

## THE IDEOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF AN ANGRY GOD

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God seems now to be hastily gathering in his elect in all parts of the land; and probably the bigger part of adult persons that ever shall be saved, will be brought in now in a little time, and that will be as it was on that great outpouring of the Spirit upon the Jews in the apostles' days, the election will obtain, and the rest will be blinded.

Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, 1741

'Tis not unlikely that this work of God's Spirit, that is so extraordinary and wonderful, is the dawning, or at least a prelude, of that glorious work of God, so often foretold in Scripture, which in the progress and issue of it, shall renew the world of mankind.

Edwards, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*, 1742

The anniversary of Jonathan Edwards's birth in 2003 offered an appropriate occasion to examine the ideological context of his most famous sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, preached at Enfield on July 18, 1741, at the peak of the Great Awakening.<sup>1</sup> No single utterance in American religious history caused such great fear and trembling and none captured the imagination of so many generations as this sermon. The reason is not hard to find. Through a series of horrifying images and terrible visions regarding the miserable condition of sinners, Edwards depicted their existential state as dangling over "the pit of hell." The "wrath of God burns against them, their damnation don't slumber, the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready, the furnace is now hot, ready to receive them, the flames do now rage and glow . . . and the pit hath opened her mouth under them." The life of an un-

<sup>1</sup>The bibliography on this sermon is vast. A few of the more important discussions are: Edwin H. Cady, "The Artistry of Jonathan Edwards," *New England Quarterly* 22 (March 1949): 61–72; J. A. Leo Lemay, "Rhetorical Strategies in *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* and Narrative of the Late Massacres in Lancaster County," in *Benjamin Franklin, Jonathan Edwards, and the Representation of American Culture*, eds. Barbara B. Oberg and Harry S. Stout (New York, Oxford University Press, 1993), 186–203; Wilson H. Kinnach, "The Brazen Trumpet: Jonathan Edwards's Conception of the Sermon," in *Jonathan Edwards: His Life and Influence*, ed. Charles Angoff (Rutherford, N. J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1975), 29–44; Ross J. Pudaloff, "'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God': The Socio-Economic and Intellectual Matrices for Edwards' Sermon," *Mosaic* 16 (Summer 1983): 45–64; Edward J. Gallagher, "'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God': Some Unfinished Business," *New England Quarterly* 73 (June 2000): 202–21; and Christopher Lukasik, "Feeling the Force of Certainty: The Divine Science, Newtonianism, and Jonathan Edwards's 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God'," *New England Quarterly* 73 (June 2000): 222–45.

converted person is like that of a small, helpless spider hanging with all the power of his weak muscles to a tiny cord over a consuming fire while God makes ready to unleash his terrible wrath. Since their condition depends on the arbitrary, sovereign will of an angry God, sinners are constantly under threat of facing "the fierceness" of God's "wrath." They have no alternative but to await "the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God," or "hell's wide gaping mouth open." In this miserable situation, their fate is totally dependent on the arbitrary, fearsome will of an angry God: "The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect," Edwards exhorted the Enfield congregation, "abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy nothing else, but to be cast into the fire."<sup>2</sup>

This sermon is probably the most famous one in the corpus of Jonathan Edwards's writings. The personal tone only enhances its great emotional power: "O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: 'tis a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God . . . you hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it."<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, when it was first preached, this "most Terrible sermon," admitted one listener at the Enfield church, caused "a great moaning & crying out through ye whole House."<sup>4</sup> The passage of time has not diminished the great emotional impact of this text. On the contrary, since the sermon was first delivered at Enfield, it "deserves to be the hallmark it has become in American religious history."<sup>5</sup> Even today, students of American history to feel a certain empathy with the awe and fear that seized its first listeners.

Yet if the deep emotional impact of the sermon is recognized everywhere, not so its ideological context. Surprisingly enough, the eschatological dimension of *Sinners* and the apocalyptic context within which the sermon was constructed have not received due attention. But the text cannot be understood without the specific ideological context of the Great Awakening, and Edwards's apocalyptic and eschatological interpretation of the great revival of religion that took place in New England during the early 1740s. The main theme, the imminent approach of God's impending judgment on those who refuse to acknowledge and receive his gospel of salvation, calls for a discussion of the philosophy and theology of history underlying it.<sup>6</sup> Edwards's main goal in this sermon was to establish a firm connection between the impending apocalypse of divine judgment and the human existential condition. In "a day wherein Christ has flung the door of mercy wide open, and

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<sup>2</sup>Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, in *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader*, eds. Wilson H. Kimnach, et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 57, 51, 52, 55, 57.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>4</sup>Stephen Williams as cited by Ola E. Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards, 1703–1758: A Biography* (New York: Macmillan, 1940), 192.

<sup>5</sup>Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards*, 193.

