

DIVINE COMMUNICATIONS IN A TIME OF REVIVAL: JONATHAN EDWARDS' USE OF 'LIGHT' AND 'WATER' IMAGERY DURING THE NORTHAMPTON REVIVAL, 1734-35

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ABSTRACT

During the Northampton revival of 1734-1735, the Congregationalist pastor and preacher Jonathan Edwards devoted himself wholly to the task of persuading his congregants to cry out to God for mercy, that he might bestow on them the free gift of the new birth. His rhetoric in the sermons of this period is particularly intense and Edwards employs a vast array of oratorical resources in order to move the affections of his audience. These range from logical argumentation for defining and defending his doctrinal convictions, to the moving utilization of images and similes such as those related to light and water. Through the analysis of the latter, the reader can trace the Puritan pastor's perception of the development of this spiritual awakening, and he or she may approach one of the greatest geniuses and artists of American sermonic tradition.

RESUMEN

Durante el avivamiento de Northampton de 1734-1735, el pastor y predicador congregacionista Jonathan Edwards dedicó sus mayores esfuerzos a persuadir a sus fieles para que clamaran a Dios por misericordia, por si se dignara a concederles el don del nuevo nacimiento. La retórica de sus sermones en esta época es especialmente vibrante y Edwards emplea todos sus recursos de oratoria para conmover a sus oyentes: desde la argumentación lógica para definir y defender sus postulados doctrinales, hasta el emotivo uso de imágenes y símiles, como los relativos a la luz o el agua. A través del análisis de estos últimos, el lector puede apreciar cuál fue la evolución del despertar espiritual desde la perspectiva del pastor puritano e igualmente puede acercarse a uno de los mayores genios y artistas de la tradición homilética americana.

In the late Fall of 1734, several circumstances and events led to the outburst of a religious awakening in Northampton (Massachusetts) that would eventually become “the most influential revival in the history of evangelicalism” (Kidd 13). No doubt, the intensity and effectiveness of Jonathan Edwards’ preaching was an essential ingredient in stirring up this revival in which hundreds of people were converted and which quickly spread throughout the Connecticut River Valley (Marsden 160, 163). By the 1730s the Northampton pastor had reached the full mastery of the sermon form¹ and, according to his own testimony, during this season of awakening his hearers were “eager to drink in the words of the minister,” often “in tears,” some “weeping in sorrow and distress” but others “with joy and love” (*Faithful Narrative*, I. 348).²

Although Edwards often used logic in order to advance his arguments and make ideas clear and compelling, the rhetorical force of his sermons lay mainly in their imagery. As Wilson Kinnach has observed, “the prime source of power lies in Edwards’ use of certain literary devices such as imagery, metaphor, repetition and allusion” (197).³ In the following survey and analysis of several sermons delivered during the Northampton revival, we will see how Edwards’ use of light imagery, combined with different images and símiles pertaining to the realm of water (“fountain,” “streams,” “deluge,” “ocean,” etc.),⁴ reflects his own perception of and response to the effects of his preaching activity. That is to say, there is a

¹ In this regard, see Kinnach 91, and Lesser 3.

² Unless indicated otherwise, all quotations from Jonathan Edwards’ writings are from Hickman, Edward. ed. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards (2 vols.)*. 1834. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998. Volume and page references will be preceded by the key words of specific titles if the quotation belongs to any of Jonathan Edwards’ major works.

³ Wilson Kinnach’s introduction to the first ‘Sermons and Discourses’ volume of the Yale edition constitutes the most thorough and authoritative analysis of Edwards’ sermons yet published.

⁴ Regarding the ‘fusion’ of light and water imagery, Kinnach’s observations have been extremely helpful (224).

correspondence between the development of the revival, its rise and declension (which show Jonathan Edwards' own optimism and disappointment respectively), and the use of negative or positive 'light' and 'water' imagery. By 'negative' imagery I mean the use of images and language referring mainly to God's dreadful wrath and judgment, as opposed to more 'positive' representations of God's love and mercy. This does not mean that when the revival was at its height there were no warnings and threats or that before it, or during its decline, there were no efforts on Edwards' part to commend Christ's love and beauty. However, the predominance of either of these two rhetorical modes and the preacher's handling of the different images clearly reflect his attitude towards the congregation and what he perceived as their spiritual state.

The mid- and long-term impact of the Northampton revival, and of the figure of Jonathan Edwards in particular, can hardly be doubted. Within the next decade, this local awakening would be publicized across the Atlantic, far beyond the circle of Calvinist dissenters and Reformed churches in which Edwards naturally fitted. His own account of the revival, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*, which was translated into several languages and saw numerous editions in coming years,⁵ compared this season of the Spirit's "outpouring" with the time of the apostles, thus placing the Northampton congregation and their minister at the center of divine history. As I shall show below, revivals themselves and the arrival of the millennium (which was the ultimate and definitive revival to be expected) would become critical in Edwards' preaching and thought,⁶ and light imagery was precisely one of the stylistic means through which he enhanced and commended his particular vision of the consummation of history.

There were certain social circumstances which favored the revival and contributed to Edwards' success in his preaching ministry. At the religious and psychological levels there was New England's heritage of covenantal theology, materialized in the "Halfway Covenant" (1662),⁷ which had a general tendency to diminish the individual's concern and anxiety about personal regeneration and the need of conversion. Northampton in particular had been instructed and led, during almost sixty years before Edwards' arrival, by a minister (Solomon Stoddard, Edwards' maternal grandfather) whose theology and opinions concerning admission to communion represented "a major break with the experiential tradition" (Goen 12, 16). At the socio-economic level, there were particular conditions in western New England, especially among the youth, which were an occasion for the intensity of the 1730s awakening. After the land distributed in the seventeenth century for coming generations had become insufficient, economic differences between the more and less prosperous landowners began to increase. It was difficult for young

⁵ On the influence of this account during and after the Great Awakening, see Goen 32-46.

⁶ About this development in Edwards' conception of history and of his own ministry, and its direct relation to the Northampton revival, see Stein 126, 127, 133. See also n. 19 below.

