

JONATHAN EDWARDS AND THE COMMUNION CONTROVERSY IN NORTHAMPTON

by Alan D. Strange

JONATHAN EDWARDS CAME to Northampton, Massachusetts in 1727 to serve as assistant pastor to his renowned maternal grandfather, Solomon Stoddard. He and his grandfather agreed on most things, including what it meant to be a true Christian. Stoddard taught that a saving work of the Holy Spirit was necessary for one to be a true Christian and to be admitted to heaven.¹ Edwards agreed with this and taught the same throughout his life.² Stoddard also taught that whether or not someone had experienced such a saving work of the Holy Spirit was not necessarily discernable by others. Because the saving work of the Holy Spirit remained ultimately undetectable, Stoddard taught that anyone who agreed with the doctrines of Christianity and was moral in life could partake of Holy Communion, whether they professed such a saving work or not.³ Edwards came to disagree with this and argued that

¹Many examples of this from Stoddard's preaching and writing might be adduced. See his *Safety of Appearing in the Righteousness of Christ* (Northampton: S. & E. Butler, 1804; rpt., Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), 161-261, and *The Tryal of Assurance* (a lecture-day sermon preached by Stoddard in Boston on July 7, 1698, published there by B. Green and J. Allen), 6-7.

²Edwards's emphasis on the necessity of a saving work of the Holy Spirit is such a pervasive theme that the entirety of his corpus demonstrates his unshakeable conviction of the necessity of "A Divine and Supernatural Light Immediately Imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God ..." as seen in Wilson M. Kinnach, *et al.*, *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 121-140.

³Solomon Stoddard, *The Doctrine of the Instituted Churches Explained and Proved from the Word of God* (London: Ralph Smith, 1700), 18-22.

whether or not one was a true Christian could be ordinarily discerned both by the individual Christian and by his fellow Christians.⁴ Thus Edwards ultimately disagreed with his grandfather that a profession of a true saving work of the Holy Spirit was unnecessary in coming to the Lord's Table, teaching instead that those who come to the Lord's Table ought to do so professing to have had experienced such a saving work.⁵

Edwards succeeded his grandfather upon the death of the latter in 1729. He became pastor of the large flock in Northampton and ministered to them for more than twenty years. Though he initially retained the practice of Stoddard of admitting any to communion who could give assent to Christian doctrine and who evinced "moral sincerity,"⁶ a number of factors led to Edwards's changing his mind about the qualifications for communion. This article will seek to explore some of those factors that led Edwards to reject the position of his grandfather and to teach instead that one coming to

⁴Not only does Edward set forth this position in his treatise on communion qualifications published in 1749, but he hints at it as early as his works analyzing the Great Awakening, viz., *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741) and *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* (1742), both contained in C.C. Goen, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, v. 4, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972). Hereafter, all references to Edwards will be from the Yale edition and simply cited as *Works*, followed by the appropriate volume and page number. Edwards's fullest treatment of the Awakening is in his *Religious Affections*, *Works*, v. 2.

⁵There are countless biographies, as well as articles, that speak of Edwards's life and of his communion position. For the best biography and an excellent recent discussion of the communion controversy that led to his dismissal from Northampton, see George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), especially 341-374.

⁶Stoddard makes a fascinating, yet never entirely clear, distinction between being "sincere" and "morally sincere," writing that a profession of faith that is "sincere makes a Man a real Saint, being Morally sincere, makes a Man a Visible Saint," in *The Doctrine of the Instituted Church*, 19. Here and elsewhere, then, Stoddard distinguishes between "real" and "visible" sainthood, arguing that "moral sincerity," which apparently means outward behavior that is upright, not done hypocritically or strictly for the sake of appearances is distinguished from "sincerity" which flows from a truly regenerate heart. Edwards is not always clear himself on what Stoddard means by this term and ultimately, thus, what Stoddard's precise requirements were for communion, see *Works*, v. 12, 185-6.

the Lord's Table should do so believing that he is a true Christian and giving evidence to others of the same. Edwards paid a high price for his changed convictions: his congregation fired him in 1750.⁷

Edwards may have been by the time of his dismissal something of an international celebrity but there were those close to home to whom he had made himself obnoxious, not only because of his changed communion position but also because of all the factors that went into Edwards's changing his mind about the qualifications for communion. Indeed, Edwards's congregation did dismiss him because of his open disavowal of Stoddard's communion position. But as there were various factors that went into Edwards's changed communion position, so his congregation recognized that the communion controversy ultimately involved more than simply the question of who is qualified to take communion.

The question of who is qualified to take communion, for Edwards and his congregation, involved the whole question that had bedeviled New England almost from the beginning: Who is a visible saint and how is visible sainthood to be discerned?⁸ Stoddard's answer was, practically, that just about everybody in Northampton, except for the utterly irreligious and scandalous, was a visible saint. Edwards, in rejecting Stoddard's position on communion, was also saying something different than Stoddard about the nature of the church and of the relationship between town and church. Thus there was more at issue between Edwards and his congregation than the narrow question of who is qualified to take communion and both Edwards and his congregation knew that there was more at stake. There had come to be bad blood between Edwards and many of his parishioners by the late 1740s and this too figures prominently in the whole communion controversy and Edwards's dismissal. This is to say, as is usually the case then and now in church disputes, Edwards's dismissal was not purely for theological reasons but also for personal reasons that became wrapped up with the theological and ecclesiological reasons.

⁷Tain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1987), 311-370.

⁸There are many fine discussions of the problem of "visible sainthood" in New England, a number cited below. A good example of this is Charles L. Cohen's discussion in *God's Caress: The Psychology of Puritan Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford, 1986), especially at 137-161.

Edwards was fired because he sought to restrict access to communion, to be sure, but he sought to restrict access because he believed that visible sainthood was not in evidence in many of his parishioners; and they knew that he thought this about them and they did not like it. All of this complex of motives is involved in his communion position and his dismissal from Northampton. When one considers Edwards's dismissal, one can feel a bit like the audience watching an episode of the old "Columbo" detective show. You've seen the crime, the firing of the "greatest philosopher/theologian yet to grace the American scene," as Perry Miller famously styled Edwards. But the question remains: what factors brought about such a sad circumstance? It is to that question that this article is devoted.

Background to New England's Position on "Visible Sainthood"

The question of "who is qualified to take communion" or "who is a visible saint" did not start with either Edwards or his grandfather but had been a concern of the churches in New England for some time. The deep roots of this question, though, have always been present in the church. The Apostle Paul himself addressed this question in I Corinthians 11 when he said that those partaking of the bread and wine of communion ought to "examine themselves" and to "discern the Lord's body" so as not to eat and drink "in an unworthy manner." Whatever this might mean, and whatever the Old Testament background to this might entail, those who partake of the Lord's Table must be recognized as worthy partakers in the communion of the saints.⁹ Generally, for this

⁹Both Edwards and Stoddard treated I Corinthians 11, Edwards at one point in his communion treatise in *Works*, v. 12, 259-262. Stoddard sees the requirement that prospective communicants "have knowledge to examine themselves and discern the Lord's body" to mean primarily that the Supper is limited to adults, arguing that "for want of this [knowledge] Infants are denied the Lord's Supper," in *The Doctrine of Instituted Churches*, 19. See also Stoddard's fuller defense of his communion practice and especially of communion as a "converting ordinance" in his *Inexcusableness of Neglecting the Worship of God under Pretence of being in an Unconverted Condition* (Boston: B. Green, 1708) and *An Appeal to the Learned, Being a Vindication of*

reason, the whole of historic Christendom had always insisted on, at least, baptism as a prerequisite for communing together with the saints at the Lord's Table insofar as baptism is the rite of initiation without which one is not visibly marked as a Christian. And, certain advocates of paedo-communion notwithstanding, most of the church has required some subsequent confession/profession of faith of some kind on the part of the one seeking to commune.¹⁰

While outside the scope of this article, the broader question of qualifications for communion throughout the history of the Christian Church is a fascinating and important one. The catechumen in preparation for the sacraments is a regular feature in considerations of communal life and liturgy in the early church. We see the tradition of what Roman Catholics now refer to as "First Holy Communion" having its roots in the Middle Ages, during which time the sacerdotal system was in development, coming to full expression in the High Middle Ages in the theology of Abelard and Lombard and in the promulgations of the Great Council of 1215, Lateran IV, called by Innocent III.¹¹ Tied together with this is the history of the development of "confirmation" as a sacrament, in which the bishop bestows the "second blessing" (the first being baptism) on the candidate, the confirmatory gift of the Holy Spirit.¹² While it is true that First Holy Communion in the Roman church ordinarily these days occurs between the ages of seven and nine, several years before confirmation, there seems to be some parallel

the Rights of Visible Saints to the Lord's Supper, Though They be Destitute of a Saving Work of God's Spirit on their Hearts (Boston: B. Green, 1709).

¹⁰The practice in Northampton under Stoddard, in fact, was that no one under fourteen was eligible to meet the Stoddardean requirements to partake of communion. See Paul R. Lucas, "An Appeal to the Learned: The Mind of Solomon Stoddard," in *Puritan New England: Essays on Religion, Society, and Culture*, ed. by Alden T. Vaughan and Francis J. Bremer (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), 329-333.

¹¹Norman p Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, v. 1: Nicaea I to Lateran V* (London and Washington, DC: Sheed and Ward and Georgetown University Press, 1990), 227-271.