<sup>6</sup>For an analysis of Edwards's teleological theology of history, see Avihu Zakai, *Jonathan Edwards's Philosophy of History: The Re-Enchantment of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

stands in the door calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners . . . How awful is it to be left behind at such a day!" and not be included in "the Kingdom of God." Those that "are not to this day born again" and are "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel," are "going down to hell" and should be counted as "the children of the devil."<sup>7</sup>

Apocalyptic visions and eschatological expectations pervade *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. Edwards believed that at the "great moment of the pouring out of the Spirit," when the Deity so vividly presents the climax of the work of redemption upon the stage of history, and when "God seems now to be hastily gathering his elect,"<sup>8</sup> the destiny of human beings was inextricable from the course of salvation history. At the time "when God manifests himself in such a great work for his church, there is no such thing as being neutrals; there is a necessity of being either for or against the king that then gloriously appears."<sup>9</sup> Salvation is inseparable from a true knowledge of divine activity in history, and vice versa. In what follows I propose to analyze the grand teleological theology of history behind this sermon, and to show that to grasp the miserable fate of sinners depicted in it, Edwards's interpretation of salvation history as reaching a climax with the great New England revival must be taken into account.

Few philosophers of history can boast that the views they develop in their private studies actually materialize in history during their lifetime, or that the passage of time testifies to their historical prognosis. Edwards is clearly one of them. In the interpretation of history he developed in the series of sermons *History of the Work of Redemption*, 1739, he foresaw the Great Awakening of 1740–43. Believing God to be the sole author and lord of history, and maintaining that divine activity is not blind to the process of history nor alienated from the fate of the human beings within it, he argued that God works continuously throughout history to advance his "work of redemption," which constitutes "the end and drift of all Gods works & dispensations from the beginning & even the end of the work of creation it self."<sup>10</sup> He calculated that before the millennium and the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God, redemptive activity would culminate in another impressive dispensation whereby the "Spirit shall be gloriously poured out for the wonderful revival and propagation of religion." So it was in the past, "and so it is foretold it will be at the great pourings out of the Spirit of God in the latter days."<sup>11</sup> This will be "the last and greatest outpouring of the Spirit," the penultimate event

<sup>7</sup>Edwards, *Sinners*, 63–64.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>9</sup>Edwards, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England*, 1742, in *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 4, *The Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 349.

<sup>10</sup>Edwards, *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 9, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, ed. John F. Wilson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 118–19; Miscellany # 702 (c. 1736) in *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 18, *The "Miscellanies": Entry Nos. 501–832*, ed. Ava Chamberlain (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 284.

<sup>11</sup>Edwards, *History of the Work of Redemption*, 460, 142.

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in salvation history preceding the millennium and the transformation of the world into the kingdom of God. Being the last effusion of the Spirit, it would inaugurate "the glory of the approaching happy state of the church" and its "most glorious and perfect state" on "earth."<sup>12</sup> As the final "great work" of the Spirit, such a glorious act "shall be accomplished, not by the authority of princes, nor by the wisdom of learned men, but by God's Holy Spirit." Instead of a magisterial reformation coming from above, as in the Protestant Reformation in Germany and in sixteenth-century England, the last remarkable revival in history would take place when the Holy Spirit "shall bring great multitudes" to be "glorious instruments of carrying on" the work of redemption.<sup>13</sup>

This historical prognosis was put to the test almost immediately. Indeed, within a year after the 1739 sermons the Great Awakening suddenly erupted in New England. Historical events thus testified to and affirmed Edwards's historical prediction: once again God was advancing his work of redemption through the close and essential convergence between divine dispensation and revival. Here was the main source for the great enthusiasm with which Edwards greeted the Awakening and his unremitting zeal in defending it.

In 1739 Edwards argued that the "Work of Redemption" was carried out "by many successive works and dispensations of God" which inaugurate remarkable periods of revivals, or "special seasons of mercy."<sup>14</sup> On the basis of this theological teleology of history he was now more than ready to welcome the Great Awakening, claiming that it heralded, along with other revivals taking place in the Protestant world during that time, as in Germany and Scotland,<sup>15</sup> "the commencement of that last and greatest outpouring of the Spirit of God, that is to be in the latter ages of the world."<sup>16</sup> Being the penultimate stage in providential history, the revival signified a special realized, fulfilled time—*kairos*—an epoch in salvation history in which the eternal judges and transforms the temporal. Hence his belief that the New England revival initiated a decisive apocalyptic and eschatological moment in salvation history as a whole: "Now [that] Christ is come down from heaven into this land, in a remarkable and wonderful work of his Spirit, it becomes" necessary for "all his professed disciples to acknowledge him, and give him honor."<sup>17</sup> God's present dispensation thus transformed the realm of history into a grand apocalypse—a special space of time within which the Deity revealed the advance of his redemptive plan. Likewise, believing the Awakening to open a new period in the realization of sacred, prophetic revelations, Edwards conceived

of it as an eschatological event announcing the final epoch in the drama of salvation and redemption: the New England revival, as part of the great eighteenth-century Protestant evangelical awakening, "is the dawning, or at least a prelude, to that glorious work of God," which "shall renew the world of mankind."<sup>18</sup> Edwards's apocalyptic visions and eschatological expectations now reached a zenith: "Neither earth or hell can hinder" God's "work that is going in the country," he proclaimed. Since "Christ gloriously triumphs at this day," all should "give glory to him who thus rides forth in the chariots of his salvation."<sup>19</sup> The Awakening signaled the penultimate stage in God's historical scheme of redemption; it was the realization of a divine plan that constituted the core of history, as well as its goal.