⁷ For an explanation of the Halfway Covenant and its relevance, see Noll 40-42.

people to marry and become independent as they did not have the opportunities for entrepreneurial initiative of later generations. As a result, there were many more people in their mid and late twenties living with their parents than in previous generations. In addition, there were recurrent Indian hostilities in settlements near the border (Marsden 150-152). Jonathan Edwards would certainly make the most of every 'earthly' anxiety his hearers might have but, above all, he would endeavor to create an anxiety about 'heavenly' matters, about the state of their souls. Nevertheless, this anxiety was not an end in itself but the means for experiencing the new birth. As biographer George Marsden has expressed it: "The travail of the new birth might be excruciating, but that was God's way of working" (164, 165).

Another biographer, Ola Elisabeth Winslow, describes how Edwards' preaching related to New England's inherited theology and to his own spiritual experience. Writing about a sermon that was preached and published in 1731, she says:

No phrase had been on the lips of the New England clergy more frequently since Jonathan Edwards was born than "sovereignty of God"; and yet, as he now interpreted this venerable doctrine, he seemed to be preaching a fresh, new truth. The sermon, as the record reads, was "uncommonly impressive." It is easy to see why. Back of the familiar structure of Calvinistic thought, in this basic first *Point*, "sovereignty," the fervent young preacher was putting the authority of his own personal religious experience. When he spoke of a satisfying spiritual joy, "a kind of effusion of God in the Soul," he was not speaking the language of catechetical divinity as he had learned it in Ames' *Medulla* during his Yale College days; he was speaking out of his own knowledge of spiritual things. (154)

His belief in the genuineness of his personal experience combined with his confidence in a sovereign God who always acted through "means" (especially through ministers of the Word) endowed his preaching with uncommon authority, intensity and pathos. Winslow acknowledges, as does Wilson Kinnach, that imagery was Edwards' most effective resource in conveying his perception of divine things:

His peculiar power as a preacher lay in his ability to paint pictures. He had to an unusual degree the faculty of objectifying his concepts, but his imagination needed something tangible with which to start. This the biblical poet had already supplied. Jonathan Edwards took the biblical figure and pursued it relentlessly, until heaven, hell, God's wrath, eternal glory, as he preached them, lost their vague outlines and became visible, imminent realities. (143)

Wilson Kinnach points out that light imagery in particular was the most innovative and affecting aspect of his rhetorical repertoire:

All in all, Edwards' ideal [of preaching] does not seem to be very different from that of the traditional preacher of the time, except that in the full context of the sermon

and through the extensive use of light imagery, he suggests a standard of transcendent dedication and nearly mystical fervor which is rare in any age. (25)

Before proceeding to analyze Jonathan Edwards' handling of 'light' and 'water' imagery and similes, something must be noted concerning his view of the pastoral ministry. Just as the doctrine of predestination did not mean for the Puritans that human responsibility to repent and turn to God was diminished, so Edwards' belief that it was God who ultimately caused sinners to be born again did not diminish his confidence in the means of conversion, namely, the preaching of the Word. As God's "ambassador" he was to proclaim the urgent message to an unfaithful and hardened people whom only God could soften and bring to life. In his own words, ministers ought to be "burning and shining lights" as John the Baptist had been when, "after a long-continued dark season," he introduced "the day-spring, or dawning of the gospel day" (II. 955, 956) This parallelism with the figure of John the Baptist was one of the ways in which Edwards recurrently claimed authority and advanced the revivalist cause.

During the months preceding the "dramatic upturn" (Marsden 158) of the awakening in the late Fall of 1734, Edwards had repeatedly warned his congregation about the dangers of living "in a land of light" (Lesser 116),⁸ since that alone did not make them true Christians. Surely they were not "left in the dark [...] as the poor heathens" (II. 59),⁹ but they should not rashly conclude that they were subjects of saving grace. In his famous sermon "A Divine and Supernatural Light,"¹⁰ published that same year, it was clearly established that the individual had to be given a "sense of the heart" to see Christ for who he is, and that only then could he be sure that he was saved from the wrath to come. Edwards described this gift and its source in these terms: "'tis a kind of emanation of God's beauty, and is related to God as the light is to the sun" (II. 16). It is worth noting at this point that words such as "emanation" or "effusion," which can be applied to liquids as well as to light, were among Edwards' favorite terms for defining and depicting divine communications. In a sermon entitled "Christ, the Light of the World," which he had delivered more than a decade earlier, he had referred to the written and the preached Word as an "emanation" through which light, i.e. knowledge, was communicated to individuals (Kinnach 542). This semantic identification of the "sense" that is directly bestowed by God and the words which a minister utters in preaching shows us, once again, the importance Edwards ascribed to his pastoral task.

⁸ Sermon entitled "The Dreadful Silence of the Lord" (dated July 1734).

⁹ "The Unreasonableness of Indetermination in Religion" (dated June 1734).

¹⁰ The full title of the sermon was "A Divine and Supernatural Light immediately imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God, shown to be both a Scriptural and Rational Doctrine."

Although the Great Awakening of the 1740s would witness a definite shift of focus in Jonathan Edwards' preaching from heaven to hell (Stout, *Works* 32),¹¹ in the run-up to the Northampton revival of the 1730s, a remarkably powerful hellfire sermon¹² was heard by his congregation. He shook them with the disturbing assertion that God "is not the covenant God of those who are in an unconverted state" (II. 819). The main assumption in New England, Congregationalist mentality was that God was somehow bound by his covenant with a special people such as themselves. The doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty had been, as it were, domesticated by the belief that God was under some manner of obligation towards them and that, in the end, he would be favorable to them.¹³ In contrast with this tame and friendly God, this sermon presents a God who might turn out to be their enemy and whose wrath would be "executed to the full upon them, *poured out* without mixture." They were in danger, Edwards told them, of being "turned away from God and from all good into the *blackness of darkness*, into the pit of hell" (II. 821, my italics). Before considering this picture of God's wrath in this sermon, I will analyze how light and water imagery is combined to describe the state of men's minds and hearts.

