion, red herrings of the faith, things he labeled “negative signs” of a work of the Spirit—they neither confirm nor disprove the Spirit’s presence and activity—and toward what he referred to as the “positive signs” of grace, things the Bible says result from true revival and conversion.

Edwards's negative signs were things like strong emotions, loss of control (either physically or spiritually), and irregular worship practices. Such things had often attended God's regenerating work but could also result from worldly pressure on the part of overweening church leaders or even of the devil. The positive signs, by contrast, included esteem for Jesus, opposition to the devil, "greater regard to the Holy Scriptures," and "a spirit of love to God and man," all things that guarantee that God is active in one's life. They cannot be fabricated. They are supernatural gifts. And the "chief" of all these gifts, the sign most clearly taught in Scripture as an indicator of grace, was the sign of "Christian practice" or biblical "holiness." This was no red herring. It was the sum of true religion.

The Awakening that Edwards led began in central Europe in the early 1720s, spread to Great Britain and its North American colonies, and soon impressed the West with the power of conversion. It peaked in New England in the early 1740s. It launched the modern, interdenominational, evangelical cause. It connected conservative Protestants all over the Western world with cords of common experience, international concerts of prayer, Christian magazines, and itinerant gospel preaching. The story of this Awakening has been told many times. It bears repeating here, though, for Pastor Kurt Smith is not merely a *scholar* of this vast spiritual movement but a *pastor* trying to make good use of it today as he teaches about conversion and a life lived in step with God's Spirit.

In the hands of Pastor Smith, this story of Edwards's efforts to defend the Great Awakening bears practical implications—life-changing, earth-shattering, practical



implications. Like Edwards, Smith shows us the importance of helping others gain a vivid sense of God’s activity in our world, our churches, and our souls. He demonstrates, with Edwards, that authentic Christianity is primarily a matter of what Edwards and others have long called “holy affections.” And he highlights the blessings of maintaining an eternal perspective in our everyday lives.

God calls us by His Word to encourage faith in others in the reality, centrality, beauty, and practicality of the teachings of Scripture (see Pss. 1:1–2; 119:105; 2 Tim. 3:16–17). This means that we help others see that biblical teaching is intended to be tasted and put into practice, not just memorized, affirmed, and then debated with those who differ. It also means that we set our hearts and minds on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God (Col. 3:1–3). As we remember God’s call on us and promise to sustain us, we are emboldened to be the people He made us to be. Those who truly fear the Lord—and take Him at His Word—are free to act with holy boldness, to do the right thing no matter how steep the cost. This book by Pastor Smith about Edwards and the Awakening will encourage you to live with that very kind of faith.

Grab this book, read it, and pray as you do so that God will use it to revive your soul today.

**Douglas A. Sweeney**  
**Dean and Professor of Divinity,**  
**Beeson Divinity School,**  
**Birmingham, Alabama**



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The subject of Jonathan Edwards and the Great Awakening has been both a historical period and theological matter in my own personal studies for some twenty-eight years. But it wasn't till 2021 that I finally set aside the time needed to read everything necessary (including what I had already read many times preceding) from primary and secondary sources in order to formulate what would be a clear, concise presentation of this season in Edwards's life. The initial motivation in this venture was in preparation for an oral presentation on the subject for the Southeastern Association of Confessional Baptist Churches' General Assembly in the autumn of 2021. Following this, I moved forward to start developing the lecture into the book you now have in your hands.

In this labor of love there is gratitude to go around that I must acknowledge. First and foremost to my beloved wife, Lorrie, who bears with me in much love during such times with patience and encouragement to keep writing! Second, to my dear friend Tom Nettles, whose wise counsel has aided me in a most fruitful way to add and improve the main text of this book in critical areas to make its application more relevant to twenty-first-century pastors. Third, to Douglas Sweeney, whose personal interaction and gracious foreword to the book have been a great blessing to me personally. Fourth, to the dear brothers who took the time to read the manuscript and warmly wrote thoughtful, appreciative commendations for this work. Fifth, to Randy Starkey at Founders Press, for all his enthusiasm and labor for this book in its preparation to be printed. Sixth, to my church family at Providence

Reformed Baptist Church and to my fellow pastors in the Southeastern Association of Confessional Baptist Churches who have cheered me with generous support in this work. And lastly, but most importantly, I remain ever grateful to the Lord my God, who gives me such a rich privilege to retell the story of His providential workings that have spread His fame in past generations. “One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts” (Ps. 145:4). *Soli Deo Gloria.*

# INTRODUCTION

In 1742 Jonathan Edwards<sup>1</sup> wrote concerning the Great Awakening:

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Edwards was born in East Windsor, Connecticut, on October 5, 1703, to Timothy and Esther Edwards. Edwards was raised in a large family with ten sisters and was the only son. Edwards came to faith in Christ at age seventeen during his second year studying for a master's degree at Yale College. Over the five years following his conversion, Edwards graduated from Yale College, served in two interim pastorates, took an instructional position at Yale, and married Sarah Pierpont (1710–1758), with whom he'd enjoy a long, fulfilling marriage, and out of which would come eleven children, all surviving infancy. In 1727, Edwards's longest ministerial tenure began, first as assistant minister to his famed grandfather, Solomon Stoddard (1643–1729), at the Congregationalist church in Northampton, Massachusetts—where in 1729 he'd be called as the senior minister in the wake of his grandfather's death. Edwards served the Northampton church for twenty-three years. His remaining years would find him on the frontier of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, as a pioneer missionary to the Mohican and Mohawk Indians. And then, with great reluctance, after six years in Stockbridge, he answered the call to become the third president of the College of New Jersey—later called Princeton Seminary. Edwards would not hold the position for long. In a strange, astonishing providence, only five weeks into his presidency, Jonathan Edwards passed away on March 22, 1758—after receiving a smallpox vaccination that did not succeed due to an infection. When appraising Edwards's life and the legacy of his labors, he has been rightly celebrated as the greatest Christian theologian of the eighteenth century and America's greatest theologian, bar none. But his towering intellect does not explain everything about Jonathan Edwards. The true greatness of this man was that his life as a Christian was God-dominated. The wealth of his knowledge and gifts all worked as servants in his pursuit of God and the unflagging zeal that carried him to do all for God's glory.

Some have greatly erred in the way in which they have gone about to try this work, whether it be a work of the Spirit of God, by judging of it *a priori*, from the way that it began, the instruments that have been employed, the means that have been made use of, and the methods that have been taken and succeeded in carrying it on. Whereas, if we duly consider the matter, it will evidently appear that such a work is not to be judged of *a priori*, but *a posteriori*: we are to observe *the effect* wrought; and if, upon examination of it, it be found to be agreeable to the Word of God, we are bound, without more ado, to rest in it as God's work.<sup>2</sup>

These words from Edwards appear in the first chapter of what would be his second major work written in defense of the Great Awakening—which he entitled *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England*. An added clause to the main title was *And the Way in Which It Ought to Be Acknowledged and Promoted*. By the time the book was published in March 1743, the “present revival of religion” had passed.<sup>3</sup>

But what we read in the above quotation captures everything that drove Edwards's defense and his discernment over what happened in New England from 1740 to 1742. Edwards was critical of those who judged the revival from

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<sup>2</sup> C. C. Goen, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 4: *The Great Awakening* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), 293.

<sup>3</sup> Chapter 3 will explore this book in more detail.

the principle of cause and effect (a priori)—where they looked at what they could see and deduce as the tangible reasons behind the revival and drew their conclusions from that premise. Rather, Edwards argued from the beginning of the Awakening (and never wavered from his position) that one should look rather at the *effect* of the revival and then let God’s Word be the true judge to determine whether it was indeed an authentic work of the Spirit of God. In short, God’s Word is the only infallible, and thereby reliable, filter to examine everything claiming association with the Great Awakening.

By this standard, it can be rightly said that the way in which Jonathan Edwards both defended and discerned the Great Awakening was *biblical*. But how exactly did Edwards go about that as the revival was underway? What scriptural defense did he apply to prove that what was happening in New England was from God—while, at the same time, using God’s Word as his guide to distinguish between the true and the false?

In this present work, it is my purpose to answer those questions by walking us through this season in Edwards’s life in the genre of historical narrative. Pulling from primary sources, especially Edwards’s own correspondence, I hope to give us some sense of Edwards’s thinking, perceptions, and even his feelings from the beginning to the end of one of the most extraordinary events in American church history. Naturally, other persons of this time have to be drawn in—especially George Whitefield (1714–1770), who, next to Edwards, is the most central figure related to the Great Awakening. But my primary focus is on this one pastor in the Connecticut River valley who spoke and wrote more

on that revival than any of his contemporaries. And what Jonathan Edwards said about the Great Awakening has as much application to us over 280 years later as it did to the churches and their leaders in Colonial America. This point I hope to make clear in chapter 5 on the lessons we should learn from the defense and discernment Edwards gave to this subject.

I have a twofold audience for this book in mind. First, there are the men and women who populate the church pew. As a pastor, these are the people I minister to week after week. While many Christians have heard of Jonathan Edwards and the Great Awakening, their knowledge and understanding of the man and the event are scant and more than likely very misinformed. So my hope and prayer is to fill in the numerous blanks on the subject, but not just for the sake of having more information. Rather, may it please the Lord to take this little work and use it to stir in the hearts of present-day believers who congregate local churches a prayerful cry to God to “rend the heavens and come down,” making His presence known (Isa. 64:1). But in addition to reaching the gathered assembly of a local church, I’m also fixing my sights on *fellow pastors*, whom I pray will be encouraged and challenged like myself by the humble, earnest, and godly example Edwards left us during an extraordinary time of the Spirit’s manifest power. In fact, the epilogue, which I entitled “A Faith Worth Imitating,” is an exclusive concluding word to pastors concerning three principal lessons we should glean from Edwards to aid us in pastoral ministry, with or without the experience of real revival.