It is well known that Edwards hailed the Great Awakening from the very beginning, working enthusiastically to advance the cause and defending it zealously against all adversaries. What is less known, however, is how his undertaking was grounded in the premises of the redemptive mode of historical thought—the doctrine that the process of history depends exclusively on God's redemptive activity in time and not on human power and autonomy—which he had developed in his 1739 sermons, or to what an extent his philosophy of history determined his rhetoric during the Great Awakening. The apocalyptic view of the Awakening makes it a great revelatory sign in God's plan of redemption; its eschatology denotes the belief that this event would mark a decisive stage in the realization of prophetic revelations regarding the end of time and history, such as Christ's second coming, the approach of the millennium, and the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God. All this is clearly described in *Sinners*, as well as in other writings pertaining to the revival, such as *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. These works present Edwards's conclusion that the goal of the divine dispensation in the Awakening was not only merely the conversion and salvation of the fallen American colonists, but ultimately the redemption of history as a whole. The spiritual regeneration of local individuals was thus inextricable from the larger issue of redeeming time itself. This is the ideological and theological context behind much of Edwards's rhetoric of history during the Awakening, leading him to envision the New England revival in glorious terms, as "the glory of the approaching happy state of the church" on earth.<sup>20</sup> Edwards's famous "hell-fire" sermon should be examined within this broad apocalyptic and eschatological context.

From the beginning of the Great Awakening in 1740 Edwards believed it to be "the dawning of a day of God's mighty power and glorious grace to the world of

4 <sup>12</sup>Edwards, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*, 1741, in Goen, ed., *The Great Awakening*, 230, 280–81.

<sup>13</sup>Edwards, *History of the Work of Redemption*, 460.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 121, 511, 143.

<sup>15</sup>See, for example, Edwards's letter "To The Reverend William McCulloch," 12 May 1743, in *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 16, *Letters and Personal Writings*, ed. George S. Claghorn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 106, and in the same volume Edwards's letter "To the Reverend James Robe," 12 May 1743, 108–10.

<sup>16</sup>Edwards, *Distinguishing Marks*, 230.

<sup>18</sup>Edwards, *Some Thoughts*, 353. The eighteenth century Protestant Evangelical awakening is described, among others, in W. R. Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), and Michael J. Crawford, *Seasons of Grace: Colonial New England's Revival Tradition in Its British Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>19</sup>Edwards, "To the Rev. Joseph Bellamy," 21 January 1741–2, in *Letters and Personal Writings*, 99.

<sup>20</sup>Edwards, *Distinguishing Marks*, 280.

mankind."<sup>21</sup> To his redemptive mode of thought, it represented another "remarkable and wonderful dispensation of God's mercy"<sup>22</sup> in history. He therefore gathered all his powers to advance the cause and thus assist God "till he establish and till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth."<sup>23</sup> The present dispensation denoted a time of ultimate necessity, especially on the part of sinners and unconverted people; their conversion was a prerequisite for accomplishing the work of redemption. With the drama of salvation and redemption reaching a culmination, the private, existential dimension of conversion became inextricable from the general, external one of salvation history.

A profound sense of the historical urgency of repentance runs through *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. Historical interpretation is indeed only implicit in this sermon, situated in the background, yet constituting an important source for the apocalyptic scenario it presents, and establishing the basis for the vision of the sinners' awful fate. Edwards strongly believed that the time had come for God to unleash his wrath on those opposing the work of redemption. Historical transformation was leading to an existential choice. The sermon is thus permeated with a powerful sense of time and a vision of history: "The wrath of almighty God is now undoubtedly hanging over great part of this congregation." In this eschatological moment inaugurated by the Great Awakening, Edwards pleaded with his audience at Enfield: "let everyone fly out of Sodom."<sup>24</sup> The current divine dispensation revealed the culmination of salvation history and determined human beings' fate within it: their existential condition is inextricable from the unfolding revelation of God's work of redemption.

For a long time this sermon was commonly referred to as a "hell-fire" sermon. Yet, as every attentive reader would admit, "it is actually focused on this life rather than the afterlife in hell. As such, it is more aptly called an eschatological sermon—one depicting the inevitability—and the temporal unpredictability—of death and judgment."<sup>25</sup> The eschatological dimension does not apply solely to the human existential condition, but to the historical process as a whole. In fact, it was this sense of time, the apocalypse and eschatology of God's work of redemption as it begins to unfold, that bestowed on the sermon its awe-inspiring character. In a time of divine dispensation, each individual faces an urgent existential choice regarding his spiritual welfare. His portion in the culminating drama of salvation can not be separated from God's overall historical scheme of redemption, since the necessity of conversion is determined by the sheer magnitude of God's dispensation. Edwards does not deal only with personal, individual conversion; he does not merely describe the terrible fate of sinners facing God's wrath. The human condition and the fate of the individual can not be separated from the historical process in which they are set.

<sup>21</sup>Edwards, "To the Rev. George Whitefield," in *Letters and Personal Writings*, 80.

<sup>22</sup>Edwards, *Sinners*, 64.

<sup>23</sup>Edwards, "To the Rev. Eleazar Wheelock," 9 Oct. 1740, in *Letters and Personal Writings*, 85.

<sup>24</sup>Edwards, *Sinners*, 65.