¹²A. Theodore Wirgman, *The Doctrine of Confirmation* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1897) is a thorough biblical and historical treatment of the question. In regards to the question of the age at which confirmation occurs, p. 325 is typical, quoting the Council of Orleans (in 511), "Let those who are of years of discretion come fasting to Confirmation."

between First Holy Communion/Confirmation and the practice that grew up in the Reformed churches of “professing faith,” generally at or after puberty.¹³

The Calvinistic branch of the Reformation, both in its British and Continental forms, did not retain the practice of confirmation in a sacramental sense. We know that Calvin, for instance, did require both a profession of faith and a moral life in order to come to the Lord’s Table.¹⁴ This practice is reflected, more or less, in both the Reformed confessional standards of the continent and of Britain.¹⁵ In the British context, most of those who were Reformed, particularly in the aftermath of the horrors of Mary Tudor (1553-1558) and in the time of Elizabeth I (1558-1603), came to be known, derisively, as Puritans. At first, Puritans were rather undifferentiated and as class were all those Protestants that stood over against the Anglican establishment as not being reformed enough in doctrine and polity.¹⁶ The Anglican church as settled during Elizabeth’s time would admit all the baptized to communion with few exceptions, a practice that the entire class of Puritans

¹³The Roman sacrament and something of its history is set forth in the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church, Articles 1285-1321* (Eng. Translation; Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1994), 325-333. See also Yngve Brilioth’s *Eucharistic Faith and Practice: Evangelical and Catholic* (London: S.P.C.K., 1965), 129 for the connection between confirmation and the “preparation of young people for their first communion,” which took its place in the Protestant churches.

¹⁴It was, at least in part, for arguing that there should be church discipline and standards for communing in the church that Calvin and his associate Farel were banished from Geneva in 1538, see T.H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 62-66.

¹⁵Implied in Article 35 of the *Belgic Confession* (“no one ought to come to this table without having previously rightly examined himself”), in Questions and Answers 81 and 82 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* and, on the British/Scottish side, in *Westminster Confession of Faith* 29: 7-8. Perhaps the most explicit teaching on the necessity of a profession of faith are found in the *Westminster Larger Catechism* (WLC), Questions and Answers 168-177, particularly WLC 177 which says that the Lord’s Supper is “only to such as are of years and ability to examine themselves,” having professed their faith as mentioned in WLC 171 and WLC 173.

¹⁶A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation, Second Edition* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1989), 362-377.

found objectionable, arguing that some sort of discipline must be present at least to keep away manifestly unworthy recipients.¹⁷

As time passed, especially during the reigns of James I (1603-1625) and Charles I (1625-1649), the Puritans increasingly differentiated and it became clear that as a class they comprised at least four groups that came to be traditionally designated as Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and Separatist. The first three of these, differing as they did in terms of church polity, were all establishmentarian, which is to say that those Puritans who were Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist all agreed that the church was to be supported by the state. The Separatists believed that the church was to be separate from the state and not in any way dependent upon it for its maintenance. The Episcopalians as a category of Puritan never amounted to much.¹⁸ The Separatists, on the other end of the spectrum, manifested themselves in various waves, beginning in the 1580s with the Brownists. One well-known group of Separatists went from Scrooby, England to Leyden, Holland in 1611 and, ultimately dissatisfied there, left for Plymouth in the New World in 1620. These were the so-called Pilgrims who came to America. Historians long considered the communion practices developed by the Separatists both before going to the New World and after arrival there as formative for the practices that came to prevail in New England and that shaped the world of Stoddard and Edwards.¹⁹

Before considering the specific communion practices of the Separatists, however, it might be helpful to recall that, inasmuch as the goal of the Separatists was to establish pure “gathered churches” (congregationally controlled), others before them had pursued the ideal of a pure church with communion restricted to the visibly godly. There has always been a challenge to the institutional church, as opposed to the sectarian church, to maintain itself so as not to

¹⁷Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1965), 4-12.

¹⁸M.M. Knappen, *Tudor Puritanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 303-336; William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), 173-225.

¹⁹Morgan, 33-66, especially 65-66 for the point that New England developed its own method of determining visible sainthood and that such a method was not imported from Plymouth to Massachusetts Bay but the opposite.

permit, on the one hand, the leaven of scandal and heresy, and, on the other hand, seeking unduly to separate the wheat from the chaff. And a number of perhaps well-meaning, but ultimately misguided, if not harshly judgmental groups like the Montanists, Novatianists, Cathari, Donatists, and the like have withdrawn from and sat in judgment on the “catholic” church (taken in its ancient, not-yet-exclusively-Roman sense). Such groups have alleged the utter corruption of the Catholic church and have called for withdrawal/purification. These sectarians have ordinarily had restrictive, if not highly restrictive, sacramental practices, including limited access to communion. All this is to say that even as there is a background to profession of faith in the Reformed churches in the earlier confirmatory practices of the Roman church, there is something of a background to the communal exclusiveness of the Separatists in both the Donatists and in the Anabaptistic movement. To be sure the Separatists loudly denied such connections. The English Separatists, though not uniform in practice (separatists by their very nature tending to disparate practices), sought to restrict communion to those who were in what they came to call “the gathered church.”²⁰

The way that the Separatists went about their program of having pure, gathered, local congregations was by developing something that they came to call the “church covenant.” Rejecting the legitimacy of a national church, established by the crown in parliament (as the Episcopalian and Presbyterian parties among the Puritans affirmed), the Separatists taught that only independent congregational churches, with ruling elders and minister(s), had validity. The very genius of Separatism, then, was that professing Christians were to withdraw from those not manifestly godly and form true local churches by covenanting together in voluntary agreements.²¹ And what the Separatists came to mean by professing Christians were not simply those who were baptized and not scandalous, as in the Church of England. The concern of the Separatists was to form a true church, which they judged the Church of England, in the main, not to be, and they wanted to make sure that those covenanting together were properly qualified to do so. And the way that they came to judge whether or not a

²⁰Morgan, 2-4.

²¹David D. Hall, *The Faithful Shepherd: A History of the New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Norton, 1972), 21-47.

person was qualified voluntarily to enter the church covenant was they required a personal confession of faith, in which a person set forth his basic doctrinal beliefs, as well as a subscribing to the church covenant, in which a person promised to walk faithfully with his brethren in the local congregation, and, lastly, continued outward good behavior.²²

This three-fold test (personal confession of faith, subscribing to the local church covenant, and good behavior) was “the state of Separatist thought and practice when the Mayflower sailed to establish the first Separatist church and the first permanent English settlement in New England.”²³ This is quite important to note, because what became the practice in New England when someone sought communicant privileges in the church, the requirement of a narrative account of the saving grace of God before the whole congregation, was long assumed to be the practice that the Separatists had developed in the Old World and brought with them to Plymouth.²⁴ It was thought, in other words, that the Pilgrims at Plymouth required the narrative of grace that the churches in Massachusetts Bay came to require, beginning in the mid-1630’s and enshrined in the Cambridge Platform of 1648. But such does not appear to be the case. It appears rather than the requirement for a narrative of grace developing in Old World Separatism and being brought to the New World in 1620, that the requirement was developed by the Congregationalists of Massachusetts Bay (yet to be discussed) and imported to the Plymouth Colony.²⁵

Visible Sainthood in New England

In the four-fold division of Puritans (above) into Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and Separatist, the middle two (Presbyterian and Congregationalist) were the slowest in separating out. Separatists obviously believed in disestablishment and in autonomous local churches. Congregationalists differed from them in affirming establishment, yet an establishment in which local churches were, though established, essentially independent,

²²Morgan, 54

²³Morgan, 58.

²⁴ Peter Y. De Jong, *The Covenant Idea in New England Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1945), 81.

²⁵Morgan, 65-66.

connected at best only by loose associations that were purely voluntary. Some of the Puritans who opposed the Separatists and the Episcopalians were bent in the Presbyterian direction and some in the Congregationalist direction, though all the differences between the two did not become manifest in the English context until the English Civil War, the establishing of closer ties with the Scots (who were clearly Presbyterian) and the Parliamentary convocation of the Westminster Assembly of Divines.²⁶ In the American context, however, it was quite clear from the settlement of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1629-30 that these Puritans were Congregationalists. Unlike the Plymouth settlers of a decade earlier, the Massachusetts settlers believed in an established church and they established congregational churches in each of their towns radiating out from Charles Town, or Boston. Like the Plymouth churches, the churches were congregationally-controlled and independent from each other.²⁷

The Massachusetts settlers initially adopted the three-fold requirement of the Plymouth colonists for admission to the Table of the Lord. Thus as in Plymouth so also in Massachusetts, one must profess faith, subscribe the local church covenant, and demonstrate good behavior. As is well known, particularly in more recent years, the practice in Massachusetts changed in the mid-1730s and a fourth requirement was added to the three of the Separatists of Plymouth. The fourth was the requirement that a candidate for admission to the Lord's Table also be able to testify to a saving work of the Holy Spirit in his life and that he make a relation of such a work of God's grace to the entire congregation for their evaluation and approbation.²⁸ These "narratives of grace," as they came to be known, were seen as necessary to ascertain that the candidate for communion had been truly regenerated and that the grace of God was really present in his heart and life. Absent such a narrative on the part of a putative member to the congregation, the concern came to be, anyone could parrot a

²⁶Morgan, 10-14.

²⁷One of the incomparable setting forth of all these events may be found in Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702; rpt., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), especially The First Book, chapters 1-7.

²⁸Patricia Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative* (Cambridge: University Press, 1983), 45-47.

confession of faith, easily subscribe a church covenant and lead an outwardly moral life.

Under the preaching and due to the influence of John Cotton, this new requirement of a narrative of grace became common in Massachusetts, moving southward to Plymouth, even more strongly embraced in the New Haven colony, though rather decidedly rejected by Thomas Hooker in Connecticut. Why did this new requirement evolve? What factors prompted the Congregationalists of Massachusetts to adopt a more stringent communion requirement than that of the Separatists of the Old World and the Pilgrims of Plymouth? The Congregationalists had become concerned that the emphasis of the Separatists/Pilgrims on good works as a key test of proper communion qualifications was so pronounced that the free grace of God was imperiled.²⁹ John Cotton feared that sanctification was stressed to such a degree that the great Reformed doctrine of justification by faith alone was in danger of being eclipsed. So the emphasis, due particularly to Cotton's influence, came to rest heavily on one's ability to convince members of the church that one had enjoyed a true saving work of God.³⁰

In the attempt to make certain that candidates seeking admittance to the Table possessed true piety and were not mere moralists, congregations learned to listen for certain words, phrases, or modes of expression in the narratives of grace offered by prospective communicants. Specifically, congregations were concerned to discern whether someone had gone through the kinds of steps in the conversion process described by some of the Puritan

²⁹Morgan, 92-104.