Most of the main text of this work, which makes up chapters 1–5, was originally given as an oral address at the



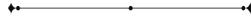
Southeastern Association of Confessional Baptist Churches' (SACB) General Assembly at Providence Reformed Baptist Church in Remlap, Alabama. I am grateful to the administrative council of SACB for giving me their blessing to present this as a single lecture. I am also thankful for the literary works that have preceded mine, which have covered far more historical ground and aided me in so many ways to connect the dots, as it were, with greater historical accuracy. Such works I could mention are Iain Murray's biography on Jonathan Edwards, along with George Marsden's as well. There is also Michael A. G. Haykin's book *Jonathan Edwards: The Holy Spirit in Revival* and Robert Davis Smart's scholarly work *Jonathan Edwards's Apologetic for the Great Awakening*. In addition to these books are the specific volumes in the Yale Edition of *Edwards' Works*, covering this subject with very helpful and insightful editorial introductions.

Following the chapters and epilogue, I have added two appendices that I strongly recommend the reader to read. The first has five letters Edwards wrote in connection with the Great Awakening. I have introductions to each letter appearing as footnotes that will help the reader understand the significance of what they are reading. What is most important about these letters, though, is that you see more of who Edwards was and where his thinking was lodged at the time. In the second appendix are two sermons Edwards preached during the Great Awakening that show, on the one hand, the pastoral wisdom Edwards ministered to his congregation during such a remarkable time and, on the other hand, the way Edwards preached to awaken those who were asleep in the midst of this exceptional moment wherein the Spirit of God was being poured out in revival power.

As to the many and sometimes lengthy footnotes I have, these are used to supplement what the main text omits and to add greater details so you could say, “This is the rest of the story.” Therefore, please don’t ignore the footnotes. There is vital information and application nestled in those notes, which I wrote to aid the reader along the way.

In closing, my wife inquired why I was writing a book on a subject that has received so much attention in so many works. Why another book on this matter? Her question was honest and fair, not critical. My answer is this: While there have been many good books that have covered Edwards and the Great Awakening, none of those books (including mine!) say everything that could be said. Church history is very complex, as history is in general. So there are still more layers to peel back and examine and ponder to the glory of God. Furthermore, I write as a pastor who can see and understand Edwards and his challenges in a pastoral way. Jonathan Edwards was not an ivory-tower theologian. He was a pastor seeking, by the wisdom of God’s Word and the power of God’s Spirit, to navigate his own walk and lead those entrusted to his charge at a time when the churches and residents of New England were beholding just a glimpse of heavenly glory. So may we learn all we can as to what Edwards himself learned when it came to this prodigious season known as the Great Awakening.

## PROLOGUE



# A GREAT DIVIDE IN THE GREAT AWAKENING

During the spring and summer of 1743, churches and their pastors across New England had entered a great divide over whether or not the recent “revival of religion” (or, as we know it, the Great Awakening) was a legitimate work of God. By this time, the revival itself had largely faded. But discussion and debate over the revival was just gaining traction. And among the Congregationalist churches in Massachusetts Bay, the dispute over the validity of this work as heaven-sent would see its strongest advocates and fiercest opponents among its clergy—who, in a matter of three months, drew a proverbial “line in the sand” that made the divide clear and, in time, set both sides on an irreconcilable course.

Those in favor of the revival were branded as “New Lights”<sup>4</sup> while those set against it carried the tag of “Old

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<sup>4</sup> The “New Lights” were stigmatized as such by their critics principally because of the *preaching* marking them in both their content and delivery. While the content was scriptural and nothing new, it was a return to the great doctrines of the Reformation, which had faded from many pulpits in New England for some time. As one leading pastor in the Awakening testified, “The points on which their preaching mainly turns, are those important ones of man’s guilt, corruption, and impotence; supernatural regeneration by the Spirit of God, and free justification by faith in the righteousness of Christ; and the marks of the

Lights.”<sup>5</sup> The Old Lights took their first shot across the bow in May 1743 at the annual Convention of Congregational Ministers of Massachusetts, which met in Boston—New England’s largest city. Discovering that they had a slight majority among the pastors who attended, the Old Lights seized the moment to formally declare in writing their condemnation of the Great Awakening by an official document they entitled “A Testimony of the Pastors of the Churches in the Province of Massachusetts Bay.”<sup>6</sup> Among

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new birth.” (C. C. Goen, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 4: *The Great Awakening* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972], 218). The Great Awakening therefore brought a revived orthodoxy that was opposed by the Old Lights who were “men of *Arminian* and *Pelagian* principles” (Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987], 215). As to their delivery of these great doctrines, the New Lights preached with a boldness free from the fear of man as they pressed hard on the conscience of their hearers the terror of the Lord. Needless to say, such preaching was startling to a largely lethargic pulpit, which was the norm of the day.