<sup>25</sup>Wilson H. Kimnach, et al., "Introduction," in *Sermons of Jonathan Edwards*, xvii–xviii,

Edwards's historical consciousness led to the composition of this "eschatological sermon" and determined its form and content. Dreadful visions of individual ultimate fates abound. Threats of "the vengeance of God on the wicked," and the judgment about to fall on sinners and unbelievers, fill the text, as well as visions of the imminent "destruction" promised to "every unconverted man" who "properly belonged to hell" while living on earth. What is most evident is God's unmitigated wrath against those who frustrate the accomplishment of the work of redemption: "Those that are not to this day born again," are "alien from the commonwealth of Israel" and could expect nothing in the impending "day of wrath." "Divine justice" indeed always calls "aloud for an infinite punishment." But during the present remarkable dispensation, the fate of those who do not undergo conversion, and thus refuse to respond to God's call is the more frightening because they obstruct the whole course of salvation history. In a time of great historical urgency, when Christ "stands in the door," there is no choice but to advance the cause of redemption or to join Satan and his minions: "every unconverted man properly belongs to hell; that is his place; from thence he is." Since salvation history is reaching a climax, God's anger against those "miserable creatures that he is now tormenting" in Hell is manifested on the face of the earth: "Yea, God is a great deal more angry with great numbers that are on earth, yea, doubtless with many that are now in this congregation."<sup>26</sup>

An extraordinary historical situation demands the use of exceptional means on the part of God. Two months later Edwards declared, in his commencement address at Yale in September 1741, "It may be reasonably expected that the extraordinary manner of the work then, will bear some proportion to the very extraordinary events."<sup>27</sup> As he had said in *Sinners*, this included, among others, bringing the images of God-inflicted torment from the hidden space of hell into broad daylight on earth, to serve as a warning. Usually limited to the abysses of the afterlife or the underworld, the dreadful visions of God's judgment surfaced in all their sound and fury upon the stage of history:

The wrath of God burns against them, their damnation don't slumber, the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready, the furnace is now hot, ready to receive them, the flames do now rage and glow. The glittering sword is whet, and held over them, and the pit hath opened her mouth under them.

"Unconverted men" therefore "walk over the pit of hell" while alive.<sup>28</sup> As opponents of God at the time of his great dispensation, their sufferings resemble these of hell; therefore hell is their portion in this life as well as in the afterlife. So far God has reserved his most fearful punishments for Hell, hidden away from the sight of living people. But with the culmination of the drama of salvation and redemption, he presents "the fierceness of his wrath" within the confines of history itself:

O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: 'tis great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose

<sup>26</sup>Edwards, *Sinners*, 51, 63.

<sup>27</sup>Edwards, *Distinguishing Marks*, 230

<sup>28</sup>Edwards, *Sinners*, 51, 53.

wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you as against many of the damned in hell.<sup>29</sup>

With such vivid and fearful images, Edwards fixed the presence of hell in his listeners' consciousness. This is why *Sinners* has been called "one of the most affecting sermons ever preached in the English language."<sup>30</sup> Edwards seemed to release Dante's *Inferno* from the underworld and place it within the historical process, an awful vision to warn all who could not see the great urgency of advancing God's work of redemption. History, in other words, would be an inferno for those who did not understand the apocalypse and eschatology of the Great Awakening.

The sermon presents the content and form of Edwards's historical consciousness. Since the revival is transforming history into the dimension of realized eschatology, human fate is seen as inextricable from God's work of redemption unfolding within history. The salvation of individuals necessarily converges with the redemption of history. The individual's existential condition is posited in a radical dichotomy, placed between the gates of heaven and hell, while history is a redemptive journey from "Sodom" to Jerusalem. Situated between judgment and redemption, destruction and salvation, the fate of human beings is intertwined with the sacred historical framework within which their lives are set. Hence the urgency of the conversion demanded of sinners during the revival. In his sermon *God Glorified in the Work of Redemption*, 1731, Edwards had called conversion "a more glorious work of power than mere creation, or raising dead body to life," and thus "the work of conversion, is a far greater, and more glorious effect, than mere being and life."<sup>31</sup> Ten years later that spiritual experience was integrated into the larger historical scheme of God's work of redemption. As Edwards's historical consciousness developed, conversion became inextricable from the redemption of history itself, which constituted the core of divine activity in time. The dimension of history thus became essential to the realization of the work of redemption.

8 The Awakening inaugurated a new stage in the drama of salvation, making conversion an essential part of providential history. Edwards's close association between history and conversion reinforced his argument that the present dispensation offered "an extraordinary opportunity" to the unconverted, "a day wherein Christ has flung the door of mercy wide open, and stands in the door calling and crying with a loud voice the poor sinners." Crucial historical circumstances determine urgent personal choices. Sinners especially ought to "wake thoroughly out of sleep," or be "born again," and thus be included within "the commonwealth of Israel."<sup>32</sup> On "a day wherein many are flocking to him, and pressing into the kingdom of God," he warned, how "awful is it to be left behind." The revival thus marked a time of special urgency because it constituted a crucial stage in the history of God's work of redemption. To emphasize this point, Edwards turned to

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 58–59.

<sup>30</sup>Kinmach, et al., "Introduction," xxx.

