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## **Setting the Stage for Dissension: Revival in Northampton, Massachusetts and the Dismissal of Jonathan Edwards**

June 22, 1750 would mark one of the most pivotal moments in religion during the colonial era of America. On that day, at the urge of his parishioners, a council of ten churches from the Connecticut River Valley determined that Jonathan Edwards should be discharged from his position as pastor of the Congregational Church in Northampton, Massachusetts. Life in Northampton during Edwards' tenure can be divided into four general phases, each further illuminating the widespread series of religious revivals, known as the Great Awakening, as the beginning of the town's dissent from their minister and his eventual dismissal.

The first phase took place in the mid 1730s, peaking in 1735, when Northampton and a majority of the Connecticut River Valley experienced a revival of the Christian faith. Next, from 1736 to 1740, the congregation began to drift away from their religious state of mind. Then, with the Great Awakening of 1740-43, the people of Northampton restored their love for Christ, albeit in a new way. The last phase consisted of various tensions between Edwards and his flock, leading to his dismissal in 1750.

The dismissal of Edwards is crucial to understanding colonial history and society. Understanding the religious dynamics of Northampton during his tenure provides insight into the evolving structure of New England society only a generation before the American Revolution. Also, viewing the differences in church doctrine between the Connecticut River Valley Revivals, in where Edwards emphasized justification by faith alone, and the Great Awakening, which stressed an emotional experience and a distrust for the traditional church authority of ministers, indicates ways that religion altered how Edwards' congregation perceived their pastor and their faith. Moreover, the effects that the Awakening had on Northampton showcase the congregation's dissent from their pastor, leading to his dismissal. While there is an abundance of

historical work on both Edwards and the Great Awakening, this research provides a new connection between the two, emphasizing the role of the Awakening in influencing Northampton society away from their pastor, who was unwilling to depart from his strict biblical views.<sup>1</sup>

The 1735 revival was first established in the small community of Pascommuck, just three miles from Northampton, yet still a part of Edwards' parish. Spreading from there, conversions began to take place among young, unmarried people from within the roughly 200 families in Northampton. Once converted, to a renewed faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin, they began to turn from their perceived licentious ways, spurring one another to the promotion of religion. The youth, who once gathered in taverns and other inconspicuous places, were now meeting together in "social religion" to sharpen one another in the faith and deeds their pastor had demonstrated to them. This revival, however, was set apart from previous revivals in Northampton under Edwards' late grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, as this one affected more than the youth of the town. In a letter to Bostonian minister, Benjamin Colman, Edwards documented conversions of the older townspeople: "upwards of fifty persons... above forty years of age; and more than twenty of them above fifty, and about ten of them above sixty, and two... above seventy years of age."<sup>2</sup> This breadth of the revival had been unprecedented to Edwards' knowledge, giving him a strong sense of hope for its lasting nature.

Edwards, who was the sole preacher in Northampton during this revival, emphasized the inability of humans to gain their salvation through works. This continued value of the Calvinist doctrine of justification by faith alone was used to combat the human merit, or Arminian doctrine, that he and other ministers in the valley felt was threatening their churches. Due to the Arminian scare, this revival was heavily marked by the necessity of faith. As researcher, Mary Catherine Foster states, "it was neither fear nor joy that motivated [Edwards'] audience, but the fact that they were unable to save themselves."<sup>3</sup>

In spite of the substantial changes, the town's spiritual highs did not last forever. To some of the congregants, the idea of not being able to *do* anything to secure their salvation produced a great anxiety. When Edwards wrote Colman his letter in June of 1735, he ended up including a postscript describing the diversion from spiritual thought that happened just that week. His uncle and town merchant, Joseph Hawley, had become so intensely distraught knowing the state of his sinful nature that he took his own life on June 1, 1735. Thereafter, the revival faded from Northampton.<sup>4</sup>

The circumstances and context of the revival, as short as it was, are important for understanding the town, the Great Awakening, and eventually, Edwards' dismissal. Edwards grounded the revival by reminding his parishioners "not to be lured by the 'inner light' of affections" unless the sound doctrine of scripture was attached. This emphasis of *sola scriptura* reinforced the idea that "there was no new doctrine, no new way of worship, no prevailing oddity of behavior... or other alleged innovations" during this year long revival. This was not the case for the Great Awakening of the 1740s, where most of the reviving spirit would come from itinerants, and thereby, with a different doctrinal foundation.<sup>5</sup>

As town life in Northampton became more secular, Edwards looked outside himself to bring the people back to a religious mindset. Hearing that Englishman, George Whitefield, would be crossing the Atlantic to preach throughout the colonies, Edwards wrote him in February 1739/40<sup>6</sup> in hope that Northampton could be a destination. Whitefield would arrive to Northampton on October 17, 1740, bringing an energetic and emotional message. The inhabitants of Northampton had been fading from their spiritual focus over the last five years, but with the presence of Whitefield, their perception of their faith would change as well. This third phase of Northampton culture, like the first, would be marked a revival of the congregation's faith in Christ; however this time, the doctrine was loose, and the emotions were high.

Unlike Edwards who preached from his fine-tuned notes, Whitefield's sermons were filled with spontaneity and enthusiasm. It seemed that this fresh take on religion was exactly what the people needed; they had "recovered their first love."<sup>7</sup> Despite Whitefield's emotional approach to preaching, Edwards welcomed the itinerant with sincere joy. He recognized that his flock had been falling away from their faith, yet were now experiencing profound change under Whitefield.