<sup>5</sup> The “Old Lights” represented a minority of New England clergy who strongly opposed the Great Awakening as a true work of the Spirit because of the many disorders that were mixed in this revival. Yet this was not the only motivating factor for their rejection of the Awakening. An even greater reason for their enmity was the way in which the Awakening was upsetting and overturning their established social and ecclesiastical culture. As Robert D. Smart explained it from the Old Lights’ perspective: “The leveling of clerical authority, the neglect of parish boundaries, and the open judgment of the state of the ministers and churches opposed to the revival leaders had convinced this growing, collective group that the ‘Great Awakening’ was a ‘Great Delusion’” (Robert D. Smart, *Jonathan Edwards’s Apologetic for the Great Awakening* [Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011], 58).

<sup>6</sup> The title of this document originated with Charles Chauncy (1705–1787), who at this time had emerged as the great leader of the Old Light cause. Thus, whatever Chauncy advocated for the promotion

the contents of this diatribe they listed their denunciation of the obvious and most infamous disorders that attached themselves to this revival—like reliance on impressions as a direct word from God, or the public castigating of clergy as unconverted, or the fainting and fits of congregants during meetings, or the mass exodus from parish churches to form new ones in favor of the revival.<sup>7</sup>

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of the Old Lights was met with their hearty approval. The full title read as follows: *The Testimony of the Pastors of the Churches in the Province of the Massachusetts Bay in New England, at Their Annual Convention in Boston May 25, 1743. Against Several Errors in Doctrine and Disorders in Practice, Which Have of Late Obtained in Various Parts of the Land; As Drawn up by a Committee Chosen by the Said Pastors, Read and Accepted Paragraph by Paragraph, and Voted to Be Signed by the Moderator in Their Name, and Printed* (Edwards' Works, vol. 4, 79). In chapter 3, more will be said about Chauncy and his open opposition to the Great Awakening.

<sup>7</sup> There was perhaps nothing more scandalous to the Old Light clergy than the fast-paced emergence of what became known as “The Separate Movement”—hundreds of professing Christians who left the established order of parish Congregational churches in New England to form new churches that were illegal under colony law. Many of these churches faced fines and legal harassment for refusing to cooperate with the state-sponsored religious order. However, despite the strong legal efforts to quash the Separate churches, the Old Light clergy could not overcome the momentum they were gaining. This especially became true among the Separate *Baptists*. In fact, it would be the Separate Baptist movement that stood the test of time as its lasting fruit turned toward the Southern Colonies in the mid-to-late 1740s, where Baptist churches were planted throughout Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. Along with the Methodists and Presbyterians, the Separate Baptists were a key religious component in turning the South into “the Bible Belt.” But their movement and mission were the result of the Great Awakening. (To dig further into the history of the Separate Baptists in the South, especially in Georgia, read the book I coauthored with

To the Old Lights, these examples and many others were nothing but the false fire of fanaticism, which they believed was rooted in antinomianism. Thus, their public conclusion was that this revival could not have any rightful claim as being born of God. This testimony would have the endorsement of some forty pastors, who only made up around one-fifth of those in the entire province of Massachusetts Bay.<sup>8</sup> Yet due to their numerical advantage in this spring convention, the Old Lights prevailed despite the forceful push against their coup by the New Light clergy.

Needless to say, the New Light pastors were stunned at this bold and aggressive move by the Old Light clergy. And while they themselves affirmed the dangers of the fanaticism that was mixed with this revival, they could not sign off on the Old Light rejection in toto. They knew in truth and by experience that what happened from 1740–1742 was, as one Boston pastor wrote in 1741, “such a display . . . of the power and grace of the divine Spirit in the assemblies of his people, and such testimonies has he given to the word of the Gospel.”<sup>9</sup> In short, as this pastor attested, it was a “large effusion of the Spirit.”<sup>10</sup>

So in the two months following the May meeting in Boston, another annual meeting was held during the Harvard commencement in Cambridge. And during this meeting, a counter-convention was organized by New Light pastors,

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Branden F. Smith, entitled *The Gospel Heritage of Georgia Baptists: 1772–1830* (Port St. Lucie: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003), 279.

<sup>9</sup> Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 217.

<sup>10</sup> Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 216.

wherein they issued an official document in praise of the revival while supporting nearly all the censures made by the Old Lights. This defense for the Great Awakening was sanctioned by sixty-eight ministers who were present at this meeting and backed up by letters sent from forty-three others in their absence.

Among the letters sent to Cambridge in favor of the revival was one composed by a thirty-nine-year-old pastor who served the most distinguished church in the Connecticut River valley. His name was Jonathan Edwards.