<sup>31</sup>Edwards, *God Glorified in the Work of Redemption*, in *Sermons of Jonathan Edwards*, 72.

<sup>32</sup>Edwards, *Sinners*, 63, 44.

past history: "God seems now to be hastily gathering in his elect in all parts of the land; and probably the bigger part of adult persons that ever shall be saved, will be brought in now in a little time, and that will be as it was on that great outpouring of the Spirit upon the Jews in the apostles' days, the election will obtain, and the rest will be blinded."<sup>33</sup> Theological considerations, to quote William James, deal "with personal destinies and thus in contact with the only absolute realities which we know, must necessarily play an eternal part in human history."<sup>34</sup> Edwards's hope in proposing the historical context for the revival was that sinners might be persuaded to embrace their destiny in salvation history if they understand the sacred historical moment.

The comparison between "apostles' days" and the New England revival exemplifies Edwards's endeavor to justify the Awakening in historical terms. Analogy constituted a leading strategy in his attempt to furnish historical justification for the revival in other works as well, such as *The Distinguishing Marks* of 1741 and *Some Thoughts* of 1742. Based on his redemptive mode of historical thought, Edwards did not hesitate to compare the New England revival with God's dispensation during the time of the apostles. That remarkable dispensation required not only conversion but illuminated the whole process of salvation history. Hence, as in early times, the present dispensation revealed God's decree of salvation and damnation: in the effusion of the Spirit "the election will obtain, and the rest will be blinded." And if "this should be the case with you," Edwards warned his audience, "you will eternally curse this day."<sup>35</sup>

To advance the revival's cause, Edwards used another powerful eschatological vision from Scripture. Arguing for the necessity of conversion, he paraphrased the passage in Matthew 3:10 where John the Baptist proclaimed that the time had come and the kingdom of heaven was at hand: "the ax is in extraordinary manner laid at the root of the trees, that every tree that brings forth no good fruit, may be hewn down, and cast into fire."<sup>36</sup> Without conversion there is no redemption, and without redemption no history. A moment of great proportions in salvation history was denoted by Sodom, a time of imminent divine judgment and destruction, but also of possible hope and deliverance. Only by escaping this sinful city could God's people have embarked on the road to the New Jerusalem, and thus continued to advance God's plan of redemption.

*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* shows the importance Edwards attached to historical thought, and how historical reasoning became part of his justification of the revival. He indeed dwelt at length on the existential condition of sinners, yet behind their dreadful portion stood a singular interpretation of history. Those who frustrate the historical work of redemption cannot but expect God's terrible wrath. With the advance of the Awakening Edwards turned more and more to history to explain the revival's significance within the annals of holiness and salvation. The New England event demanded an historical justification, which Edwards was well

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 503.

<sup>35</sup>Edwards, *Sinners*, 64.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

equipped to supply through his redemptive mode of historical thought. The historical turn in his mind was more and more apparent as the revival spread, becoming more explicit in his Yale address, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*, and reaching a climax with *Some Thoughts concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England*.

To assess the meaning and significance of *Sinners*, it is useful to analyze it in the context of Edwards's other works pertaining to the Awakening. The same apocalyptic and eschatological thought evidently pervaded his whole justification of the revival. On September 10, 1741, two months after preaching at Enfield, Edwards stood before the faculty and students of Yale College who gathered, "along with an auspicious company of 'ministers and other gentlemen,' to hear the commencement address." That occasion was much weightier and more dignified than the one at Enfield, and Edwards must have calculated his message very carefully. Simply put, his goal in *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* was "disarming those who would discredit the revival on the basis of its epiphenomena."<sup>37</sup> He pleaded with his audience that the revival should not "be judged by any effects on the bodies of men; such as tears, trembling, groans, loud outcries, agonies of bodies, or the failing of bodily strength."<sup>38</sup> These are only the peripheral and marginal manifestations which have always accompanied a remarkable effusion of the Spirit, attested throughout salvation history, as during the Protestant Reformation or the Puritan Revolution.<sup>39</sup> Yet behind the extravagant and bizarre behavior of some people lay something more profound which should be understood in terms of God's general historical scheme of redemption, or more particularly according to the extraordinary working of the power of the Spirit.

Seeking to mitigate the rising doubts and the criticism levied against the revival because of the increasingly odd behavior and unrestrained enthusiasm of some converts, Edwards told his audience that "at the commencement of that last and the greatest outpouring of the Spirit of God, that is to be in the latter ages of the world, the manner of the work will be very extraordinary, and such as never has yet been seen."<sup>40</sup> The historical scheme of the work of redemption determined the magnitude of the revival, and the extravagant actions of some participants should be judged in light of its being the last great effusion of the Spirit. The "extraordinary" aspect of the effusion of the Spirit, even historical necessity, would account for the enthusiasm which always tended to accompany important revivals. Apart from offering scriptural evidence that the revival was an authentic work of God, Edwards further developed his rhetoric of history, placing the historical source of the revival within the general framework of God's work of redemption. Historical considerations thus became an essential part of his defense of the Awakening.

<sup>37</sup>Goen, "Introduction," in Goen, ed., *The Great Awakening*, 52–53.

<sup>38</sup>Edwards, *Distinguishing Marks*, 230.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 245–46.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 230.