³⁰As is so often the case, there were those in Boston who took Cotton's strong emphasis on the grace of God to an Antinomian extreme and who taught that any emphasis on good works was inherently legalism and anyone thus stressing obedience was guilty of teaching a "covenant of works" instead of a "covenant of grace." Anne Hutchinson did this in Cotton's time even as others did it in Edwards's time. For a thorough treatment of this, see David D. Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), especially chapters 9-10 on Hutchinson's examination and trial and chapter 12 which is John Cotton's famous defense of the newly-developed method of church membership in New England, *The Way of Congregational Churches Cleared*.

writers.³¹ As a result, these accounts of God's gracious work tended to become stylized according to the morphology of conversion set forth by Puritan divines. Inasmuch as this was the case, narratives of grace could be parroted as readily as the more prosaic professions of faith that had earlier been the standard and which had elicited the concern that anyone could give them by rote repetition. Given, though, that congregations could question the narrators as to the reality of their professed grace, such spiritual querying seems to have kept relatively low the number of those who were actually able to give convincing narratives of grace.³²

This is the way that it worked, then, in coming to commune in colonial New England: the candidate was required to profess faith and repentance by telling not only what he believed but how he had come to know and to walk with Christ, ordinarily as part of a crisis-conversion. Only those who could do such were properly regarded as partakers of the covenant of grace. Thus a credible recounting to the congregation of the saving work of the Holy Spirit was necessary for one to be considered in the covenant of grace. And when one could testify to (essentially) a crisis-conversion and a real "closing with Christ," then, and only then, would one be permitted to subscribe the church covenant. Upon subscription to the church covenant, together with the testimony of a godly life, one was then admitted to the Table of the Lord and to "full" membership in the local congregation, counted among the "visible saints." Edmund Morgan assumed that Jonathan Edwards, in staking out the communion position that he did over against the practice of Solomon Stoddard, sought to return to the requirements of a

³¹William Perkins, for example, "identified ten stages in an individual's acquisition of faith," Morgan, 68.

³²Thomas Hooker stopped requiring the narratives because of what he perceived as "curious inquisitions and niceties" on the parts of congregations, Morgan, 107. As seen below, Edwards had no intention of letting the congregation as a whole have any part in admitting to the Table, preferring instead ministerial/committee examination in the lamented absence of ministerial/elder examination (in a more Presbyterian fashion, which he preferred, see *Works*, v. 16, 355). As to whether all who made the narrative were approved, an unpublished letter of Richard Mather (published some time after 1636) "indicated that many were trying and failing: 'All [who are found to be unworthy] are kept out though they offer themselves to be taken in. And hence it is that many are in the Country and are not members of any church,'" quoted in Caldwell, 47.

narrative of grace as practiced in Massachusetts Bay in the seventeenth century.³³ That this is not the case will be seen below. Edwards's call for communicants who believed themselves to be regenerated and who had could credibly demonstrate that does not mean that he sought a return to the narrative of grace requirement.

Further complicating the picture in Massachusetts and the other places that came to adopt the requirements for a narrative of grace was the political situation. The General Court in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1631 "prescribed that the franchise would be limited to those who had entered the church covenant."³⁴ In other words, only those who could testify to a work of saving grace in their lives could enter the church covenant and only those who were in the church covenant could enter the civil covenant, i.e., enjoy the franchise and the right to hold office. Only visible saints, that is to say, were permitted to vote and have a say in civil society. And while this may not have been as much a problem for the first settlers (often called "the first generation"), who seemed to have been courageous, pioneering sorts of deep convictions—understandably enough given the risks that they were taking—successive generations did not seem to experience the sort of crisis-conversions that those of the first generation did. Even as early as 1643, though the population of Massachusetts Bay was probably just over 15,000, "only 1708 persons had become citizens in the colony, and of them a number had removed to Connecticut." Plymouth was even worse: "out of some 3,000 inhabitants only about 230 had been enfranchised by 1643."³⁵

That so many were unable to enter into the civil covenant, i.e., enjoy the franchise and the right to hold public office, obviously testifies to a failure on the part of many to subscribe the church covenant. Such a failure to subscribe the church covenant meant that many either did not profess to possess true saving grace or that many were unable to convince those already in the church covenant that they did. That this was the case even as early as 1643 is quite interesting, because the failure of many to qualify for the church covenant, by failing to be able to give a credible narrative of grace, did not keep the framers of the Cambridge Platform in 1648 from

³³Morgan, 151-152.

³⁴De Jong, 80.

³⁵Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (1893; rpt., Boston: The Pilgrim Press), 165.

nevertheless still requiring such a narrative for those who would subscribe the church covenant. It is in the Cambridge Platform, in fact, that what became known as the “New England Way” (particularly the requirement of a narrative of grace in order to commune) received its synodical shape.³⁶ And though the framers of the Platform were quite aware of the criticism of the New England way, particularly from their Presbyterian brethren across the ocean, and of the cost that such a way was exacting (in terms of few qualified to commune), they seemed determined to maintain this way. The New Englanders believed that their way was calculated to maintain and foster the purity of the church, even if such a way meant that many people would be disenfranchised in both church and state.

One might pause at this point to observe that a solution to the problem of too-little societal participation would have been the kind employed by Thomas Hooker in Connecticut, who did not require church membership as a prerequisite to the franchise. To put it another way, one was not required in Connecticut to subscribe the church covenant in order to participate in the civil covenant. Massachusetts (and neighboring colonies), however, did make a restrictive church membership foundational to societal participation.³⁷ When fewer and fewer were able to meet the exacting standards for communicant membership and were thus civilly disenfranchised, Massachusetts could have disassociated subscribing the church covenant with participation in the civil covenant rather than move, as she ultimately did, to revise the standards for communicant membership. This is not to argue that the way in which the framers of the Cambridge Platform sought to insure a pure church was right-headed. Maintaining the practice of requiring a narrative of grace, as the Platform did, reflected a certain morphology of conversion that was, in fact, fraught with problems. Nevertheless, there is something admirable about the refusal of the framers of the Cambridge Platform to accommodate the method of admittance to the Lord’s Table to political exigencies. Whether or not the New England Way, as reflected in the Cambridge Platform, was the right way of admitting candidates to “full” or “communicant” membership in the church, the framers of the

³⁶Walker, 194-237.

³⁷Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 150.

Platform believed it best to allow the Scriptures as they understood them, rather than the need of the state to have franchised participants, to determine who could properly subscribe the church covenant.

Such a commitment to furnishing the church with her communicants in a way believed to be biblical soon gave way, however, to more pragmatic political concerns. Many in colonial New England revealed that they thought more of the state ultimately than they did the church inasmuch as they allowed the engine of state concerns to drive the question of membership/participation in the life of the church.³⁸ As fewer were qualified to give acceptable narratives of grace and thus fewer came to be a part of the church covenant and able to enjoy the franchise, a concern arose. Since only those who were “full” or communicant members in the church were qualified to have their children baptized, a crisis developed inasmuch as many of the children of the first generation, call them the “second generation,” failed to give narratives of grace. Here’s the picture: a first generation settler meets the restrictive communion requirements, thus becoming a full member of the church in a local congregation and qualified to have his child baptized. However, that second generation child, in failing himself ever to become a communicant (because he is not able to give the narrative of grace) does not qualify to have his child, call him the “third generation,” baptized. So the grandchildren (the third generation) of full church members (the first generation) were going unbaptized because their parents (the second generation) had never become full church members. Lurking in the background here as well was a fear that if such a dire circumstance continued to prevail, the covenant society, the civil covenant in particular, would wither away.

The Half-Way Covenant and Solomon Stoddard’s Modifications of It

Those who came to the Synod of 1662 were determined to address this question of the unbaptized third generation.³⁹ It is not at this point that the divines present there allowed the engine of

³⁸Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 19-146.

³⁹Walker, 238-339.

state concerns to drive the question of who is qualified to take communion. It was the Synod in 1679 and Solomon Stoddard who later did this.⁴⁰ Rather the Synod of 1662 decided that the third generation could be baptized even though their parents of the second generation continued to remain unable to give a narrative of grace and be admitted to communion. What the Synod required of the second-generation was two-fold: They must acknowledge the tenets of the Christian faith to be true and they must be moral in their lives. Such an affirmation of the faith and demonstration of good behavior, however, would not admit the second generation to the Table. It would only permit them to baptize their hitherto unbaptized children. Otherwise, all would have to continue to give the narrative of grace in order to come to the Table of the Lord.

Some scholars see the decisions of the Synod of 1662, that came derisively to be tagged as the “Half-Way Synod,” as a reasonable accommodation to the problems inherent in the New England Way. The second generation, as “half-way” members (baptized, yet not communing), could remain within the church and bring their children by baptism into the church. Other scholars have noted, though, that unintended consequences developed in the wake of, what some regard as, doctrinal downgrade.⁴¹ Many feared, as did Increase Mather, that the Half-Way covenant solution would lead to a spiritual diminution in which formalism would creep in and real heart religion decline. Such fears were shown in some measure to be justified as some who did not meet even the minimal requirements as determined by the Synod of 1662 assayed to bring their children for baptism. And the problem of a limited number still qualified to commune continued, leaving many outside “full” membership and thus outside the franchise and full civil participation.

⁴⁰Walker, 409-439.

⁴¹Robert G. Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 261, does not see the Half-Way Covenant, for example, as necessarily indicating declension, writing, “The half-way covenant does not signal the failure of the city on a hill as so many historians have assumed, but rather marks a reaffirmation of the Puritan mission.” On the other hand, though he has otherwise been troubled by New England’s entire approach to the covenant and to church membership, P.Y. De Jong (in his *Covenant Idea of New England Theology*) sees the Half-Way covenant as setting the stage for the formalism and nominalism that appears to necessitate revival in the eighteenth century, at 110 ff.