When Edwards wrote this letter advocating the revival as a valid work of God, he did so as a summary of what he'd already written, and even published, as a formal vindication for the Great Awakening.<sup>11</sup> In fact, out of more than two

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<sup>11</sup> Edwards wrote this letter not merely to represent himself and his own convictions, but he penned this brief vindication on behalf of six other fellow pastors in Hampshire County. Writing on June 30, 1743, Edwards asserted, with the affirmation of his ministerial colleagues, that “we judge that there has been within the last two years and an half [1740–1742], a blessed outpouring of the Spirit of God in this county in awakening and converting sinners, and in enlightening, quickening and building up saints in faith, holiness and comfort; which has been attended in great numbers with an abiding alteration and reformation of disposition and behavior.” But while Edwards and his brethren rejoiced to see such a work of God manifested in their respective towns and parishes, he also acknowledged, “There has been, especially in some places, a mixture of enthusiasm and false religion, and some have run into great errors in their conduct, and some have fallen away, and there is a declension in others that is to be lamented.” Notwithstanding though the grievous “mixture of enthusiasm and false religion” showing itself in the course of the Great Awakening, Edwards maintained, “Yet we still think the effect has been such, and still continues to be such, as leaves no room reasonably to doubt of God’s having been wonderfully in the midst of us, and such as has laid us under great

hundred Congregationalist pastors in Massachusetts at this period, it would be Jonathan Edwards who providentially became what Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899–1981) rightly designated “the theologian of revival.”<sup>12</sup> No one brought a more articulate and scripturally sound advocacy for the Great Awakening than Edwards. And no one framed their case with greater discernment than Edwards, answering the fanatics on the one hand while countering the rationalists on the other with God’s Word as his authority for both.

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obligations forever to admire and extol the riches of his grace in doing such great things for us” (George S. Claghorn, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 16 [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998], 111–112). What we read in brevity from these words is what we will see unfolded in the historical narrative that follows in the following chapters. Edwards had both eyes open to behold the work of God in truth while not denying the work of Satan sowing his own corruption to blind many from what the Lord was actually doing.

<sup>12</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 361.



## CHAPTER 1



# GOD'S GRAND ITINERANT

1740

In 1740, there was no urgency in Edwards to defend what he described in his letter from 1743 as “a blessed outpouring of the Spirit of God.”<sup>13</sup> In the first full year of the revival, all Edwards could do was rejoice and pray and hope that where he pastored in Northampton, they would all see a greater measure of the Spirit’s work among them. And Edwards’s anticipation was not unfounded.

It had been only since the mid-1730s that he witnessed, with all of Northampton and its neighboring towns in Hampshire County, a season of unusual spiritual power. Occurring toward the end of 1734 and lasting till June 1735, “the Spirit of God . . . extraordinarily set in,” wrote Edwards in his published account of the event, “and wonderfully [worked] amongst us.”<sup>14</sup> But as this revival season ebbed

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<sup>13</sup> *Edwards’ Works*, vol. 16, 111.

<sup>14</sup> *Edward’s Works*, vol. 4, 149. Edwards had no intention of actually publishing a detailed account of this revival. Due to the extraordinary nature of what had occurred, a minister in Boston named Benjamin Coleman (1673–1747) inquired from Edwards a report of what took place in Northampton. Replying in brief on May 30, 1735, Coleman sent Edwards’s letter to fellow ministers John Guyse (1680–1761) and Issac Watts (1674–1748), with whom he kept in frequent

away in Northampton, spiritual decline broke in, and by the beginning of 1740 Edwards bewailed “a lamentable decay of religious affections, and the engagedness of people’s spirit in religion.”<sup>15</sup> This despite the fact that prayer societies and social religion had continued since the previous awakening. So as 1740 dawned, an ardent desire in Edwards pled with God more earnestly to return again in those more visible measures of spiritual power as He’d done in the past.

### THE CATALYST TO THE GREAT AWAKENING

Yet the past experience of revival was not the only thing moving Edwards with such a building anticipation. The other factor flaming his fervency toward this work of God was in the person of a young Anglican minister named George Whitefield (1714–1770). When Whitefield arrived in America in late fall 1739, it was his second visit to the British-American colonies. Since his first visit, an evangelical revival had already landed in England through the conversion

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contact. When Watts delivered this narrative to his own congregation at the Mark Lane Congregational Chapel in London, the feedback was a prompt request to not only publish Edwards’s letter but to have it expanded with greater details. It appeared first in December 1736 as an eighteen-page appendix to a book of sermons by William Williams (1665–1741). But then in the fall of 1737, it was published as a single title, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton, and the Neighboring Towns and Villages of New Hampshire, in New England*. Watts and Guyse wrote a protracted preface to the book. In its first two years in print, it went through three editions and twenty printings. It has been described as “the most significant book to precede the great evangelical awakening on both sides of the Atlantic” concerning this subject of revival (Murray, *Edwards: A New Biography*, 122).