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Having assigned the Holy Spirit the leading role in the rise and spread of revivals, Edwards now drew a comparison between the New England revival and the effusion of the Spirit in the age of the apostles. Already in *Sinners* he had made the analogy between the present dispensation and the "outpouring of the Spirit upon the Jews in the apostles' days."<sup>41</sup> Now he made this argument the cornerstone of his speech at Yale. In the Enfield sermon the historical comparison was mentioned only in passing, but here it came to the foreground of the address. Critics of the Awakening, Edwards said, should take notice that the power of the Spirit evident in the present dispensation resembled the great dispensation

in the age in which the apostles lived and preached the Gospel, . . . an age of the greatest outpouring of the Spirit of God that ever was; and that both as to the extraordinary influences and gifts of the Spirit, in inspiration and miracles, and also as to his ordinary operations, in convincing, converting, enlightening and sanctifying the souls.<sup>42</sup>

Responding to critics of the revival who were alarmed by the enthusiasm apparent in the strange actions of some of its adherents, Edwards claimed it is "not reasonable to determine that a work is not the work of God's Spirit, because of the extraordinary degree in which the minds of persons are influenced and wrought upon." Against the claims that the New England revival was not evidence of the Spirit because of its being "very unusual and extraordinary" in character, Edwards reminded his audience that if the work of the Spirit in the Awakening is "very unusual, then it always was so, and was so in the apostles' days." In fact, in those early times "never were there seen before such mighty and wonderful effects of the Spirit of God, in such sudden changes, and such great engagedness and zeal in such multitudes, such a great and sudden alteration in towns, cities and countries; such a swift progress, and vast extent of the work."<sup>43</sup> Undoubtedly this description of the age of the apostles was based upon Edwards's own experience during the revival; it was a history of the New England Awakening writ large. Never indeed had the revival been placed in such a broad historical context. Its resemblance to the divine dispensation during the age of the apostles transformed it from a mere provincial affair into a moment of great proportions in salvation history.

As the dispensation of the Spirit led to the establishment of the visible church during the time of the apostles, so now the present revival illuminated "the glory of the approaching happy state of the church" on earth. The Awakening thus marked another important stage in providential history. Elaborating on the close relationship between the means and effects of the effusion of the Spirit, Edwards went on: "It may be reasonably expected that the extraordinary manner of the work then, will bear some proportion to the very extraordinary events, and that glorious changes in the state of the world, God will be about to bring to pass by it." An extraordinary historical situation demands the use of exceptional means on

<sup>41</sup>Edwards, *Sinners*, 64.

<sup>42</sup>Edwards, *Distinguishing Marks*, 226.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 228–30.

the part of the Spirit, and an extraordinary effusion of the Spirit determines its reception on the part of human actors. Given the historical urgency evidenced in the revival, the culmination of the work of redemption determined unusual behaviors. To make this point Edwards repeated the images he had developed in *Sinners*, claiming that if "we consider human nature, we need not wonder" about these radical changes in human behavior. If "a person saw himself hanging over a great pit, full of fierce and glowing flames, by a thread he knew to be very weak, and not sufficient to bear his weight," is it not only natural that "he be ready to cry out in such circumstances? How much more those that see themselves in this manner hanging over an infinitely more dreadful pit, or held over it in the hands of God, who at the same time they see to be exceedingly provoked?"<sup>44</sup>

If the extraordinary manner of the Spirit led to the great "noise and stir" caused by the revival all over New England, then the rising opposition to it should also be understood in the general context of salvation history. Edwards elaborated on the analogy between the Great Awakening and the time of Christ's first coming: "And we find that when Christ's kingdom came, by that remarkable pouring out of the Spirit in the apostles' days, it occasioned a great stir and ado everywhere." God's dispensation led to much strife and contention: "What mighty opposition was there in Jerusalem, on occasion of that great effusion of the Spirit that was there?" The same applied to the growing controversy surrounding the Great Awakening. The strong opposition the revival incurred in New England was to Edwards another proof of his contention that it bore the mark of the power of the Spirit. The more the opposition raged against the revival, the more the revival resembled the influence of the Spirit in primitive times, where the controversy "filled the world with noise, and gave occasion to some to say of the apostles, that they had turned the world upside down."<sup>45</sup>

Edwards first developed his comparison between the Great Awakening and the apostolic age in *Sinners*. In the Yale address he was ready to expand this comparison to include the Protestant Reformation and the Puritan Revolution. The "remarkable pouring out of the Spirit, and revival of religion" in New England clearly resembled "the time of the Reformation." This was especially true with regard to "the Word of God as the principal means of carrying on God's work." As Luther returned preeminence to God's Word—*Sola Scriptura*—and proclaimed it the locus of religious faith and experience, so was the case with the New England revival, "when persons affected in hearing the Word preached." For "all that is visible to the eye is unintelligible and vain, without the Word of God to instruct and guide the mind." Like the Reformation, the Great Awakening's goal was "propagating the church" in the world.<sup>46</sup>

The historical example of the Protestant Reformation helped Edwards soothe opponents of the Awakening who were quick to find "the fall away into gross errors or scandalous practices" by many of its practitioners. Yet this could not serve as an argument that "the work in general is not the work of the Spirit of God." For

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 280, 230, 231–32.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 235.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 239–40.