The Half-Way solution also did not solve the ongoing problem of increasing numbers remaining unqualified for citizenship. Thus pressure mounted to lessen the requirements for full membership so that the civil, or social, covenant would remain viable. In other words, there was a growing conviction that the cost of retaining the covenant society needed to be paid in and by the churches. The churches needed to lessen communion qualifications so that the idea of a covenant society and the centrality of the civil covenant, even as enunciated from the very beginning by John Winthrop on board the *Arbella*, could be salvaged.⁴² If it was thought desirable to modify the admittedly stringent communion qualifications and to broaden the definition of visible sainthood, this should have been done only because the New England divines believed that the Bible mandated it. To change the standards for table fellowship to save the social covenant was to allow the concerns of the state to reign paramount over church.

Solomon Stoddard, who succeeded Eleazer Mather in Northampton (in the Connecticut River Valley of Western Massachusetts) in 1672 came to teach that essentially the same requirements that would permit one to baptize one's child would permit one to come to the Lord's Table. In what year Northampton began admitting to the Lord's Table all those who affirmed the truth of the faith and were "morally sincere" is not certain. Clearly, after 1679 Stoddard had eliminated the requirement of a narrative of grace as requisite for communion. As far as Increase Mather and his son Cotton Mather were concerned, this spelled the end of the pure gathered church.⁴³ To be sure, there is no evidence that Stoddard adopted his position on communion because he believed it to be politically expedient. Rather, he argued that the sacrament of Holy Communion was a "converting ordinance." Even as all in

⁴²Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1958), 84-100.

⁴³Increase Mather, *The Order of the Gospel, Professed and Practised by the Churches of Christ in New England* (Boston: B. Green and J. Allen for Nicholas Buttolph, 1700). This is the work written in specific opposition to Stoddard's *Doctrine of Instituted Churches* in which Mather seeks to defend the New England Way of the Cambridge Platform/Half-Way Covenant before Stoddardean innovations/corruptions, writing, "wherein these [earlier New England] Churches did chiefly Excel was their Order, Especially in *their great Strictness as to Admissions to the Lords Supper* [sic]," 5.

Northampton were invited to hear the Word preached so that they might be converted, Stoddard reasoned that all should be invited to come to the Table so that the grace signified and sealed there would be available to all. Stoddard therefore did not distinguish in the public ordinances of God between those professing saving faith and those not, reasoning that both preaching and the Supper were means used by God both to convert sinners into saints and to strengthen saints once converted. Though Stoddard may not have adopted this position because of political expediency, his position nonetheless had the effect of creating an identity between church and town. Such an identity was established because many came to commune in Northampton (and the surrounding towns of Western Massachusetts that adopted Stoddardeanism) who were not required to profess that they possessed saving grace.⁴⁴

Even if Stoddard had not modified and extended the Half-Way Covenant as he did, the political landscape altered before the turn of the 18th century. Church membership no longer came to be required for the right to vote and to hold office. In 1684, the Massachusetts Charter was annulled and the colony was put under direct royal rule. In 1686, the colony was enfolded into the Dominion of New England, though the Glorious Revolution of 1688/9 brought an end to this arrangement that was roundly despised by the colonists.⁴⁵ A new charter was issued in 1691 that ended the days of the franchise being strictly restricted to full members of the churches.⁴⁶ Thus there was no longer the pressure on the churches to loosen communion practices so that the state might be furnished more fully with a qualified citizenry. The Mathers delighted in this because they saw in this new arrangement the opportunity to re-invigorate the churches which had suffered

⁴⁴E. Brooks Holifield, in his masterful work, *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England, 1570-1720* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), furnishes us with one of the best discussions of the New England way, its various modifications, its defense by the Mathers, etc. Chapter 7 is superb on Stoddard's innovations and his conflict with the Mathers, revealing that in some respects the Mathers, and Edwards after them, had a higher view of the sacrament than Stoddard, insofar as the communication of grace to the regenerate was concerned (pp. 197-224).

⁴⁵Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 111-118.

⁴⁶Miller, *Errand*, 151.

declension, due in no small part, the Mathers believed, to the Stoddardean modifications.⁴⁷

There continued to be practical reasons, however, for New Englanders in wanting to maintain an identity between town and church. Though the franchise was broadened under the new charter of 1691, Massachusetts retained an established church, doing so, in fact, until the 1830's, well after independence and the constitutional commitment not to establish a national church. While church membership in the eighteenth century no longer enjoyed the decisive significance that it had under the original charter, it retained great importance nonetheless and civil office-holders were expected to be church members (though what this might mean in New England churches that shifted from Calvinistic to Arminian to Socinian/Unitarian and even Deist in the course of the century is another matter).⁴⁸ Church membership (which is to say, "full" or communicant membership) conferred on its recipients a respectability which nothing else quite did. Thus, even absent the earlier civil requirements, there was still a desire that communion requirements be lessened along the lines laid out by Stoddard. Purists, however, continued to lament the Stoddardean innovations in jeremiads that set forth the woeful tale of declension and departure from the old glory days of the New England Way.

It must be said, for all the supposed declension due to Stoddard's extension of the Half-Way Covenant, that the church in Northampton enjoyed at least five distinct times of refreshing, or revival, during Stoddard's ministry.⁴⁹ While Stoddard taught that one need not profess regeneration to come to the Lord's Table, he certainly believed that one must be regenerated to enjoy true communion with God, both in this world and the next. To put it another way, though Stoddard's "open" communion policy and

⁴⁷Holifield, 206 ff.

⁴⁸The whole shift from the insistence on heart religion (which Edwards sought to recapture) to religious externalism/formalism is involved in the consideration of New England's transformation from Bible province to Liberal bastion. It has scarcely been told with more creativity and sharpness than in Joseph Haroutunian's masterful, *Piety Versus Moralism: The Passing of the New England Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1932), the third chapter title, for instance, revealing a great deal: "Reform without regeneration" (pp. 43-71).

⁴⁹Stout, 99-101 and Edwards, *Works*, v. 4, 145-6.

Edwards's more restrictive later policy differed, the two men did not differ on what constituted a person to be a true Christian. A true Christian, that one who would enjoy heavenly glory, was one who had a saving relationship with God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Stoddard preached the necessity of such as well as did Edwards. Their difference rested in the question of whether or not one must profess to possess such saving grace, and whether the church or the pastor believed that you did possess such.

Stoddard saw visible sainthood as distinct from real sainthood, whereas Edwards believed that visible sainthood should, as much as possible, approximate real sainthood. In other words, Stoddard reasoned that since we will never know in this life who the elect are, we should give all who say they believe in Christian doctrine and lead moral lives the benefit of the doubt and receive them as true believers. Edwards argued that we should receive as true believers only those who can testify credibly to the church's leaders that they know the Lord and are walking with Him. Stoddard's practice led to most of the town being admitted to communion. Edwards's position would have excluded more of the town than did Stoddard but not as many as were excluded under the old practice of requiring a narrative of grace that could withstand close congregational scrutiny.⁵⁰

Jonathan Edwards, Revival and Visible Sainthood

As a part of figuring out why Edwards came to differ from Solomon Stoddard in his communion position, it is helpful to take stock of the kind of ministry that Edwards enjoyed for some years in Northampton before his dismissal in 1750. Stoddard's ministry

⁵⁰The best discussions of the difference between Stoddard and Edwards on their respective communion positions, in addition to Marsden's and Murray's, are found in David D. Hall's introduction to Edwards, *Works*, v. 12, 38-85 (including a masterful summary of Edwards's work on communion, *Humble Inquiry*, pp. 62-73); John F. Jamieson's, "Jonathan Edwards's Change of Position on Stoddardeanism," *Harvard Theological Review* 74:1 (1981), 79-99; Thomas A. Schafer's, "Jonathan Edwards' Conception of the Church," *Church History*, 24 (1950), 51-66; as well as Haroutunian's, chapter 5 and De Jong's, chapter 7. The discussion by Patricia Tracy in *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor: Religion and Society in Eighteenth-Century Northampton* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), at 147-194 is especially helpful from a socio-cultural vantage point.

had been, as noted, one that taught the absolute necessity of personal regeneration. Edwards hammered home the necessity for such during the whole course of his ministry. Solomon Stoddard also taught that the Holy Spirit alone could bring about such a work in a person's heart and that the Spirit was often pleased to move in a corporate way in performing his saving work. That is to say, Stoddard taught that the church should specifically pray for seasons of refreshing from the Lord and that she should wait on Him for these revivals and benefit during them, making the most of every opportunity.⁵¹ Edwards also taught that the church progressed particularly during revivals—or Awakenings—as they came to be called, when many men and women at once appeared to experience the saving work of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. Edwards, in fact, as an ardent postmillennialist, anticipated that Awakening and Revival would increase as the kingdom advanced and the world was evangelized. There was no disagreement, then, between Edwards and his grandfather either on the need for the work of God's Spirit or on the shape that this work often assumed, a massive work in many hearts that might properly be denominated as a revival.

Edwards found his grandfather's Northampton badly in need of such a revival upon his coming there in 1727. Edwards was not in much of a position to do anything about the ills that he perceived in Northampton until 1729, when he became pastor of the church, no longer serving in the shadows as the assistant to his grandfather. Edwards believed the Northampton parish to be in a rather serious state of declension, a condition that manifested itself particularly in the behavior of the young people who were given, as young people

⁵¹Let it not be thought that the difference between Edwards and Stoddard on communion qualifications indicated any kind of laxity on Stoddard's part about what was needed for salvation. In fact, as David Hall has noted, rather than "welcome a weak degree of faith, as the Mathers did, [Stoddard] reasoned that it was better to do away with the distinction between baptism and the Lord's Supper and allow everyone admitted to the first to participate in the second, whereupon the full message of evangelism could come home to them," *Works*, v. 12, 40. Holifield argues that Stoddard was "criticizing the laxity, as well as the rigor of prevailing New England practices" (p. 210), wanting, if anything, to sharpen and not blunt the ministry of Word and Sacrament, teaching those that came that they must trust Christ alone and not the means appointed (as ends in themselves). See also Patricia Tracy, pp. 35-36

frequently are, to seeking to amuse themselves rather than in serving the Lord. Edwards lamented that after the last of the five revivals that occurred during Stoddard's ministry, "came a far more degenerate time (at least among the young people), I suppose, than ever before." Surveying Northampton's spiritual condition, Edwards observed, "Just after my grandfather's death, it seemed to be a time of extraordinary dullness in religion: licentiousness for some years greatly prevailed among the youth of the town; they were many of them very much addicted to night-walking, and frequenting the tavern, and lewd practices, wherein some, by their example exceedingly corrupted others." Edwards went on to note that both sexes got together frequently for "mirth and jollity, which they called frolics; and they would often spend the greater part of the night in them." Even in church the young people had been guilty of open misbehavior though unnoticed by Stoddard because of his age. All of this was combined with "a spirit of contention" that had long prevailed in the town between leading families who "were prepared to oppose one another in all public affairs."⁵²

In spite of all of this, most in Northampton above fourteen years of age were communicants, meaning that they could affirm Christian doctrine, pledge moral sincerity, and refrain from open scandal. But were they even living up to this? Is what Edwards witnessed evidence of moral sincerity? Was it really free of open scandal? So, from the beginning of his time in Northampton, when according to all accounts Edwards was a convinced Stoddardean, Edwards saw behavior, both in the young people and in local family contentions, that caused him to wonder about the true religious condition of many in Northampton.