<sup>15</sup> *Edwards’ Works*, vol. 16, 116.

and preaching of men who were heralding to their nation, “You must be born again!” But at the center of this revival in England was George Whitefield—a West Country man in his early twenties whom God chose to raise up and preach the gospel with singular, evident power.<sup>16</sup> Thus, when word reached Colonial America via the local papers and

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<sup>16</sup> When you assess the life of George Whitefield, the one word that naturally surfaces is *exceptional*. His irrepressible zeal for Christ, his glowing catholicity for the body of Christ, his ever-humble and teachable spirit, and his fearless, incessant determination to preach Christ to as many people as he could humanly reach distinguished him among his contemporaries as “the wonder of the age” and by later church historians as “the greatest evangelist since the apostle Paul.” Such accolades are not meant to paint a picture of Whitefield that would leave an impression of him as sinless during his earthly sojourn. Far from it! But it is to stress that when you consider honestly the facts of both his Christian life and gospel ministry, his devotion to Christ and the way in which God spent him out in service to Christ were exceptional. When he passed away in September 1770 (only three months shy of his fifty-sixth birthday), his labors for Christ had covered thirty-four years—wherein he preached some eighteen thousand sermons averaging sixty hours a week, reaching combined audiences of over ten million people. His ministry took him all over his native country of England, fifteen times to Scotland, twice to Ireland, once to Holland, crossing the Atlantic thirteen times with seven trips to America, one to Gibraltar and Bermuda, with attempts to reach Canada and the West Indies. No single gospel minister in the eighteenth century had achieved the magnitude of such a breathtaking span of evangelistic enterprises. (If you’ve never read a biography on Whitefield, I humbly recommend my own work on this subject, entitled *Thundering the Word: The Awakening Ministry of George Whitefield*, published by Free Grace Press in 2020. It is a well-rounded introduction to Whitefield’s life and ministry. To read what is perhaps the best exhaustive biography on Whitefield, there is Arnold Dallimore’s two-volume work published by Banner of Truth Trust).

personal correspondence from Whitefield of his return, the expectation of his arrival was electric.<sup>17</sup>

But one thing must be clarified as to Whitefield's return to Colonial America: *His aim and ambition was not to bring revival.* What Whitefield designed in all his aspiration as he headed for America was twofold: first, the orphan house he planned to build in Savannah, Georgia; and second, but most important, to be the brightest burning candle for Christ by way of gospel proclamation.<sup>18</sup> As he expressed by letter to a fellow minister just before landing in America,

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<sup>17</sup> Regarding the general anticipation for Whitefield's appearance in New England alone, Thomas Kidd wrote, "New Englanders had begun hearing reports of Whitefield's ministry as early as the spring of 1739, when the *Boston News-Letter* included a story on his preaching to the Kingswood colliers. By mid-1739, news about Whitefield had become a staple of the Boston papers, and in November 20, 1739, the *New England Weekly Journal* reported on the itinerant's arrival in America. . . . The newspapers in New England monitored Whitefield's movements throughout 1740" (Thomas S. Kidd, *George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014], 120). Lisa Smith, in her book *The First Great Awakening in Colonial American Newspapers*, noted how the first two years of the Awakening focused heavily on Whitefield throughout the colonies. To most Americans in this initial season of the revival, Smith reports how Whitefield *represented* the Awakening. In a further observation from her research, she wrote, "What is noteworthy about Whitefield's entrance into the American newspaper scene is its explosiveness. Approximately seventy-five newspaper items related to Whitefield appeared in the colonial papers during the first two months of Whitefield's visit, almost the same number that had appeared during the preceding ten months. [Benjamin] Franklin printed nine items in the first two months after Whitefield's arrival—four letters and five news reports" (*The First Great Awakening in Colonial American Newspapers*, [Lexington Books, 2012] 17–18).

<sup>18</sup> Kurt M. Smith, *Thundering the Word: The Awakening Ministry of George Whitefield* (Conway, AR: Free Grace Press, 2020), 67.

“Never was the harvest greater, never were the laborers fewer. If we do not now lift up our voices like trumpets, the very stones would cry out against us. I could almost say, ‘the glory is departed from Israel; the ark of the Lord is fallen into enemies hands.’ Oh let us endeavor, dear Sir, let us endeavor to bring it back, by preaching and living the truth as it is in Jesus. The light that has been given us, is not to be put under a bushel, but on a candlestick.”<sup>19</sup> And to another minister on this same voyage he summed up with all simplicity his mission to the British-American colonies, “The whole world is my parish. Wheresoever my master calls me, I am ready to go and preach his everlasting gospel.”<sup>20</sup>

But what Whitefield could not anticipate was the extent to which God would call him to preach the “everlasting gospel” and the way in which his labors would impact all thirteen colonies in a spirit of true awakening power. Indeed, when one considers all seven visits Whitefield made to Colonial America in his lifetime, this second sojourn from November 1739 to January 1741 would harvest more souls to Christ than any other time he labored in this country. Yet the reason for such enormity of gains for Christ was not credited to Whitefield’s greatness but God’s grace poured out in a most uncommon manner. Nevertheless, by God’s own prerogative, it would be George Whitefield emerging in the first full year of the Great Awakening as the catalyst for this extraordinary work.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> George Whitefield, *George Whitefield’s Letters: 1734–1742* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 1976), 94.

<sup>20</sup> *George Whitefield’s Letters: 1734–1742*, 105.