"such things are always expected in a time of an important reformation of religion. If we look into church history, we shall find no instance of great revival of religion, but what has been attended with many" errors. This was the case "in the apostles' days" and of course during "the Reformation from popery" where many "fell away into grossest and most absurd errors, and abominable practices." It is almost a rule that "in times of great outpouring of the Spirit to revive religion in the world," a number of those in favor of the revival "have fallen off into whimsical and extravagant errors, and gross enthusiasm," and so forth. Such was the case also in the time of the Puritan Revolution in England, or "in the days of king Charles I, the Interregnum, and Oliver Cromwell," and of course "in the beginning of New England, in her purest day, when vital piety flourished."<sup>47</sup> Later Edwards used this argument in his most ambitious attempt to defend the revival, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*, 1742, where he contended that the "weakness of human nature has always appeared in times of great revival of religion."<sup>48</sup>

As the Great Awakening spread rapidly throughout New England, Edwards more and more tended to identify this event with the anticipated last effusion of the Spirit before the coming of the millennium and the transformation of the world into the kingdom of God. He pleaded with his Yale audience to reconsider the meaning of the revival in light of "the commencement of that last and greatest outpouring of the Spirit of God, that is to be in the latter ages of the world" wherein "the manner of the work will be very extraordinary." Those who listened to him would grasp the point he was trying to make, namely, that "the extraordinary manner of the work" will "bear some proportion to the very extraordinary events, and that glorious changes in the state of the world, God will be about to bring to pass by it."<sup>49</sup> The Awakening evidently belonged to the exceptional outpouring of the Spirit anticipated in the last stage of history, and should be considered by all, especially its opponents, in this eschatological context:

Since the great God has come down from heaven, and manifested himself in so wonderful a manner in this land, it is in vain for any of us to expect any other, than to be greatly affected by it in our spiritual state and circumstances, respecting the favor of God, one way or the other.<sup>50</sup>

In attempting to illustrate the Awakening's singular historical moment, Edwards compared it also to the "little revival" in Northampton in 1734–35. Compared to that episode, the "work of God that has been carried" in New England "this year, has been much purer than that which was wrought there six years before." Even "those that laughed before" at the little revival "weep now." The Great Awakening signals a most crucial epoch in salvation history: "Now [that] Christ is come down from heaven into this land, in a remarkable and wonderful work of his Spirit, it becomes all his professed disciples to acknowledge him, and give him honor." With such high eschatological expectations, Edwards did not hesitate to

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 244–46.

<sup>48</sup>Edwards, *Some Thoughts*, 318–19.

<sup>49</sup>Edwards, *Distinguishing Marks*, 230.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 276.

compare the revival of the 1740s with the time before Christ's first coming: "And certainly, that low state that the visible church of God has lately been sunk into, is very parallel with the state of the Jewish church when Christ came." Edwards first developed this point in 1739, but now made it essential to his defense of the Great Awakening. In such a context, evidently, the New England revival appeared to herald, along with other current revivals in the Protestant world, Christ's Second Coming, inaugurating a great apocalyptic and eschatological moment that would reveal "the glory of the approaching happy state of the church," its "most glorious and perfect state" on "earth."<sup>51</sup> What was only implicit in *Sinners* was made explicit to the audience at Yale, when Edwards retrieved the New England revival from its local setting and invested it with a glorious role in salvation history.

"The Great Awakening of 1740 was at first hailed by its partisans . . . as a supernatural work." Soon, however, "opponents of the Awakening were starting their attack," claiming that "far from being a supernatural work, the outburst was criminally excited by artificial stimulation."<sup>52</sup> The many "monstrous evils" which pervaded the revival indicated to the anti-revival party that this event had nothing to do with God's Word or with His Spirit, but was founded rather on unjustified enthusiasm.<sup>53</sup> "Visions and trances appeared, and some persons began to claim immediate inspiration for occasionally bizarre behavior. This, of course, was "enthusiasm," always an awful threat to orthodox Protestants and Puritans. Plainly, the revival was in danger of getting out of control."<sup>54</sup> Chief among the attackers was Charles Chauncy, who served as co-pastor of the First Church of Boston. In his sermon *Enthusiasm Described and Caution'd Against*, 1742, Chauncy launched the first onslaught against the revival, denouncing overt enthusiasm and calling for a return to sane and rational religion:

Make trial of your spiritual pretences by this rule: If you can submit to it, and will order your conduct by it, well: otherwise you only cheat yourselves, while you think yourselves to be spiritual men, or prophets: You are nothing but Enthusiasts.<sup>55</sup>

In this context Edwards again insisted on his apocalyptic and eschatological interpretation of the revival. The Awakening, he declared, "is undoubtedly, in the general, from the Spirit of God."<sup>56</sup> Convinced that revival was the mark of divine agency in time, he wrote to a friend: "If this ben't the work of God, I have all my religion to learn over again, and know not what use to make of the Bible."<sup>57</sup> For

14 <sup>51</sup>Ibid., 260, 270, 270-71, 280-81.

<sup>52</sup>Alan Heimert and Perry Miller, "Introduction," in *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences*, eds. Heimert and Miller (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), xxxviii-xxxix.