The emotional message preached by Whitefield and other itinerants, however, contained a new take on Church authority. Whitefield believed that "the Reason why Congregations have been so dead, is because dead Men preach to them."<sup>8</sup> While Edwards maintained the power of church authority, despite the recognized flaws, many Awakening itinerants believed it to be the time for church laity to take a more active role in spreading the Christian gospel. Yet, as the ability to convert fell into the hands of the general church population, the Arminian doctrine also seemed to appear in various forms in Northampton. Further into the Awakening, parishioners ventured to exceed one another in their enthusiasm, believing that the more vehement their words and deeds, the more pious they were.

Edwards sought to capitalize on this spiritual enthusiasm by drafting a church covenant in the spring of 1741/42. The covenant, "a strategy commonly advocated for by the earlier generations to root out immoral behavior," signified Edwards' attempt to prevent the congregation's dissent from his leadership. While the members of the church did recite and sign the covenant on March 16, 1741/42, their lack of reverence for their pastor and his choices began to shine through their actions as the Awakening slowed down.<sup>9</sup>

By the spring of 1744 the stage had been set for dissension. In what has been termed the "bad book scandal," a group of young men in the church (average age of twenty-four), began to circulate a medical text with vivid descriptions of the female body and instructions on

midwifery, using it to taunt and ridicule young women in town. Edwards, who “thought more highly of women’s religious natures than men’s,” immediately called for a church committee to oversee the discipline of the boys involved. However, many of the townspeople believed that the sins committed by the boys were private matters, therefore, should be handled in private. Nonetheless, to set the bar for what would not be tolerated under his authority, he stood his ground in forcing public accountability in what many viewed as “matters of private morality.”<sup>10</sup>

The crux of Edwards’ dismissal occurred in 1749, when he decided to implement communion as the first Puritan settlers had, doing away with the “halfway covenant” and legacy of his grandfather, Stoddard. Feeling that from a biblical standpoint, the Lord’s Supper was meant for those who not only professed the faith, but whose lives reflected that profession, Edwards could no longer, in good conscience, lead those he did not see as upstanding into communion. Interpreted by the majority of his congregation as a leap for more ecclesiastical power, the dismissal process began that winter. With a sense of leniency in regards to the sacrament prevailing, Edwards lost his position as pastor in Northampton.

The dynamics of Northampton life during Edwards’ tenure demonstrate, as Foster termed it, “a society in transition.”<sup>11</sup> With the 1735 revival came a renewing of the importance of spiritual matters in town. The congregation passionately responded to their pastor’s sermons, which emphasized that the justification of their sins was by faith alone. Under the Great Awakening however, the “inner light of affections” dominated religious thought. Thus, when Northampton parishioners heard itinerant preachers calling the lay people to exercise their own authority, they were less willing to heed the advice and direction of their pastor. This break from traditional church roles that came out of the Awakening set a new wave of Christianity in America in motion, one where the minister does not have the final say, but must heed the decisions of the congregation.



(This map demonstrates the geographic span as well as the sources for both the 1735 revival and The Great Awakening. The 1735 revival spread out solely from Northampton, but did not go beyond the Connecticut River Valley. The Great Awakening's influence was much wider, stemming from major cities such as Newport, Rhode Island and Boston, Massachusetts.)

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For intellectual histories of Edwards, see Vernon Louis Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought: The Colonial Mind, 1620-1800*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987); Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1949); Social histories include Richard L. Bushmann (ed.), *The Great Awakening: Documents on the Revival of Religion, 1740-1745*, (New York: Atheneum, 1970); Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1963); Patricia J. Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor: Religion and Society in Eighteenth Century Northampton*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980); More recent biographies and comparative histories are Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); See the entire issue of: *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 31, no. II (summer, 2003); George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> This letter was later published in Boston to use as a pamphlet to encourage revival in New England as Jonathan Edwards, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprizing Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton*, in *The Great Awakening* (WJE Online Vol. 4), 158-159.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Catherine Foster, "Hampshire County, Massachusetts, 1729-1754: A Covenant Society in Transition" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1967), 90n; Hampshire Association of Ministers, 1731-1747, "April, 8<sup>th</sup>, 1735" MSS, Forbes Library, 17.

<sup>4</sup> Marsden, 163; Edwards, *Faithful Narrative*, 208.

<sup>5</sup> Marsden 162, 171.

<sup>6</sup> Because the year officially began on March 25 in America until 1752, dates within the months of January until March 25 were often written as February 1739/40. Thus, when the British empire adopted the Gregorian calendar (previously Julian), the date would become February 1740.

<sup>7</sup> George Whitefield, "Seventh Journal" in *The Journals of George Whitefield* (Shropshire, England: Quinta Press, 2009), 605.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 596.

<sup>9</sup> Ava Chamberlain, "Bad Books and Bad Boys: The Transformation of Gender in Eighteenth-Century Northampton, Massachusetts," in *Jonathan Edwards at Home and Abroad: Historical Memories, Cultural Movements, Global Horizons*, ed. David W. Kling and Douglas A Sweeney, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 65;

<sup>10</sup> Ava Chamberlain sums up much of the gender issues historians have brought to the table in regards to the Puritans in colonial America. Many historians argue that in the years between 1680 and 1720, women began to be taken less seriously than men, while also receiving more active punishment for sins such as fornication. Noting that Edwards believed in a single standard "that insisted on chastity for both sexes and proper public contrition from all sinners, no matter their social rank," Chamberlain argues that while Edwards felt it was the church's duty to try the boys involved, the community did not take their sins as seriously or even see them as the public's responsibility. Chamberlain, 61-63; For a more specific mentioning of Edwards' view of females, look to Kenneth P. Minkema, "Old Age and Religion in the Writings and Life of Jonathan Edwards," *Church History* 70 (Dec. 2001), 696-701; Marsden, 294; Chamberlain, 75.

<sup>11</sup> Foster, 1.

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