<sup>21</sup> Whitefield’s endeavors to preach the gospel during this period in Colonial America were not reckless or purely impulsive. He was

## EDWARDS'S INITIAL CORRESPONDENCE WITH WHITEFIELD

This fact was not missed on Jonathan Edwards. On February 12, 1739, Edwards made his first correspondence to Whitefield, inviting, and indeed urging, the young Anglican to come and preach at Northampton. Conceding to what preceded Whitefield's reputation, Edwards wrote, "But I apprehend, from what I have heard, that you are one that has the blessing of heaven attending you wherever you go; and I have a great desire, if it may be the will of God, that such a blessing as attends your person and labors may descend on this town, and may enter mine own house, and that I may receive it in my own soul."<sup>22</sup> Writing further in the same

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very methodical and organized as to where and when he would set out in spreading the gospel to the different colonies, towns, and villages. Thus, in 1740, he divided up his evangelistic labors into three different *tours*, if you will. From April 2 to June 5 he ministered in both Pennsylvania and New York; then from July 2 to July 25 he would tax his gospel efforts in Charleston, South Carolina; and lastly, from August 18 to December 14 he would make his most memorable trek to New England. But as organized as Whitefield was in the *where* and *what* of his gospel preaching, the results of his service to Christ could not be controlled by anything he did. And Whitefield got this as he expressed in a letter at this time, "When an uncommon work is to be done, no doubt [God] will work upon his chosen instruments in an uncommon manner. What the event of the present general awakening will be, I know not. I desire to follow my dear Lord blindfolded, whithersoever he is pleased to lead me; and to do just so much, and no more, as his providence points out to me" (*George Whitefield's Letters: 1734-1742*, 188). No one could predict, least of all Whitefield, what would unfold in the British-American colonies in 1740. Like Paul the apostle, Whitefield set out to plant and water the gospel-seed, but its actual growth would be determined by God alone (see 1 Cor. 3:6-7).

<sup>22</sup> *Edwards' Works*, vol. 16, 80.

letter, Edwards rejoiced at what he'd also heard concerning the revival in England and gave God much gratitude for how refreshing it was that the Lord's chief human vessel in that work was one coming out of the Church of England itself—"as one raised up," Edwards observed, "to revive the mysterious, spiritual, despised, and exploded doctrines of the gospel . . . full of a spirit of zeal for the promotion of real vital piety."<sup>23</sup> Thus disclosing his exuberant joy for Whitefield's gospel labors, Edwards expressed in the spirit of a benediction, "Blessed be God that hath done it! who is with you, and helps you, and makes the weapons of your warfare mighty."<sup>24</sup>

### ENCOURAGED YET DISCOURAGED

But as strongly as Edwards anticipated Whitefield's visit to Northampton fanning into flames real revival fires, the first stirrings of the Awakening began in Whitefield's absence. Recalling this in a letter three years later to his close friend, Thomas Prince (1687–1758), Edwards noted, "In the year 1740 in the spring, before Mr. Whitefield came to this town, there was a visible alteration: there was more seriousness and religious conversation, especially among young people. Those things that were of ill tendency among them were more [withheld]; and it was a more frequent thing for persons to visit their minister upon soul accounts, and in some particular persons there appeared a great alteration about that time."<sup>25</sup> This "visible alteration" encouraged

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<sup>23</sup> *Edwards' Works*, vol. 16, 80.

<sup>24</sup> *Edwards' Works*, vol. 16, 80. This letter appears in full in the appendices.

<sup>25</sup> *Edwards' Works*, vol. 16, 116.

Edwards, as it signaled for him what might be on the way for Northampton in greater measure, if it pleased the Lord; yet, in a letter from October 9, 1740, he petitioned a younger pastor in Connecticut whose church and town had been visited with a great revival, “We need the prayers of all that are favored with God’s presence and the lively influences of his Spirit. It is a sorrowfully dull and dead time with us . . . I know not where to look for help but to God. O dear Sir! earnestly pray for us.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Edwards’ Works*, vol. 16, 85–86. It should be noted that in this same letter, Edwards made special mention of Whitefield for two different petitions. First, that “Satan may not get any advantage of [Whitefield].” Mindful of how the Lord had been pleased “to improve to do such great things for the honor of his name” by the labors of Whitefield, Edwards was urgent to pray that God would uphold Whitefield as a matter of divine protection. Second, Edwards remained ever hopeful that God would bless “Mr. Whitefield’s coming here for the good of my soul, and the souls of my people.” An important takeaway from these petitions is how Edwards kept looking to the Lord in all things in this special season of reviving power. As much as he joyfully anticipated Whitefield’s arrival in Northampton, Edwards was always conscious that this young Anglican evangelist was only God’s *instrument*, not the source or cause of the Great Awakening. Thus, all of Edwards’s hope and care for both himself and Northampton to be spiritually revived were fixed on the Lord and not man. This is why Edwards prayed that God would “guide and direct” Whitefield “at all times . . . under [the] extraordinary circumstances” he found himself in at the center of this great work. For if the Lord is not sustaining His servant, then Satan is liable to get the upper hand. This was Edwards’s constant concern for Whitefield, and rightly so, since Whitefield was only a fallible, fallen man, though redeemed by grace.