As Edwards sets out to prove the stated doctrine that "they who are in a natural condition, are in a dreadful condition," he begins to pile up images and employ the emphatic language of human depravity:

The dreadfulness of their depravity appears in that they are so sottishly blind and ignorant. [...] His understanding is full of darkness; his mind is blind, is altogether blind to spiritual things. Men are [...] blind in the midst of the brightest light, ignorant under all manner of instructions. (II. 817)

No people were so surrounded by "the brightest light" as New England Congregational churches, and, therefore, no audience was so worthy of reproof for remaining indifferent towards spiritual matters. At this point, Edwards begins to quote Scripture although, interestingly, none of the chosen passages contain images or similes of light, darkness or blindness, as does the preceding description. After backing his statement with a cluster of Bible verses, he goes on to make a diagnosis of the human heart:

The hearts of natural men are exceedingly full of sin. [...] The heart is a mere sink of sin, a fountain of corruption, whence issue all manner of filthy streams. [...] There is not only malice in the hearts of natural men, but a fountain of it. [...] Sin flows from the heart as constantly as water flows from a fountain. (II. 819)

¹¹ Edwards' most famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," for example, was preached in 1741.

¹² Published as "Natural Men in a Dreadful Condition" in Hickman's edition (II. 817ff).

¹³ An explanation of this theological development, its social consequences, and Edwards' challenge of it, is found in Miller 89-98.

Finally, in view of the pitiful state of human nature, the Northampton church is assured that anyone who can relate to this mental blindness and these sinful desires of the heart can be rightly called “a child of the devil, the spirit of darkness, the prince of hell.” Edwards will merge ‘light and darkness’ imagery with similes semantically related to water precisely to describe God’s wrath and hell itself.

The first instance of this ‘fusion’ is introduced by the phrase “blackness of darkness,” as was quoted above. This emphatic, negative image serves Edwards to convey the idea of extreme uncertainty and confusion. On the other hand, the sense of inflicted pain or the intensity and force of God’s vengeance upon the damned are more effectively expressed through images like being “filled with wrath” or having a “deluge of wrath” poured upon oneself:

[Sinners in hell] shall be turned away from God and from all good into the blackness of darkness [...] Their souls and their bodies shall be filled full with the wrath of God. [...] The vessels of wrath shall be filled up with wrath to the brim. Yea, they shall be plunged into a sea of wrath. And therefore hell is compared to a lake of fire and brimstone, because there wicked men are overwhelmed and swallowed up in wrath, as men who are cast into a lake or sea, are swallowed up in water. (II. 821)

By massing all these ‘dynamic’ water similes, Edwards complements the more ‘static’ imagery of light and darkness. After briefly expounding the apocalyptic metaphor of “the great wine-press of the wrath of God” (Revelation 14:19), he again employs a water simile, combined with his typical *a fortiori* form of argumentation, to warn the congregation: “If a few drops of wrath do sometimes distress the minds of men in this world [...] how dreadful will be a deluge of wrath; how dreadful will it be, when all God’s mighty waves and billows of wrath pass over them!” (II. 821).

As Edwards seeks to press further the point of hell’s torments (specifically their “endless duration”), the fusion of these images is used again in a number of brushstrokes which effectively depict unspeakable despair and alienation:

Who can express, or think any thing, how dreadful the thought of eternity is to them who are under so great torment! To what unfathomable depths of woe will it sink them! With what a gloom and blackness of darkness will it fill them! What a boundless gulf of sorrow and woe is the thought of eternity to the damned. (II. 822)

In the next few lines (this sermon is particularly long) several scriptural and logical arguments are put forth in support of the same point, so figurative language is momentarily, as it were, set aside by the preacher. However, it is taken up again with new impetus in the second head of the ‘application’ just after Edwards has begun to shift the pronouns from the third person plural to the second person:

And how amazing may it well be to *you*, when you consider how great that future misery is to which you are exposed and condemned, wherein God shows his wrath, and makes his power known in the destruction of the ungodly, in which *they* are vessels of wrath filled to the brim; and that *you* are in danger of being plunged in a bottomless gulf or deluge of wrath, where mighty waves and billows of wrath shall pass over you; and when *you* consider the torment of *your* body in that great furnace of fire... (II. 826, my italics)

With this rhetorical manipulation of perspective and by gradually replacing abstract, theological categories with vivid images of God's fierce anger, Edwards resumes the artistic task of painting a spiritual landscape where his audience can picture themselves.

Despite his reputation for being a relentless hellfire preacher, Edwards rarely preached a sermon about the torments of eternal condemnation without mentioning the delights and joys of salvation. "Natural Men in a Dreadful Condition" is not an exception. Having endeavored to convince his people of their depraved nature and of the eternal consequences it entails, now he wants to offer a glimpse of heaven. He does so by blending once again the natural and biblical images of light and water:

A converted state is not less happy than a natural condition is miserable and dreadful. You will be brought out of darkness into marvellous light. It will be like the dawning of the morning after a long night of darkness. It will be a joyful morning to you. The day-star will arise in your heart. Then will be given you the morning star [...] then will be opened to your view the glorious fountain of divine grace. (II. 827)

Edwards also invokes the messianic name given to Christ in Malachi 4, preceded by one of his own similes, to announce that there is still hope for the sinner: "You will come forth as from a dark dungeon, to see the glorious light of the Sun of Righteousness" (II. 827). This sermon was no doubt designed to stir up those whom the minister still considered to be "dull" and "stupid" with regard to the things of religion, and it was probably achieved in some measure. The predominant rhetorical mode is certainly negative, even offensive. However, the minister would not be satisfied with conversions based merely on fear of hell, so he finished his sermon on a positive note to make sure the Northampton congregation understood that "God is the fountain of spiritual light. He opens the eyes of the blind. He commands light to shine out of darkness. It is easy with God to *enlighten* the soul, and *fill* it with these glorious discoveries" (II. 829, my italics). And with these words still resounding, the Fall of 1734 arrived.

In November 1734, Edwards later wrote, his two lectures defending the Calvinistic doctrine of justification "seemed to be remarkably blessed" (*Five Discourses*, I. 620). A general concern for the spreading of Arminian heresy made the Northampton congregation pay close attention to their pastor's heavily doctrinal

message. But even in these lectures, towards the end of his exposition, we find that Edwards resorts to some of the above-mentioned images, reversing them to apply them to heaven and salvation: "The saints are as so many vessels of different sizes, cast into a sea of happiness, where every vessel is full" (I. 646). Or speaking about the act of faith, he says: "[E]mbracing Christ as a Saviour from sin implies the contrary act towards sin, viz. rejecting of sin: if we fly to the light to be delivered from darkness, the same act is contrary towards darkness, viz. a rejecting of it" (I. 648). On the 7th day of that same month, Edwards delivered a Thanksgiving sermon in which he further developed the fusion of light and water images, and which was probably more affecting to his hearers than the two doctrinally loaded lectures.