Now it must be said here that Edwards was a precisionist if not to say a perfectionist. Surely this affected his judgment, particularly in dealing with the young people. We see this in his time as tutor at Yale⁵³, in the so-called "bad book affair"⁵⁴ and in the way that he

⁵²*Works*, v. 4: 146. During his tenure at Northampton, Edwards battled with factions of the Williams family that seemed to resent him and always oppose him (both in Northampton and the broader region) as well as various members of the "country" party, over against the "court" party, in Northampton, Marsden, pp. 369-374 and elsewhere throughout.

⁵³Marsden, 101-113. He never quite knew how to relate to those his own age, especially insofar as his fellows engaged in jest or other such conduct.

conducted himself in disputes.⁵⁵ He was never one to make excuses for himself or others. The standard of behavior that he sought in the regenerate, both in himself and others, was very high, commendably so, though one might question his view of progressive sanctification. Did Edwards fail to appreciate that the truly regenerate might only faintly manifest true piety and that it might take some time before the real evidence of visible sainthood would be forthcoming? And what was the best evidence at any rate of such visible sainthood?

The evidence that Edwards looked for to determine visible sainthood was somewhat different than that looked for by those of earlier New England who insisted that a narrative of grace was necessary in staking out a claim to visible sainthood. Part of the reason that Edwards never insisted on such a narrative was because his own conversion experience, in which he admittedly suffered from no terror of the law or heavy conviction of sin,⁵⁶ did not meet the standard expectations of the seventeenth-century preparationists, with their developed morphology of conversion and stylized narrative of grace.⁵⁷ Writing in August, 1723, Edwards

⁵⁴This is the common name for it, though Marsden better calls it the “Young folks’ Bible” case and has an excellent and insightful discussion of it at pp. 292-302, in particular. Essentially, a group of young men (in their twenties) in 1744 taunted and abused young women with ribald comments about female matters, inspired apparently by a purloined copy of a book on midwifery. Discipline was in order if for no other reason than that the threatening behavior of the men was tantamount to sexual harassment. Edwards took it quite seriously, but, in seeking to discipline, read a list of names from the pulpit, failing to distinguish between accused and witnesses. Since many of the leading families of the town had some of its members involved at least as witnesses, this created something of an uproar and led to resentment. Edwards was viewed by some as harsh or, at the least, pastorally inept.

⁵⁵Many saw him as punctilious and exacting in the disputes that he had with the town over his salary. Undoubtedly, he simply saw himself as seeking properly to secure the welfare of his family. Nonetheless, such disputes did not heighten the affection that either had for the other. See Marsden, 123-124; 301-303 and elsewhere. See also *Works*, v. 16: 148-151 in which Edwards answers critics regarding his supposed financial extravagance and in which he proposes a fixed salary to the precinct.

⁵⁶*Works*, v. 16: 773, diary entry for July 4, 1723.

⁵⁷For an excellent study on the English and American Preparationist background to this, see Norman Pettit, *The Heart Prepared: Grace and*

noted, “the chief thing, that now makes me in any measure to question my good estate, is my not having experienced conversion in those particular steps, wherein the people of New England, and anciently the Dissenters of Old England, used to experience it.” In light of his personal differing experience, Edwards resolved “never to leave searching, till I have satisfyingly found out the very bottom and foundation, the real reason why they used to be converted in those steps.”⁵⁸

Edwards discovered during the 1735 revival in Northampton and the subsequent Great Awakening in the 1740’s that the error of some of the preparationists, like Perkins, Hooker, Shepard, etc., was in placing steps to salvation before the process of conversion, which is to say placing them too early in the *ordo salutis*. Edwards was personally relieved to witness that the strong sense of sin that came to him only some years after his conversion also come to some of the Northampton revival converts after theirs.⁵⁹ He wrote some years later to Thomas Prince that a “person’s state is not chiefly to be judged of by any exactness of steps, and methods of experiences, in what is supposed to be the first conversion....”⁶⁰ Clearly, then, Edwards in rejecting Stoddard’s communion position was not in favor of a return to a system that he himself regarded as misguided, not in the least because it might exclude him.⁶¹

Edwards was concerned with the lack of vital godliness in Northampton, both at the time of his coming and throughout his

Conversion in Puritan Spiritual Life (1966; rpt., Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 48-124.

⁵⁸*Works*, v. 16: 779, diary entry.

⁵⁹*Works*, v. 16: 790-804: Edwards’s *Personal Narrative* gives the story of his conversion and early struggles for assurance. This, together with his diary, as well as *Miscellanies* like Numbers 317, 325, 335, 338, and 345 (all in *Works*, v. 13), all furnish us with a good picture of Edwards’s thinking on conversion, visible sainthood, and assurance.

⁶⁰*Works*, v. 4: 556.

⁶¹Interestingly his parents, his father in particular, had qualms about the genuineness of Edwards’s conversion because it did not seem to fit the New England morphology of conversion, Marsden, pp. 55-58. Apparently, Jonathan’s father, Timothy, never agreed with Stoddard, was a preparationist in the William Perkin’s mould, and required something like a narrative of grace. Thus he had problems with Jonathan’s conversion narrative as not following that of the older preparationist morphology of conversion.

tenure there, manifested in unchristian behavior on the part of his people, and always pointing to the need for revival. However, he was also clearly not content that the evidence of revival rest merely in the ability to recount a certain sort of conversion experience. In that sense, then, he was not seeking a return to the kind of narrative of grace required by the Cambridge Platform. The kind of evidence that Edward sought in ascertaining whether a real work of grace had occurred in a person was both outward godliness coupled with a verbal profession of having received the grace of God, but not necessarily according to the New England morphology of conversion as reflected in the 17th century narratives of grace.

Revival did indeed come to Northampton in 1735 and in 1740-2 during the Great Awakening. It never ceased to concern Edwards, though, that many identified the presence of true revival with a person having had a great religious experience and being able to relate the same loudly and at length to others. Edwards saw many who claimed to have been religiously affected whose lives at length continued to manifest a clear lack of love to God and neighbor. Incidents like the “bad book affair,” the reluctance of the congregation in regards to proper ministerial maintenance, and the continuing factional warfare among the residents of Northampton gave Edwards pause in this regard. Edwards was convinced that if true religious affections were present in a person that that would manifest itself in “Christian practice.”⁶² And he saw significant shortcomings here that ultimately caused him to require more evidence of visible sainthood than merely having participated in the revivals. He wanted those who would come to commune at the table of the Lord to be able to testify of the grace of God in their lives, to be sure, but to do so in a way that made it clear that their claim of an inner saving work of God’s Spirit demonstrated itself in

⁶²The third part of *Religious Affections* (in *Works*, v. 2) was devoted to an enunciation of the “Distinguishing Signs of Truly Gracious and Holy Affections.” Edwards dedicates more time to explicating the twelfth and final of the signs than to any of the others: “Gracious and holy affections have their exercise and fruit in Christian practice.” He argues that “Christian practice or a holy life...is the chief of all signs of grace, both as an evidence of the sincerity of professors unto others, and also to their own consciences.” Edwards believed then that “Christian practice is the *principal sign* by which Christians are to judge both of their own and others’ sincerity of godliness” (pp. 406-407).

outward godliness. Edwards wanted those coming to commune, in other words, who had good grounds for believing that they were in fact truly regenerated and walking with the Lord. He wanted some assurance of salvation before coming to communion.⁶³

In this respect, Edwards was not one under whose ministry assurance was impossible to attain. Since he did not require a stylized conversion experience, what he stressed as the basis of assurance was a godly life flowing from a true profession. In his *Faithful Narrative*, for example, in which he describes the 1735 revival in Northampton and surrounding towns, Edwards recounts that many new converts had a great struggle to gain assurance (yet he clearly regarded them as truly converted). Such an observation undoubtedly comforted him as he recalled his own struggle to gain assurance. Given Edwards revival model, it was not uncommon after a dramatic and intense conversion in which the subject was overwhelmed with a sense of God's presence and the loveliness of Christ that he should afterwards "fall into dead frames of spirit" and be anxious that he had not been genuinely converted. Inasmuch as the conversion point was the zenith of the emotional buildup and whatever followed was bound to seem the nadir, the spiritual and emotional "high" could only be sustained for so long. When the new converts in the revivals began to descend from this spiritual apex, Edwards wrote, "They generally have an awful apprehension of the dreadfulness and undoing nature of a false hope . . . , and many after they have related their experiences, have been greatly afflicted with fears, lest they have played the hypocrite, and used stronger terms than their case would fairly allow of . . ."⁶⁴

Such experiences on the part of the converted in Northampton reflected something of Edwards's own struggle for assurance. As noted above, in not having had experienced what was often expressed in the narrative of grace (at least in the order that it was therein expressed), Edwards struggled mightily in his early years to gain assurance. He resolved to "cast away such things as I find do

⁶³Thus he was always looking for *Signs of Godliness* and giving *Directions for Judging of Persons' Experiences*, both in *Works*, v. 21, at pp. 469-510 and pp. 522-524, respectively. Nonetheless, one may still in some measure, "doubt of his own condition and [yet] still adhere to faith in God's testimony in the Word," as Conrad Cherry noted in his *Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (NY: Doubleday and Co., 1966), 150.