## WHITEFIELD'S ARRIVAL IN NORTHAMPTON

Nine days after composing this letter, the long-awaited revival Edwards prayed so earnestly would visit Northampton came with the arrival of George Whitefield. When he entered Northampton on Friday, October 17, Whitefield was on the last leg of his preaching itinerary in New England, which started in Rhode Island on September 14. His greatest labors during this time were twenty-seven days spent in Boston and its surrounding regions. Several pastors in Boston attested, in the wake of Whitefield's labors, that the twenty-five-year-old Anglican evangelist had not run in vain, as the churches were fuller now than they'd ever been, with sinners under conviction, others converted, and many seasoned Christians witnessing to a greater assurance of faith.<sup>27</sup> So on the heels of such an evident outpouring of the Spirit's presence and power in New England's largest city, Whitefield showed up on Edwards's doorstep, 105 miles west of Boston.

He would spend a full weekend with Edwards and the people of Northampton—preaching once on Friday, twice on Saturday,<sup>28</sup> and twice on the Lord's Day, along with a private lecture in Edwards's home. "The congregation," Edwards reminisced three years later, "was extraordinarily melted by every sermon; almost the whole assembly being in tears for a great part of sermon time. Mr. Whitefield's sermons were suitable to the circumstances of the town; containing a just reproof of our backslidings, and in a most moving and

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<sup>27</sup> *Thundering the Word*, 84–85.

<sup>28</sup> One of these sermons on Saturday was in Hatfield, Massachusetts, nearly six miles northeast of Northampton at the meetinghouse of William Williams.

affecting manner making use of our great professions and great mercies, as arguments with us to return to God from whom we had departed.”<sup>29</sup>

In the aftermath of these meetings, Edwards noted how the fruit was rapid and pervasive in its growth, with “the minds of the people in general [appearing] more engaged in religion, showing a greater [boldness] to make religion the subject of their conversation, and to meet frequently for religious purposes, and to embrace all opportunities to hear the Word preached.”<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Edwards remarked how the revival first appeared among professing Christians, but then not long following “there appeared an awakening and

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<sup>29</sup> *Edwards' Works*, vol. 16, 116. In Whitefield's own published *Journal* of this time in Northampton, he remarked in the first place how “Mr. Edwards is a solid, excellent Christian” whose “fellow” Whitefield had not seen in all of New England. He was further impressed by what he witnessed in Edwards's marriage to his wife, Sarah—“a sweeter couple I have not yet seen.” As to his ministry from the pulpit and the effect of the Word among the people at Northampton, Whitefield expressed that “when I came to remind them of their former experiences, and how zealous and lively they were at that time, both minister and people wept much.” And again, writing of his ministry on Sunday, October 19, he said, “Preached this morning, and good Mr. Edwards wept during the whole time of exercise. The people were equally affected; and, in the afternoon, the power increased yet more. Our Lord seemed to keep the good wine till the last. I have not seen four such gracious meetings together since my arrival. Oh, that my soul may be refreshed with the joyful news, that Northampton people have recovered their first love; that the Lord has revived His work in their souls, and caused them to do their first works!” (George Whitefield, *George Whitefield's Journals* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960], 476–477). One can only imagine how cheered and encouraged Whitefield must have been when he read Edwards's letter reporting the fruit that had come in the wake of these meetings.

<sup>30</sup> *Edwards' Works*, vol. 16, 116.

deep concern among some young persons, that looked upon themselves in a Christless state.”<sup>31</sup> The outcome of all this, Edwards rejoiced to report, was that in a month’s time “there was a great attention in the town, both as to the revival of professors and the awakening of others,” with “some hopeful appearances of conversion.”<sup>32</sup>

Nearly two months after Whitefield preached in Northampton, Edwards wrote personally to Whitefield to encourage him that a gradual “reviving and prevailing” had been exceeding throughout the town since his labors among them. But with such apparent promising fruit, Edwards still remained cautious and humble, desiring Whitefield’s “fervent prayers . . . that God would not be to us as a wayfaring man, that turns aside to tarry but for a night, but that he would more and more pour out his Spirit upon us, and no more depart from us; and for me in particular, that I may be filled with his Spirit, and may become fervent, as a flame of fire in my work, and may be abundantly succeeded, and that it would please God, however unworthy I am, to improve as an instrument of his glory, and advancing the kingdom of Christ.”<sup>33</sup>

As 1740 closed, what Edwards asked from Whitefield as a matter of intercession would be answered by God in ways the Northampton pastor could not possibly imagine. The Great Awakening had finally come to Northampton, and in the following year its fruit would only increase. In addition to this, Jonathan Edwards would providentially begin taking a more central place in this extraordinary work of the Spirit.

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<sup>31</sup> *Edwards' Works*, vol. 16, 116.

<sup>32</sup> *Edwards' Works*, vol. 16, 116.

<sup>33</sup> *Edwards' Works*, vol. 16, 87.