In this sermon¹⁴ there is an essential aspect of the Edwardsean vision of God that is particularly relevant to this present study. By magnifying and making much of God's sovereignty, glory and majesty (these were often expressed through light imagery), Edwards ran the risk of conveying the idea of a distant or static deity. A self-sufficient and supreme Being, as the God of the Puritans was, had to be presented as willing to save and to communicate with insignificant human beings. In order to achieve this, the "fountain" and "ocean" metaphors became as important for the artist as that of the "sun." The first 'proposition' of the sermon articulates the doctrine in rather abstract terms: "God himself enjoys infinite happiness and perfect bliss, and yet he is not inactive, but is himself in his own nature a perfect act" (II. 914). Heavenly happiness consists in God's communication of his holiness and the saints' and angels' active response to it; and the church must likewise respond in praise for the mercy and goodness bestowed on her.

Although in the second proposition Edwards is supposedly talking about saints in heaven (who have an "immediate vision of God"), he gradually manipulates the perspective of his speech to somehow include his congregation in the contemplation of this "glorious sight." He does it mainly through the gradual introduction and repetition of ambiguous terms (like "awaken" or "sense") and by changing pronouns and tenses at his convenience:

We cannot reasonably question but *they are* employed in contributing to each other's delight. *They shall* dwell together in society. [...] That *they see* God, sufficiently shows the reason why *they praise* him. [...] Such a glorious sight *will awaken* and rouse all the powers of the soul. (II. 914, my italics)

Herein we have a mere hint of what Edwards will continue to do in the next two paragraphs. At this point, however, he momentarily brings the listener back to the distinction of present and future, of heaven and earth:

¹⁴ Published as "Praise, one of the chief Employments of Heaven" in Hickman's edition (II. 913ff).

Now the saints see the glory of God but by a reflected light, as we in the night see the light of the sun reflected from the moon; but *in heaven they shall* directly behold the Sun of Righteousness, and shall look full upon him when shining in all his glory. [...] When *they* see the infinite grace of God, and see what a boundless ocean of mercy and love he is, how can *they* but celebrate that grace with the highest praise! (II. 914, my italics)

Curiously, in the next head there is a massing of images during which references to the future are gradually dropped and the word “sense” is repeated up to eight times:

They *will have* another sense of the greatness and manifoldness of the communications of his goodness to his creation in general. They will be more sensible how that God is the fountain of all good, the Father of lights. We do now but little consider, in comparison with what we should do, how full the world *is* of God’s goodness, and how it appears in the sun, moon, and stars, and in the earth and seas, with all their fullness [...] the *saints in heaven clearly see* [...] how the communications of his goodness are incessantly issuing from God as from an ever-flowing fountain, and are poured forth all around in vast profusion into every part of heaven and earth, as light is every moment diffused from the sun. (II. 914, my italics)

Apart from the highly suggestive effect Edwards achieves and the dynamic, all-encompassing image he constructs by blending the ‘sun’ and ‘fountain’ similes (which finally, as it were, explode and rush in all directions), it is worth noting that in the remaining heads of this section the first person plural pronoun is not used. Thus, the congregation are insistently being told, without any explicit reference to the future, that saints in heaven “have *another sense*”; it is no longer “we” but “saints on earth” who are compared with “saints in heaven” (II. 915), and God’s communications are not just those of his “holiness” in heaven but his “goodness” manifested “all around” the earth, “in his creation in general.” Although Edwards’ main message is that the church should praise God, it is as though he were commanding them: “See!,” “Get the sense of the heart you have heard me preach about so many times!”

The Northampton pastor, being convinced that spiritual sight would not be gained without struggle, directs the people to “repent of [their] sins” and to realize that they need “a work of conversion wrought in [them].” He exhorts them to “[l]abour after more and more of those principles from whence the praise of the saints in heaven doth arise. [...] Labour therefore that you, though you have not an immediate vision of God, as they have, may yet have a clear spiritual sight of him” (II. 917). Edwards’ own “labour” in warning about the horrors of hell and painting poignant pictures of heaven would produce a remarkable harvest which he reaped during the months following the delivery of this sermon. In February 1735 he would stand before his people, assuming the authority of John the Baptist, to

urge them to “press into the kingdom” and “take it by force.” And so they did, “in surprising numbers” (Lesser 16).

In “Pressing into the Kingdom” (*Five Discourses*, I. 654ff) Edwards brought together several of the rhetorical devices I have already analyzed. But most relevant to the tracing of his view of the revival and of his own historically transcendental role in it,¹⁵ is the way he established a parallelism between John the Baptist and himself. Moreover, he was bold enough to insinuate, as the reputable English minister Isaac Watts would do after reading Edwards’ own account of the revival,¹⁶ that the “outpouring of the Spirit of God” in Northampton was like the one “in the apostles’ days” (I. 660). Edwards’ increasing self-confidence and his growing interest in the universal, historical¹⁷ dimension of revivals brought him to the apex of his pulpit oratory.

The sermon starts with the usual exegetical introduction in which Edwards provides a contextual frame for understanding the verse (Luke 16:16). After quoting several passages from the gospels which define John the Baptist’s ministry, he begins to hoard light similes and develop the metaphor of the rising sun:

The old dispensation was abolished, and the new brought in by degrees; as the night gradually ceases, and gives place to the increasing day which succeeds in its room. First the day-star arises; next follows the light of the sun itself, but dimly reflected, in the dawning of the day; but this light increases, and shines more and more, and the stars that served for light during the foregoing night, gradually go out [...] till at length the sun rises and enlightens *the world* by his own direct light. (I. 654, my italics)

In the next head, following the idea of the whole world being flooded with the light of the gospel, he calls attention to the “universality” of the “awakening” that took place under John the Baptist’s ministry. Edwards subtly imposes his ‘revival terminology’ on the biblical narrative. For example, he talks about “an extraordinary pouring out of the Spirit of God” or “an uncommon awakening” taking place in John’s days. In his famous 1739 sermon series, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, he would use the same language even to refer to “the days of *Enos*” in Genesis 4, before the flood (I. 539).¹⁸ Thus, revival becomes universal in a twofold sense, namely, that it includes “every man” (I. 654) and it encompasses all of human history. World history is, as it were, the stage on which God’s redemptive action is performed and revivals are the determining acts of the play.