⁶⁴*Works*, v. 4: 186-7.

abate my assurance.” He broke this resolution many times if what he desired was immediate comfort because other resolutions that he made virtually guaranteed that he would still suffer from a lack of assurance. Resolutions such as Number 48, if he was honest, would prick his conscience, and while perhaps beneficial in the long term, would not in the short term tend to the increasing of his spiritual comfort: “Resolved, constantly with the utmost niceness and diligence, and the strident scrutiny, to be looking into the state of my soul, that I may know whether I truly have an interest in Christ or not; that when I come to die, I may not have negligence respecting this to repent of.”⁶⁵

Looking back years later on this period of youthful wrestling with the question of assurance, which is really about the visibility of one’s sainthood to oneself, Edwards commented: “I used to be continually examining myself and studying and contriving for likely ways and means how I should live holily, with far greater diligence and earnestness than I have ever pursued anything in my life; but yet with a great dependence on my own strength; which afterwards proved a great damage to me. My experience had not then taught me, as it has done since, my extreme feebleness and impotence, every manner of way; and the bottomless depths of secret corruption and deceit there was in my heart.”⁶⁶ Edwards here admitted that there was an abundance of sin in him in his early Christian years that he failed to see. This does not mean that he was not then a visible saint nor that he would discount anyone else in such a position as being a visible saint. It was not until after the mid-1730’s revival, however, that Edwards came to realize, as he wrote, “how ignorant I was, when a young Christian, of the bottomless, infinite depths of wickedness, pride, hypocrisy, and deceit left in my heart.” Now that the revival had revealed his heart more fully to him as it had revealed the hearts of his congregation to themselves, Edwards saw himself as “afflicted with a proud and self-righteous spirit, much more sensibly than I used to be formerly.”⁶⁷

⁶⁵*Works*, v. 16: 757.

⁶⁶*Works*, v. 16: 795.

⁶⁷*Works*, v.16: 803.

Edwards kept his diary and made his resolutions regularly for about two years and after that kept the diary only sporadically.⁶⁸ It is likely that during these years when the diary entries became more infrequent, Edwards, by degrees, gained more insight into his self-deception. The young Edwards had made the knowledge of salvation so subjective that he could not honestly examine himself. He had set such a high standard of holiness for himself to attain that when he saw himself falling short of that standard admitting failure could appear tantamount to confessing that he remained unconverted. When he began to realize that he was not as holy, nor indeed could be as holy as he wished, he ceased his rigorous introspection and turned for assurance to the objective fact of the atonement and God's election. He began to emphasize Calvin's prescription for attaining assurance: he who desires holiness and struggles with his sin while maintaining a steadfast devotion to Christ is the one who has a right to be assured.⁶⁹ Calvin had taught that while the believer may not know as an objective fact that he is elect, being unable to peer into the secret counsel of God, he could nonetheless gain strong assurance of salvation and election if he were disposed to perform good works. If the believer had been justified, in other words, then this act should manifest itself by sanctification, given that a good tree brings forth good fruit.⁷⁰ Edwards came to emphasize more and more, as Conrad Cherry wrote, that "Christian practice" was the "chief means through which one may be assured that he is a man of faith."⁷¹

Edwards, in attempting to understand assurance and define visible sainthood, sought to steer clear between the Scylla of Arminianism and the Charybdis of Antinomianism. Antinomianism, which he often called by the name Separatism, was for Edwards represented by those who insisted on immediate assurance, often

⁶⁸*Works*, v. 16: 788-9. Edwards made only one diary entry in 1726, one in 1728, and did not make another until 1734 (his last being in 1735).

⁶⁹The relationship between Calvin and the Calvinists—do the Calvinists faithfully follow Calvin or significantly depart from him?—has been hotly contested in recent years, particularly on the subject of assurance. One of the best treatments demonstrating their essential concord is found in Joel R. Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and his Successors* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999).

⁷⁰John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (rpt., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), v. 2: 202-224.

⁷¹Cherry, 151.

associated with an insistence on something like a stylized narrative of grace, a position that played down outward godliness and emphasized the supposed experience of inner grace.⁷² And by Arminianism, Edward meant all that moralism whereby men imagined that they might commend themselves to God. For Edwards, Stoddard's way of communion promoted Arminianism, unwittingly and unintentionally but nonetheless so.⁷³ To permit men to come to the Table who did not even profess regeneration was to inculcate in some measure the notion of ability or at least to downplay inability and the need of a work of the Spirit in the heart for the grace of the sacrament to be efficacious. Edwards fought Arminianism throughout his career and coming to part with his grandfather on the communion question seems a natural outworking of that battle: one needs not mere "moral sincerity" to come to the Table but a sincere and credible profession of having received the grace of God. This requirement avoided the error of the English separatists who required an outwardly moral life but no narrative of grace. And it avoided the error of those who made a stylized narrative of grace paramount, teaching instead that true religious affections in the heart tend to manifest themselves in a godly life, thereby avoiding the antinomianism of Hutchinson and other separatists.

Edwards under Fire

Historians have long noted that a number of factors contributed to the anti-Edwards atmosphere that seemed to prevail at Northampton in 1749-50 at the time of his dismissal. Though Edwards had arduously labored among his people and presided pastorally over rather remarkable times of revival, by the late 1740's whatever reservoir of good-will and affection that he had ever

⁷²Another helpful take on this question is William K.B. Stoever's "*A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven*": *Covenant Theology and Antinomianism in Early Massachusetts* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1978), especially his discussion of assurance at pp. 129ff.

⁷³*Works*, v. 12: 498 ff. Edwards fought against Arminianism in this sense throughout his whole ministry, always emphasizing God's greatness and man's utter dependence and inability, seen in his first published sermon, the Breck affair, his preaching on justification by faith alone and all of his revival analyses.

enjoyed among his people apparently dried up. As noted earlier, the “bad book” affair, the salary disputes and pastoral ineptitude undoubtedly contributed to this atmosphere. For Edwards, a lack of godly fruit on the part of his congregants made him all that much more determined to stick by his long-held convictions that visible sainthood meant a godly profession of faith coupled with godly behavior. When he revealed to his people that only those professing such should come to the Table, this only enflamed the suspicion of the town folk about Edwards’s judgment of them. In fact, he had come to question the reality of God’s grace in many of their lives and the folk of Northampton knew and resented this.⁷⁴

If Edwards was suspicious that some of his parishioners were unconverted (and thus should not be coming to commune), his parishioners were suspicious of the motives involved in Edwards’s break with his grandfather, particularly as to the question of timing. On June 19, 1748, Colonel John Stoddard (son of Solomon), public official and one of the most powerful men politically in Western Massachusetts, died. Colonel Stoddard was not only patriarch of the clan but patron to and ardent supporter of Jonathan Edwards. This meant that in the upcoming battles that would ensue after Edwards made public his opposition to his grandfather’s communion views, that he would not enjoy the support of his most powerful patron. From the point of view of many in Northampton, and in the Hampshire Ministerial Association (the ministerial association in Western Massachusetts), Edwards took advantage of the death of Col. Stoddard to take a position that he would never have taken while the Colonel lived. Many were convinced that Stoddard’s death afforded Edwards the occasion that he had long awaited—the opportunity to take a public stand against Solomon Stoddard’s communion position.

This does raise a question: When did Edwards come to the position that he did on communion and had he ever truly embraced his grandfather’s position? As seen above, Edwards’s early definition of visible sainthood differed from Stoddard’s and he may have never been completely comfortable with Stoddard’s position. However, Edwards had, both while assistant to Stoddard and on into the 1730s, preached sermons that clearly reflected and set forth

⁷⁴Edwards has furnished us with his own narrative account of the communion controversy, *Works*, v. 12: 507-619. In the following pages, I follow this, together with Marsden’s analysis of the same.

the Stoddardean view.⁷⁵ Edwards's understanding of the revivals and assurance had, in the 1740s, though, brought about a settled conviction that only the professing regenerate should come to the Table. This fit Edwards's conception of the church—that the visible church should as closely as possible approximate the church as it really was—and also meant that the grace signified in communion had more significance: grace would much more likely be conveyed to those who demonstrated themselves to be its proper recipients. Edwards had a high view of the church and the grace of the sacraments in a way different from certain others, certainly Stoddard. He wanted a membership that could ordinarily be assured that the grace offered in the sacrament would be received by them, coming to the Table as they did with true faith. Thus the sacrament of communion was really a sacrament communicating the grace of God to those who were in communion with God and each other as members of Christ's mystical body.

The question remains: Why did Edwards wait until 1748/9 to reveal publicly his earlier-developed position on communion? Because, remarkably, no one had applied for communion since 1744, which, as Marsden notes, is “a commentary in itself.”⁷⁶ Surely Edwards's conviction that Northampton was spiritually at a low ebb and that true piety was wanting might in some measure be justified. Edwards, then, waited until the end of the decade to make his views known because he was waiting for someone to seek membership who showed sufficient signs of piety.⁷⁷ Edwards was not demanding step-by-step conversion narratives, as his father still required, but he did want something more than the formal assent that had satisfied his grandfather Stoddard.” Edwards's father, Timothy Edwards, retained the old narrative of grace practice. Edwards's grandfather Solomon Stoddard went in the utterly opposite direction. It seems that Edwards sought to find a mediating position, not requiring that

⁷⁵*Works*, v. 14: 357-370. This sermon, “Living Uncovered Under an Eminent Means of Grace,” was preached shortly after Stoddard's death and uphold's Stoddard's communion position. Edwards continued publicly to uphold it, for instance, in the sermon, “Self-examination and the Lord's Supper” (preached in 1731), *Works*, v. 17: 262-272. This sermon is so searching, though, that one wonders how any but the regenerate dared to come to the Table.

⁷⁶Marsden, 346-7.