¹⁵ See n.6 above.

¹⁶ In a letter to Benjamin Colman in Boston (Goen 36).

¹⁷ On the spiritual significance of history for Edwards during this period and later on, see Stout, *Works* 4-6.

¹⁸ The ideas explored and developed in this sermon series became critical in Jonathan Edwards’ thought and theology. He was turning it into a theological treatise when he died in 1758.

Although light imagery is not used as much throughout the sermon as in setting the frame at the beginning, we find Edwards, yet again, reminding the church that they “live under the light of the gospel” (I. 655) and using one of his favorite similes to entreat them to “improve such an opportunity as this to get heaven, when heaven is brought so near, when the fountain is opened in the midst of us in so extraordinary a manner” (I. 659). While this positive and optimistic tone clearly predominates, there are also some severe warnings: “The vengeance of God will pursue, overtake and eternally destroy, them that are not in this kingdom. All that are without this enclosure will be swallowed up in an overflowing fiery deluge of wrath” (I. 656). Addressing the unconverted, Edwards cries out: “[H]ow dark then does it look upon you that remain stupidly unawakened! [...] How dark doth it look upon you, that God comes and knocks at so many persons’ doors, and misses yours!” (I. 662). Many different people-groups are specifically mentioned in the ‘application’: “sinners who are in a measure awakened” (I. 660); those who “remain unawakened” (I. 662); “them who are grown considerably into years” (I. 662); and finally “those that are young” (I. 663). Herein we can see Edwards’ effort to make the revival universal.

Regarding the predominantly optimistic ‘feel’ of the sermon, it should also be noted that while the preacher reminds Northamptonites that “God will act arbitrarily” by enlightening some and leaving others in darkness (I. 658), at the same time he seems to be confident that “hearkening to this counsel you will live” (I. 659). The way Edwards answers the hypothetical objection that “[w]e cannot do this of ourselves” is quite telling; he says: “Though earnestness of mind be not immediately in your power, yet the consideration of what has been now said of the need of it, may be a means of stirring you up to it” (I. 657). And, again, near the end of the sermon: “If you have a sense of your necessity of salvation, and the great worth and value of it, you will be willing to take the surest way to it [...] If you do so, it is not likely that you will fail; there is the greatest probability that you will succeed.” (I. 663). Such confident assertions regarding the possibility of rebirth ‘here and now’, on the basis of “what has been now said,” are quite unusual in Edwards’ sermons. His earnest pleadings, through threats and promises, were remarkably effective on this occasion and became a driving force for the revival. In this sense, Edwards’ preaching stands in a long line of traditional colonial rhetoric which, as Sacvan Bercovitch puts it, “inverts the doctrine of vengeance into a promise of ultimate success” (6, 7). According to Bercovitch, there was an implicit “unshakable optimism” (7) in this characteristically colonial mode of pulpit oratory. Without a doubt, Jonathan Edwards continued to be highly optimistic during the success of the next three months.

The spring of 1735 was, according to his own retrospective assessment, the climactic point of the awakening: “[T]he town seemed to be full of the presence of God: it never was so full of love, nor of joy, and yet so full of distress as it was then” (*Faithful Narrative*, I. 348). To the excitement caused by the great number

of conversions, Edwards added his thrilling eschatological view of history and revivals.¹⁹ There would be, he thought, an almost universal success of the gospel, a worldwide revival before Christ's second coming. When Edwards uses the language of "the kingdom," as in "Pressing into the Kingdom," it must be borne in mind that he may not just have heaven in view, but the millennium. His growing preoccupation with the millennium during this period of awakening is evident, for example, in a sermon preached in January where he says that the phrase "all flesh shall come" in Psalm 65:2 is a "prophecy of the glorious times of the gospel" (II. 113). His endeavors in disclosing this vision of consummation, along with all other circumstances, created an atmosphere of excitement and high expectations in Northampton. In two sermons preached in May,²⁰ Edwards entreated everyone to join him in looking ahead to these promises and tried to convince them of "the folly of looking back" to sin and earthly things after having begun this journey.

During this same period we find the finest examples of 'positive' light and water imagery as a consequence of Christ's love and mercy taking precedence over God's wrath and judgment. As light overcame darkness in the minds and hearts of the Northampton people, Edwards replaced the "sea" and "deluge" of wrath²¹ with the "ocean of mercy" and the "fountain of love." In April, he turned his own imagery upside down to make his people marvel at God's goodness towards them:

[The sins of men are] like huge mountains but such an ocean is the mercy of G. in Jesus X that the sins of m. are Lost in it they sink in it & are wholly swallowed up they become nothing in the midst of this Immense Ocean. they are wholly swallowed up & Lost as little motes are Lost and Cant be seen in the body of the sun [...] they are as it were swallowed up in the vast abundance of the suns Light. (L. 41v. 354)²²

All the language that had been employed to illustrate God's unavoidable and terrible punishment against sinners was now used to make sin disappear and to replace wrath with mercy. Light and water were the perfect combination for dissipating and

¹⁹ On Edwards' eschatology, its later developments and influence, and how it determined his view of revivals, see: Bercovitch 98-101; Stout, *New England Soul* 204-207; Wilson 81-94; Kidd 158,159; and Noll 106, 485 (n. 55).

²⁰ Published as "The Folly of Looking Back in Fleeing out of Sodom" in Hickman's edition (II. 64ff). This message was divided in two parts which were delivered on different (probably consecutive) occasions.

²¹ See p. 4 above.

²² This sermon and the one on Ephesians 5:25-27 are transcripts of Edwards' manuscripts and are cited by leaf number (L.), side of the manuscript leaf ("r" or "v" for recto and verso respectively), and sermon number, following the Jonathan Edwards Center citation guidelines (<<http://edwards.yale.edu/research/citation-guidelines>>; see also *Works of Jonathan Edwards Online* in 'WORKS CITED' below for full references). Abbreviations, capitalization and punctuation have not been changed (some exceptions in []), but most crossed-out words and phrases have been omitted.

dissolving any obstacle that might hinder the Christian's enjoyment of God. Another sermon that abundantly exploits these metaphors and brings light and water imagery to a climactic fusion is the one on Ephesians 5:25-27, preached in May 1735.

Expounding this well-known passage about Christ's love for the church, Edwards continues in his rather optimistic mood and makes God's blessing universally available by affirming that not only those who have been "subjects of a new birth" are loved, but also "many That are as yet in a natural condition" (L. 4r. 358). He also emphasizes that there are no class, geographical or denominational boundaries to this love:

Let em be where they will some of em may be Rich & some Poor. some are palaces & some are dunghills. some may be in one Country & some in another. be of G. of our Profession & some of another. Let em be never so much separated by distance of Place & modes of worship & Circumstantial differences on Relig. Yet they are all one [Church]. (L. 2v. 358)

Lest any of his hearers should think that God's love is bestowed only on the elect because of some intrinsic limitation or due to the abundance of human sin, he assures them that "[t]he Love of X is no finite fountain [...] 'tis an Inexhaustible fountain a boundless Ocean" (L. 8v. 358). That same ocean where, as he told them in April, their sins are "swallowed up & Lost." The sins of true believers are talked about in the past tense: "[There] were mountains & an ocean of wrath & a Great and hideous wide wildern. & Great darkness that made a Great and wide separation between X & the Chh," but Christ's love intervened so that "these obstacles might be Removed" (L. 15v. 358).

To ensure that none of his New England audience should flatter themselves that they are elect, Edwards points out that this 'removal' of their sin "is accomplished [...] in Conversion when the Elect are Converted"; a conversion in which they are "[c]alled out of dark[ness]" (L. 17r., 17v. 358). He is not willing to relieve this tension even as he illustrates the heavenly scene of uninterrupted communion with him "whose Heart is the fountain of all Love & Grace":

How dark & d have in this T X oftentimes hides his face from his saints & how distressing is that oftentimes to them[,] how do They Go mourning [...] how special is it to have the sun break out & shine down with his Pleasant smiling beams after he has been Long hid in a cloud. (L. 22v., 23v. 358)

Here Edwards seems to be alluding to the spiritual 'ups and downs' of some congregants during the preceding months. He may have been aware that their affections could hardly keep up with the enrapturing visions and compelling demands of his sermons. He conceded, with the apostle Paul, that while men were on earth

they saw “through a glass darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12), but still he strove to make heavenly reality tangible to the hearers’ senses:

They shall see not the sun of this visible T. but the bright sun of the Heavenly T. shining in full Glory ~~without~~ any Cloud Even to be with the sweet beams of his Grace & Love ~~& the Light~~ wi as their own Light and the fountain of Their blessedness without any Cloud beam to hide or darken. (L. 23v., 24r. 358)²³

Although this passage is somewhat obscure, it plainly shows Edwards’ predilection for this particular combination of images when it comes to portraying divine beauty, glory, and their communication to the believer.

Two basic ideas that run through this sermon are “union between X & the soul” of the believer and “Xs spiritual Presence” which proceeds from this union. After stressing the crucial Calvinistic doctrine that Christ did not set his love on the church because of her beauty but despite her being “naturally altogether filthy” (L. 29v. 358), there is a reference to the “Great Change there is made in the Town” since “Last winter.” They must continue to be humble and thankful, for it is not their “[l]abours” or the “skill of the minister” that have produced the revival but, rather, “Great Good Infinite blessings have been *showered* down” and

Here is the *Fountain* of it viz. the dying Love of Jesus[.] it all originally Comes out of the Heart of That Nazarene from whence issued those *streams* of blood on m[oun]t Calvary the *spring* of it is to be Looked for no where Else but here we have had many of the *streams* [...] the Heart of Jesus is an overflowing *fountain* of dying Love & thence Comes all that Grace[,] that spiritual Life & Comfort that of Late has so plentifully *Poured down* from Heaven. (L. 31r., 31v. 358; my italics)

Despite Edwards’ predilection for light imagery and ‘sun’ similes, there are instances like this one where the sense of comfort, life flowing and surrounding, closeness, “union” or “presence,” are much better expressed through water similes.

Finally, in order to keep a right balance between comfort and pressure, joy and distress, Edwards sets the universal frame for these events so that his people may take heed to their ways:

There is a Great deal of the Profession of Relig amongst us & is known Throughout The Land there is a Great Fame of our Relig we are a City set upon a hill [...] we shall ~~Probably~~ be much more narrowly watched & we must Expect that Little faults will be taken notice of [...] Let Every one take care of him. Especially & Labour that Xianity may shine on him so as That it may appear to him in its own Genuine Beauty & Lustre. (L. 33r., 33v., 34v. 358)

²³ Crossed-out words have been included and punctuation has not been added here due to the text’s obscure syntax.

The pastor's demands were now at their highest, as were his expectations. The tone of this sermon is overwhelmingly positive and optimistic and there are, once again, hints at the millennialist conception of the kingdom.²⁴ But could religious enthusiasm and concern spread still further? Could the excitement be maintained at such high levels? Edwards hoped so and his eschatology affirmed it, but decline was at hand.

While it is true, as was said above, that Edwards made the most of his people's anxieties to bring them to conversion and seriousness in religion, he also thought there was a "needless distress of thought" which Satan could take advantage of (*Faithful Narrative*, I. 351); this was the case with one of Northampton's congregations whose tragic suicide shocked the whole town. On the Sabbath morning of June 1st, Joseph Hawley cut his throat and died within half an hour.²⁵ For Edwards, this sad episode confirmed that the awakening really was a "work of God" and that Satan was understandably in "a great rage" against it (Marsden 164). Though this event is usually seen as marking the beginning of the revival's decline, Edwards later wrote that "[i]n the latter part of May it began to be very sensible that the Spirit of God was gradually withdrawing from us" (*Faithful Narrative*, I. 363). The revivalist's response to these first signs of declining spirituality in the town is reflected in two sermons from late May and June. Therein he insistently, even harshly, stressed God's all-sufficiency through the use of 'static' light images, while the more positive, 'dynamic' rhetorical mode he had employed in, say, the Ephesians 5:25-27 sermon, was completely given up. Likewise, Edwards seems to have responded from the pulpit to what he perceived as the people's "dullness" by returning to the kinds of illustrations of God's wrath he had largely used before the revival (as, for instance, in "Natural Men in a Dreadful Condition").²⁶

In "Wrath upon the Wicked to the Uttermost"²⁷ (based on 1 Thessalonians 2:16), men's sins are compared with "the raging waves of the sea" which God sets limits to. God's wrath is said to be manifested in the inward "afflictions" which the unrepentant sometimes experience as well as in outward "sore judgments" brought upon individuals and nations (II. 122, 123). Sinners after death are depicted as

²⁴ For example, speaking of the blessings that Christ is willing to bestow on the church, he says: "he will Give his Chh. a Kingd. & tis his own Kingd. that she may Reign with him" (L. 6v.).