⁷⁷*Works*, v. 12: 507; Marsden, 347.

someone be able to recount conversion with certain stages yet wanting evidence of true saving faith manifesting itself in an evidently godly life.

At the end of 1748, an evidently godly young man engaged to be married sought to come to commune in Edwards's church in Northampton.⁷⁸ This young man had, for some reason, not previously sought admission to the Table according to Stoddardean standards. As Marsden noted, "This was just the sort of case Edwards wanted because he did not want to mark the institution of the new standards with the exclusion of an applicant which would make the move look petty and personal." So in addition to Stoddard's three-fold requirement (assent to orthodoxy, moral sincerity, and good outward behavior), "Edwards gave the young man some samples of brief professions of heartfelt faith that he might affirm and told him that he might draw up something similar in his own words."⁷⁹ The young man agreed to such a procedure but backed out when Edwards's proposed procedure leaked out and opposition arose. The prospect understandably did not wish to be a center of what was quickly becoming a controversy.

Two months later, in February 1749, Edwards set forth his communion views to the committee of the church and asked if he could preach to the congregation on his position. As an aside, that the church was ruled not by ruling elders serving together with Pastor Edwards, was a situation that had come to prevail in grandfather Stoddard's time.⁸⁰ Edwards wanted ruling elders, and in other respects expressed a preference for Presbyterianism over congregationalism.⁸¹ Perhaps the committee of the church, composed as it was of leading citizens of Northampton, felt the need to flex its muscle in the aftermath of Edwards's expressed preference for a more presbyterial as opposed to congregational rule. At any rate, the animosity against his views was so strong that the great majority of the committee refused to let him preach about the matter. As an alternative, they allowed that he was free to publish his views. Edwards immediately set himself to writing his *Humble Inquiry Into The Rules of the Word of God, Concerning The Qualifications Requisite to a Compleat Standing and full Communion In The*

⁷⁸*Works*, v. 12: 508

⁷⁹Marsden, 347.

⁸⁰Marsden, 345-6.

⁸¹*Works*, v. 16: 355.

Visible Christian Church.⁸² The whole title is worth iterating because it accurately describes the project. It is this work that stands over against Stoddard's defense of his communion views, particularly the defense that Stoddard made in his *Appeal to the Learned* in 1709. Edwards's treatise was in turn answered by one of his Williams' family opponents, Solomon Williams, with Edwards answering back to Williams even after his departure from Northampton.⁸³

Before, during, and after the preparing of these positions and counter-positions, events developed apace. In April, 1749, Edwards came to the committee of the church with the request for membership of a young woman who was willing to profess her faith in preparation for communion in accordance with Edwards's now-public understanding.⁸⁴ Edwards even assured the committee that he would not use the young woman's case as a precedent and offered to resign if the committee continued to oppose his position after studying the matter, particularly after reading his communion treatise that was in preparation. Astonishingly, the loyalties of the committeemen to the Stoddardean way apparently ran so deep, together with their animosity to Edward, that by a fifteen to three vote they refused to admit the young woman to membership under these terms. The hearts and minds of the church leaders were so set against Edwards's position that they were willing to allow innocent laypersons to get caught in the crossfire of their conflict with Edwards.

The committeemen, and the town fathers involved in this matter (the mixture between church and state already being a problem in colonial New England, as seen above), demanded to know why Edwards had not previously disclosed his views on Communion? Why had he waited until, as they saw it, the salary dispute had been settled and Edwards had achieved a fixed salary? Why had he waited until after Col. Stoddard's death. "Was it that he knew that Solomon Stoddard's son, who had so long protected him, would be the most formidable opponent of a repudiation of his father's heritage?"⁸⁵

⁸²*Works*, v. 12: 167-348.

⁸³*Misrepresentations Corrected, and Truth Vindicated, In A Reply to the Rev. Mr. Solomon Williams's Book, intituled, The True State of the Question concerning the Qualifications necessary to lawful Communion in the Christian Sacraments* (Boston: S. Kneeland, 1752). This is also contained in *Works*, v. 12: 351-503.

⁸⁴*Works*, v. 12: 509-510.

⁸⁵Marsden, 348.

Edwards reply made it clear that he had never fully embraced his grandfather's position and that he had come to his current position at least by the time that he wrote *Religious Affections* in the mid-1740's.⁸⁶ So much skepticism on the part of Edwards's opponents about the timing of his revealing his communion position continued that Edwards ultimately felt compelled to solicit affidavits and testimony from various parties affirming that he had been of the position for some time and only lacked the opportunity to make it known because no one applied during those several years for admission to the Lord's Table. Sarah Edwards herself, in fact, testified that "not very long after Mr. Edwards had admitted the last Person that ever was admitted into this church who made no Profession of Godliness, He told me that He would not dare ever to admit another Person without a Profession of real saving Religion."⁸⁷ Sarah Edwards makes it clear in this letter that Edwards did not seek to hide his opinion either from the general public (expressing it in some measure in *Religious Affections*) or from various private parties to whom he discoursed more freely. She acknowledged that he was loathe to go against the practice of his late grandfather and that he feared that his position on communion would ultimately result in a separation between him and his people. He saw no reason, though, apart from a particular case (i.e., in the absence of persons applying for communion), to stake out a position that would undoubtedly rankle many of his congregants.

What should not be missed is that when Edwards believed it time to publish his opinions he did and stuck by them even though it meant his dismissal. He was a man of principle who would not back down from what he was convinced that the Scriptures taught. Marsden keenly observes: "That he was willing to risk comfort and status for high principle does not mean that he was without fault. For one thing, his brittle, unsociable personality contributed to the breakdown of the once-warm relationship with the townspeople. Try as he might to temper his natural propensities by cultivating Christian virtues of gentleness, charity, and avoiding evil-speaking,

⁸⁶As noted earlier, there were several intimations in *Religious Affections* that Edwards communion position had changed and that he would require more than did Stoddard to partake of that sacrament, although the reasoning contained therein is rather subtle, see, e.g., *Works*, v. 2: 21-2, 62, 181.

⁸⁷Reprinted in Iain Murray, 485-487.

he still seemed aloof. He was not able to build up the reserve of personal good-will that more pastoral ministers enjoyed. Edwards was keenly aware of these failings, and as the disaster developed he suggested a number of times that he might not be suited for anything but writing.”⁸⁸ That Edwards questioned his vocation and fitness for pastoral office in the light of the communion controversy speaks well for him. That he knew his own shortcomings and yet maintained his principles also speaks well for him. Edwards failed pastorally in some measure and was keenly aware of it. But so did his people especially insofar as they refused not only to agree with his biblical arguments but even to give them a respectful hearing.⁸⁹

While it is quite true that Edwards was a precisionist, it would be wrong to assume that this means that Edwards required a high degree of assurance of salvation or an overabundance of spiritual evidence to come to the Table of the Lord. This charge was leveled against him by many of his opponents, not the least being Solomon Williams who sought to answer Edwards’s *Humble Inquiry*. In the *Humble Inquiry*, Edwards had argued just how he or other church officers ought to conduct themselves in admitting prospects to the Supper: “If any are known to be persons of an honest character, and appear to be of good understanding in the doctrine of Christianity, and particularly those doctrines that teach the grand condition of salvation, and the nature of true saving religion, and publicly and seriously profess the great and main things wherein the essence of true religion or godliness consists, and their conversation is agreeable; this justly recommends ‘em to the good opinion of the public, whatever suspicions and fears any particular person, either the minister, or some other, may entertain, from what he in

⁸⁸Marsden, 349.

⁸⁹Marsden, 359. For a church in the Hampshire Ministerial Association, as was Edwards’s church in Northampton, to sever its ties with its pastor, the concurrence of an ad hoc committee of neighboring churches was needed, together with the precinct and congregation. This tale is told at some length by Edwards in his “Narrative of the Communion Controversy,” *Works*, v. 12, 511 ff. As a part of what was an increasingly strained relationship between minister and congregation, Edwards was “painfully exasperated that he could not get the townspeople even to listen to his views.” Most would not read his *Humble Inquiry* nor would they attend a series of five Thursday lectures on the subject, which were attended mainly by curious folk from surrounding communities.

particular has observed, perhaps from the manner of expressing himself in giving an account of his experiences, or an obscurity in the order and method of his experiences, etc. The minister, in receiving him to the communion of the church, is to act as a public officer, and in behalf of the public society, and not merely for himself, and therefore is to be governed, in acting, by a proper visibility of godliness in the eye of the public.”⁹⁰ Solomon Williams interpreted this and like statements in Edwards to mean that Edwards required “the highest evidence a man can give of sincerity,” along the lines of the old narratives of grace. Edwards rebutted this and argued that he was seeking only “credible evidence of *real godliness* as opposed to credible evidence of *moral sincerity*, which had been sufficient for Solomon Stoddard.”⁹¹

Indeed, given his own struggle for personal assurance, it was Edwards’s practice to encourage those, especially during the time of the revivals, to claim assurance if there was any good evidence of the saving grace of God in their hearts, much as Thomas Shepard would encourage one reluctant to claim assurance who gave evidence of faith to come to the Table and continue searching his heart.⁹² And even as Shepard and his colleagues came under fire from the Antinomian Anne Hutchinson for making such allowances for those lacking in assurance, Edwards too came under fire from certain Separatists and enthusiasts in his own day who insisted that the elect know immediately that they belong to the Lord and that they have no problem with assurance.⁹³ The Separatists who were of the Antinomian/Enthusiast stripe, in fact, claimed on the basis of a passage like I Corinthians 2:15 that they possessed the positive ability infallibly to discern who did and who did not possess saving grace. Edwards utterly disdained any such ability to discern who was the elect and who was not, writing to Peter Clark: “I am far from

⁹⁰*Works*, v. 12: 179-80.

⁹¹Marsden, 368.

⁹²See Michael McGiffert, ed., *God’s Plot: The Paradoxes of Puritan Piety, Being the Autobiography and Journal of Thomas Shepard* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972), 15-17, *passim*. Shepherd’s writings are filled with anxiety over his spiritual state. He knew what reluctance to claim assurance meant and he was one of the leading ministers of his day.