²⁵ He was Edwards' own uncle. This episode and the subsequent waning of the revival are described in Marsden 163-169.

²⁶ M. X. Lesser notes that during the summer of 1735 Edwards concentrated on "the living Christ, his pledge of salvation, his love, excellency," etc., in an attempt to "quicken the work of redemption against the contagion of despair" (Lesser 19). I reckon, however, that Edwards' most immediate response to decline was relentless and somewhat harsh as shown in the following analysis. This response would have included at least two sermons: "Wrath upon the Wicked to the Uttermost," delivered in late May, and "Divine Sovereignty," which was preached in June, soon after the suicide episode.

²⁷ Preached in late May 1735 (II. 122ff).

“bound in chains of darkness” while awaiting the moment when “[t]he soul will be, as it were, utterly crushed; the wrath will be wholly intolerable. It must sink, and will utterly sink, and will have no more strength to keep itself from sinking” (II. 123). This hyperbolic gradation of the verb “sink” conveys the idea of not just ‘intense’ but ‘endless’ punishment. Most interestingly, the picture of blessings being “showered down” and life and comfort being “poured down” on his people (see p. 8 above) is inverted at the beginning of the ‘application’ in order to intensify the sense of God’s fierce anger: “It is like being in Sodom, with a dreadful *storm* of fire and brimstone hanging over it, just ready to break forth, and to be *poured down* upon it. The *clouds* of divine vengeance are full, and just ready to burst” (II. 123, my italics). Edwards reminds his hearers that lately “[t]he fountain hath been set open in an extraordinary manner” in Northampton but that if they “live under such light” and continue in sin they will “have no lot or portion” regarding the kingdom (II. 124). In order to persuade impenitent Northamptonites of the dreadfulness of God’s wrath he paints the most terrifying picture while assuring them that no matter how much they may be affected by this sight, real hell will be far worse:

Sometimes, when God only enlightens the conscience, to have some sense of his wrath, it causes the stout-hearted to cry out; nature is ready to sink under it, when indeed it is but a glimpse of divine wrath that is seen. [...] When a few drops or little sprinkling of wrath is so distressing and overbearing to the soul, how must it be when God opens the flood-gates, and lets the mighty deluge of his wrath come pouring down upon men’s guilty heads, and brings in all his waves and billows upon their souls! (II. 124)

As was shown above, Edwards’ growing interest in history (which was interpreted as the unfolding of God’s redemptive plan) is reflected in several features of his sermons. For example, though in this sermon he focuses mainly on Judgment Day, he does not want his people to forget or underestimate the importance of events happening around them: “Consider, you know not what wrath God may be about to execute upon wicked men *in this world* [...] The work which hath been lately wrought among us is no ordinary thing [...] and it is probable, that it is a forerunner of some very great revolution” (II. 124, my italics). Although expectations are raised, they are not predominantly optimistic or comforting as they had been, for instance, in February when Edwards explained that the kingdom had to come in “gradually,” as light gradually increases at dawn (see p. 6 above). This time, the watchman announced dreadful, imminent “calamities”; no soothing thoughts were to be entertained now; God would act arbitrarily and this uncertainty should make the people fear and tremble.

In expounding and applying 1 Thessalonians 2:16, despite the overwhelmingly negative tone of his admonitions, the pastor differentiated between God’s enemies, i.e. “natural men” (II. 123), and the “many” who had converted lately,

thus finding a “refuge” from wrath to come (II. 124, 125). However, in a sermon delivered the following month he would make his language ambiguous enough to let his reproof reach as many congregants as would hear it. God’s “holiness” and “sovereignty” were to be acknowledged and worshipped, but no promises of its being communicated were made this time.

As Norman Fiering has clearly explained (98-100), for Jonathan Edwards there was no contradiction between there being apparently fixed ‘laws’ in the way nature or human history worked and developed, and the existence of a God who ultimately acted arbitrarily. Nor did the fact that God acted in this way diminish his wisdom in everything he did. Moreover, just as creation and human history had begun by a supernatural, creative and arbitrary act of God, so it was to be expected that towards the consummation of history (the millennium, in Edwards’ scheme) there would be more direct divine manifestations. Bearing this in mind, it is somewhat easier to understand how Edwards could preach confidently about a God who was working in absolutely everything through divine providence and whose decrees were fixed from eternity, but at the same time was ready and willing to act imminently in extraordinary ways. For this reason, while in June 1735 he called the church to acknowledge God’s absolute sovereignty (describing it in the starkest terms) he still expected his hearers not to despair completely. Whether they could grasp this vision of God and be satisfied with it was quite a different matter.

The first striking thing about “Divine Sovereignty” (II. 107ff) is the potential there is in the passage Edwards was preaching from (Psalm 46) for developing some of his favorite images. Thus, in his brief exegetical introduction he points out that “[t]he church makes her boast of God, not only as being her help, [...] but also by supplying her, as a never-failing *river*, with *refreshment, comfort and joy*, in the times of public calamities. See ver. 4, 5. ‘There is a *river, the streams* whereof shall make glad the city of God’ (II. 107, my italics). He ends his introduction to the context of the main verse under consideration (v.10) by saying that in this psalm God “delivers the church” despite (or even through) “awful desolations” (II. 107). However, on this particular occasion, far from offering a comforting view of God’s deliverance or painting lively pictures of his “emanations” through the “river” and “streams” similes, Edwards is determined to apply the passage’s doctrine “*only* in a use of reproof” (II. 109, my italics).