⁹³Morgan, 109-110. See also C.C. Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 44-47.

pretending to a discriminating judgment of men's spiritual state, so as infallibly to determine who are true converts and who are not; or imagining that I, or anybody else, is sufficient for the execution of any such design as the setting up of a Pure Church consisting only of true Christians."⁹⁴

To be sure, a survey of a number of Edwards's writings might indicate just the opposite: frequently he preached and wrote in such a way as to give very close principles for self-examination and for discerning whether or not one was truly godly. More than a few have read Edwards, and undoubtedly heard Edwards, who came away wondering whether they were true believers, certainly as set forth by Edwards. In this respect, though, Edwards was fairly typical of many Puritan preachers/writers, who preached and spoke in ways intended to search the heart so as to leave saints trusting in nothing but the grace and mercy of the Lord and to undeceive hypocrites who might not be truly trusting in the Lord but in themselves and their own righteousness. Much of this kind of preaching was purposed to demonstrate man's utter helplessness and to point all auditors to Christ alone. But in private conference, many of these same preachers could be quite comforting, that is to say, if someone came to Edwards, or preachers like him, deeply concerned for their soul's salvation, they would generally be encouraged in their relationship with the Lord. Such preaching/dealing was, as much as any ever has been, calculated to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

Edwards did indeed preach and write, one might say, "hard things," but when it actually came to admitting someone to the Table of the Lord he did not require the kind of "highest evidence" that Solomon Williams alleged him to require. Rather, Edwards required only a rather simple profession of faith. He drew up four such sample professions to demonstrate to the church, the town, and the council called to resolve the communion controversy the kind of profession that he would consider to be acceptable. One of them was "I hope, I do truly find a heart to give up myself wholly to God, according to the tenor of that covenant of grace which was sealed in my baptism, and to walk in a way of that obedience to all the commandments of God, which the covenant of grace requires, as long as I live." The other of the shorter two was, "I hope, I truly

⁹⁴JE to Peter Clark, ALS, 7 May 1750, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

find in my heart a willingness to comply with all the commandments of God, which require me to give up myself wholly to him, and to serve him with my body and my spirit; and do accordingly now promise to walk in a way of obedience to all the commandments of God as long as I live.” Edwards plaintively comments: “Now the reader is left to judge, whether I insist, as Mr. Williams represents, that persons must not be admitted without the highest evidence a man can give of sincerity.”⁹⁵ This does not sound like the narratives of grace required by the Cambridge Platform.

Even with these less-than-Cambridge-Platform standards, Edwards, as Marsden notes, “was impaled on the horns of a dilemma inherited from his tradition. Puritanism and its Reformed-pietist successors constantly vacillated between whether they were rebuilding Christendom by making towns and nations into virtually Christian societies, or whether they were advocating a pure, called-out church.”⁹⁶ Edwards clearly did not want a disestablished church like the Separatists (nor the kind of utterly pure church that many of them also wanted). Edwards certainly believed in the notion that God in some sense covenanted not only with those in the church but also, to some extent, with those in the nation.⁹⁷ Yet, he was also not willing that political/civil concerns be paramount to the spiritual concerns of the church. In other words, in his theory of visible sainthood and in the question of who was qualified to take communion, Edwards wanted the church to be the church. He resented that church polity or doctrine should be made the handmaiden of the good of the town or the state.

Rather, the civil covenant ought properly to be informed and shaped by those in the covenant of grace. And his post-millennial and revivalistic convictions meant that he thought that more and more would be truly regenerated and thus truly enabled to express such real godliness in the life of the church and in the life of the state.⁹⁸ But it was fleshly and rebellious to seek to build this

⁹⁵*Works*, v. 12: 361.

⁹⁶Marsden, 350.

⁹⁷Gerald R. McDermott, “Jonathan Edwards and the National Covenant: Was He Right?” in D.G. Hart, *et al.*, eds., *The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards: American Religion and the Evangelical Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 147-157.

⁹⁸That Edwards believed that the millennium was dawning is evident in a number of his apocalyptic writing, e.g., *Works*, v. 5: 253-284. Edwards

millennial kingdom apart from waiting on the Lord to furnish it with the true building materials.⁹⁹ Edwards did not wish to build with the wood, hay, and stubble of mere morality but believed that the coming kingdom was to be built only with the gold, silver and precious stones of those who were truly regenerated and were thus proper building material. In this respect, he agreed with the original vision of New England's founders to found a society composed of the regenerate. But Edwards did not believe in pretending that such a society existed if it didn't yet so exist. He was not willing to jettison spiritual standards to achieve some civil utopia, which he regarded as hollow and empty if not informed by true spirituality.

To put it another way, Edwards was a kind of empiricist, but not so much after the fashion of Locke, as Perry Miller would have it¹⁰⁰, but after the fashion of Berkeley, who was an idealist in his empiricism. Berkeley argued *esse est percipi*: to be is to be perceived. Edwards took this approach to the church as he considered visible sainthood and the question of who is qualified to commune. It is the one who appears to be a saint whom we regard as a saint, not one who makes no such profession. Edwards disagreed with the Separatists and even the narrative of grace folk that a more or less pure church could be achieved. Ultimately the Lord knows them that are his. But because everyone who names the name of Christ is commanded to depart from iniquity, Edwards believed that we can ordinarily know who these people are, which is to say that as far as saints are concerned, to be a saint is to be perceived as a saint. In his spiritual, post-millennial, revivalistic way, Edwards saw the church and state as more and more coming to instantiate the real,

regularly read the newspaper looking for news of "Events of a Hopeful Aspect on the State of Religion" (*Works*, v. 5: 285-297). For the broader implications, see Ruth Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 16-21.

⁹⁹Much like the Hasidim (ultra-orthodox Jews) who opposed the Zionists at the time of Israel's becoming a state in 1948. Rather than wanting to establish Israel as a political state like the Zionists, the various ultra-orthodox groups argued that only the Messiah could properly re-establish the Jewish state. Edwards believed that only Christ by the power of his Spirit could establish the millennial kingdom.

¹⁰⁰Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (1949; rpt. Amherst, MA: Univeristy of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 52-67, *passim*.

the visible manifesting truly the invisible, as in the Incarnation, and as even in, in its own idealistic way, Plato's *Republic*.

Edwards's high spiritual ideals and exalted conception of the church found little resonance in the more mundane lives of his Northampton congregants, however. And for many there, Edwards's rejection of his grandfather's communion position was the straw that broke the camel's back. Edwards's exacting requirements and unreachable standards were too much, many perceived, and a number in Northampton were unwilling to allow Edwards to place the kind of yoke on them that they perceived him to have placed on himself and his family. Folk who had chafed under various aspects of his ministry now saw the opportunity to rid themselves of their punctilious and officious pastor. That he was, in the eyes of his opponents, a reactionary, authoritarian determined to maintain his dominance over them at all costs can be seen in his rejection not only of Stoddardeanism but even of the Half-Way Covenant as well. Edwards argued that not only should one profess godliness to come to the Table but also to present one's child for baptism.¹⁰¹ Edwards saw himself as defending the covenant, seeking to maintain its purity (and beauty), while his opponents saw him as attacking the covenant. Jonathan Ashley, pastor of the neighboring Deerfield congregation and another Williams' family champion, argued that Edwards's position was disruptive of church and state and was little better than the misguided Separatists.¹⁰²

Edwards argued, in response to all of this, time and again, from every vantage point, that all he wanted was that those who came to commune could give good evidence that they were truly saints, that they belonged at the Table of the Lord. Certainly, his people concluded that he did not belong in the pulpit or presiding at the Lord's Table. And so when the church council called by the Hampshire Ministerial Association to adjudicate the communion

¹⁰¹*Works*, v. 12: 314-319; Marsden, 354-355.

¹⁰²Jonathan Ashley, *An Humble Attempt to Give a Clear Account from Scripture, how the Jewish and Christian Churches were Constituted and what Sort of Saintsship is necessary in order to be a Communicant at the Lord's Table* (Boston, 1753). Ashley preached these two sermons in Northampton at their request in an attempt to combat Edwards's position. He, like Stoddard, saw visible sainthood as distinct from real sainthood (that is to say, the former did not necessarily entail the latter).

controversy asked for the Northampton congregation to “express its views on whether to continue the pastoral relationship, only 23 of the 230 male members voted on Edwards side.”¹⁰³ In his Farewell Sermon, preached in the summer of 1750, Edwards told his congregation that the final adjudication of the matter that they had just decided awaited the Final Judgment, at which time the Judge would make it clear who was approved and who was condemned.¹⁰⁴

Edwards went on to serve as a missionary to the Housatonic Indians in Stockbridge in the Berkshires of Far-Western Massachusetts. And it all came to an end at the College of New Jersey (later Princeton), where he served as President for some few weeks until his death of smallpox in 1758. His dismissal from Northampton afforded him the time at Stockbridge to write his great classics on the Will, Original Sin, True Virtue, etc. His legacy has remained highly disputed. Did Hopkins, Bellamy and others of the New Divinity corrupt Edwards’s theology or rightly develop it?¹⁰⁵ Or was old Princeton, though differing in some minor points from him, truer to his vigorous defense of Calvinism? These questions are for another day, but here we might observe that Edwards was right—in line with Scripture, confession, and historic Calvinism—in arguing that a visible saint is one who truly evidences godliness and it is such who are properly qualified to come to the Table of the Lord. That his congregation in Northampton dismissed him for such a position ultimately says more about them than it does about Jonathan Edwards.

¹⁰³Marsden, 360.

¹⁰⁴*A Farewel-Sermon Preached at the first Precinct in Northampton, After the People’s publick rejection of their Minister, and renouncing their Relation to Him as the Pastor of the Church there, On June 22, 1750. Occasion’d by Difference of Sentiments, concerning the requisite qualifications of Members of the Church, in compleat Standing* (Boston, 1751).

¹⁰⁵The several articles contained in the section entitled “The Legacy of Edwards” are helpful in Nathan O. Hatch and Harry S. Stout, eds., *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).