Many people in the town, including those who had supposedly experienced the new birth, were probably so startled by an event like Joseph Hawley’s suicide that they found it difficult to believe that everything that came to pass was strictly God’s will. If such doubts could be harbored in people’s minds, their minister would consider many of his teaching efforts to have been in vain. In order to convince his hearers that even this tragic event is within God’s control, he describes a ‘divine light’ that, instead of being “diffused” everywhere as in the Thanksgiving sermon preached the previous Fall (see p. 5 above), is hidden from their sight.

In his ontological defense of the doctrine that “God is God,” Edwards uses more logical argumentation than imagery: “Being thus infinite in understanding and power, he must also be perfectly holy; for unholiness always argues some defect, some blindness. Where there is no darkness or delusion, there can be no unholiness. It is impossible that wickedness should consist with infinite light” (II. 107, 108). To back up this cold, ‘static’ portrait of the deity, two biblical ideas are repeatedly used throughout the sermon, namely, that God dwells “in thick darkness” (1 Kings: 8:12) and also “in light to which no man can approach” (1 Timothy 6:16). This picture is insisted on not so much to present a deterministic God as to stress the unpredictability of his actions or “dispensations.” Northamptonites must ultimately acknowledge these to be “mysterious” (II. 108) and “be still,” as the psalm says (v.10). As we shall see, there is some ambiguity as to whom Edwards is addressing in the ‘application’ of this sermon. Curiously, although God’s anger and displeasure are being expressed, there are no water images to, as it were, “dynamize” the static deity that dwells in distant “thick darkness.” Moreover, the idea that God is under no obligation to bestow grace on sinners or to answer when they call on him is stressed and affirmed numerous times (II. 109, 110).

The contrast between the applications of “Divine Sovereignty” and that of “Pressing into the Kingdom” is remarkable as regards the number of people-groups explicitly addressed and the way each one is exhorted. Whereas in the latter Edwards mentioned different groups separately, attempting to make his awakening as universal as that of John the Baptist, and boldly assured them that “hearkening to this counsel” they would live (see p. 6 above), here he simply reproves the congregation with a general second person address. Although he begins by saying he is speaking “to such under convictions of sin, and fears of hell, but [who] oppose the sovereignty of God” (II. 109), it gradually becomes clear that he means to rebuke the church as a whole. First, there seems to be a specific reference to a sermon preached in May²⁸ which had probably caused some dissension²⁹ among church members: “It is from little thoughts of God, that you quarrel against his justice in the condemnation of sinners” (II. 109). Then, he mentions those who “trust in [their] own righteousness” (II. 110), probably with certain congregants in mind who were not publicly recognized as ‘sinners.’ Lastly, there is the mere fact that there are no references to hearers who might accept God’s sovereignty (surely there were many), nor is there any assurance that God will hear the “cries” of those who seek him (II. 110). The tone and content of the application indicate that the sermon is designed to shut people’s mouths with regard to a doctrinal dispute

²⁸ Published as “The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners” in Hickman’s edition (*Five Discourses*, I. 668ff).

²⁹ Ola Elisabeth Winslow explains that there had been, since the early stages of the revival, some opposition to the strict Calvinistic concept of justification and of God’s sovereignty and justice: “Tension [over these doctrinal issues] had supplied a favorable background for emotional excitements of the revival sort” (160, 161).

rather than to deal with forsaking sins or being born again. This is not to say that doctrine and Christian praxis were completely separate categories in Edwards' mind. On the contrary, he probably considered that the decline he perceived in spiritual excitement and religious zeal was caused, at least in some measure, by weak and wavering doctrinal convictions.

Thus, by the end of the spring of 1735, the "fountain of spiritual light" seems to have been rhetorically stopped from yielding any refreshing or enlightening 'divine communications.' With the apparent return of the Northampton congregation to their "old ways," came also their minister's reproof and a return to negative light and water imagery. Those who listened to "Divine Sovereignty" were denied any lively pictures of blessings being "poured down" or even offered to them. In "Wrath upon the Wicked to the Uttermost," the hope of an approaching "great revolution" in the Christian world was mixed with the ominous images of God's "mighty deluge of wrath" which had filled the meetinghouse in August 1734.

During the years between this local revival and the Great Awakening of the 1740s, Edwards would continue to experiment with light and water images, finally coming up with a masterful picture of heaven that has been said to be "worthy of comparison" (Kimmach 220) with that of hell in "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." In 1738, as he concluded a long series of lectures on 1 Corinthians 13, Jonathan Edwards turned his eyes away from earthly concerns, personal disappointment and even millennial hopes, to explain that "heaven is a world of love":

That world is perfectly bright without any darkness, perfectly clear without spot. [...] That Son of God who is the brightness of his Father's glory appears there in his glory [...] There the Holy Spirit shall be poured forth with perfect sweetness, as a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal [...]

Love is in God as light is in the sun, which does not shine by a reflected light as the moon and planets do; but by his own light, and as the fountain of light. And love flows out from him towards all the inhabitants of heaven. (Ramsey: 371, 373)

Although tradition has handed down the picture of a gloomy Puritan preacher, mainly concerned about people's sins and their punishment in hell, it would seem that the Northampton pastor's mind was more often engaged in thoughts about God's love and glory such as these.

The 1740s witnessed a "notable decline in sermon composition" as Edwards engaged in bitter disputes over the awakening with Charles Chauncy in Boston and over admission to communion with his own people at Northampton. His tendency to "preach treatises from the pulpit" increased and sermons gradually became a secondary part of his literary activity (Kimmach 73, 105). However, the biblical and natural images of light and water were never exhausted for Edwards, and so we find him recurrently resorting to them in some of his thoroughly theological

treatises.³⁰ The essence and communication of an overflowing divine love and of the deity's shining glory could not be appropriately described in merely abstract or philosophical terms and categories. Something more tangible and aesthetically compelling was required in order to commend God's infinite goodness and his willingness to bestow it on his creatures. It was these attributes of God, rather than a particular eschatological scheme or his own success in ministry, that caused Jonathan Edwards to remain confident and optimistic about revival and the consummation of world history.

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³⁰ For example, both images are combined to describe the abiding spiritual principles that lead true Christians to produce lasting fruits of love in *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (I. 265); or to describe God's communication of his glory and goodness to his creatures, in his late treatise *The End for which God Created the World* (I. 117, 118).

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