<sup>53</sup>Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards*, 194.

<sup>54</sup>Goen, "Introduction," 51.

<sup>55</sup>Charles Chauncy, *Enthusiasm Described and Caution'd Against*, Boston 1742, in Heimert and Miller, eds. *The Great Awakening*, 230.

<sup>56</sup>Edwards, *Distinguishing Marks*, 260.

## SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF AN ANGRY GOD

neither "earth nor hell can hinder" God's "work that is going on in the country." Since "Christ gloriously triumphs at this day" all should "give glory to him who thus rides forth in the chariots of his salvation."<sup>58</sup> Accordingly Edwards composed his most forceful attempt to vindicate the Awakening—*Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England*, 1742. Here he strove to refute the "error of those who have had ill thoughts of the great religious operation on the mind of men, that has been carried on of late in New England."<sup>59</sup> He again proposed his historical analysis of the eighteenth-century Protestant evangelical awakening in Europe in general, and the New England Great Awakening in particular:

'Tis not unlikely that this work of God's Spirit, that is so extraordinary and wonderful, is the dawning, or at least a prelude, of that glorious work of God, so often foretold in Scripture, which in the progress and issue of it, shall renew the world of mankind.<sup>60</sup>

In *Some Thoughts* Edwards defended the revival against the growing opposition of many skeptical and critical voices. He attacked the errors of those who "make their rule to judge of this work" from the perspective of "history, or former observations," instead of grounding it solely on "the Holy Scriptures." The main fault with these critics lay in their claim that "if there be anything new and extraordinary in the circumstances of this work that was not observed in former times, that is a rule with them to reject this work as not the work of God." Such an explanation, which denies the possibility of any great and sudden transformation in the course of salvation history, is totally wrong and unwarranted, because it "limits God where he has not limited himself" in the affairs of redemption. Against those who found no historical support for the Great Awakening in the annals of the Christian church, Edwards reiterated his views regarding God's scheme of redemption:

for whosoever has well weighed the wonderful and mysterious methods of divine wisdom, in carrying on the work of the new creation, or in the progress of the work of redemption . . . may easily observe that it has all along been God's manner to open new scenes, and to bring forth to view things new and wonderful . . . to the astonishment of heaven and earth, not only in the revelations he makes of his mind and will, but also in the works of his hands.

He found evidence for this proposition in a comparison between the old and the new creation which he first made in his Boston lecture in 1731.

As the old creation was carried on through six days, and appeared all complete, settled in the state of rest on the seventh: so the new creation, which is immensely the greatest and most glorious work, is carried on in a gradual progress, from the fall of man to the consummation of all things, at the end of the world.<sup>61</sup>

Edwards admitted that a "great deal of noise and tumult, confusion and uproar, and darkness mixed with light, and evil with good, is always to be expected in the beginning of something very extraordinary, and very glorious" in the "state

<sup>58</sup>Edwards, "To the Rev. Joseph Bellamy," 98.

<sup>59</sup>Edwards, *Some Thoughts*, 293.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 353.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 306-07.

of the church of God." The reason for such phenomena is the "weakness of human nature" which "has always appeared in times of great revival of religion."<sup>62</sup> The Great Awakening is no exception to this rule. Yet this should not hinder us from seeing the glorious power of God's hand in that event. Edwards therefore reiterated the belief uttered in his Yale address in 1741, that "the extraordinary manner of the work then, will bear some proportion to the very extraordinary events."<sup>63</sup> Hence, if "we consider the errors that attend" the present revival, "they are not strange, upon the supposition of its being, as to the substance of it, a work of God." For if "God intends this great revival of religion to be the dawning, or a fore-runner of an happy state of his church on earth, it may be an instance of the divine wisdom, in the beginning of it, to suffer many irregularities and errors in conduct." Given the inherent weakness of human nature, so radical a transformation in the history of God's work of redemption entails that the Deity would "permit a great deal of error, and suffer the infirmity of his people much to appear, in the beginning of a glorious work of his grace." Human errors and misbehavior are only natural at such a decisive historical moment when God is about to radically change the course of history. "For as the work is much greater than any other outpouring of the Spirit that ever has been in New England, so no wonder that the Devil is more alarmed and enraged, and exerts himself more vigorously against it."<sup>64</sup> To denounce the present revival means rejecting the "whole tenure of the Gospel" and "all the notion of religion that the Scripture gives us." Faithful to his views on the historical scheme of redemption, Edwards has no difficulty in claiming the present dispensation to be "a great and wonderful event, a strange revolution, an unexpected, surprising overturning of things, suddenly brought to pass; such as never has been seen in New England, and scarce ever has been heard of in any land."<sup>65</sup>

In confronting the growing reaction, Edwards had no doubt that the Great Awakening "is the work of God," and "that it is a very great and wonderful, and exceeding glorious work of God."<sup>66</sup> To further demonstrate his point he used ideas first announced in the Boston lecture, *God Glorified in the Work of Redemption*, 1731, where he claimed conversion to be a more glorious work than creation, and also his conclusion in *Miscellany* 547 (1731),<sup>67</sup> regarding the work of redemption as the great end and reason of creation. Thus in 1742 he said again that the "work of redemption" is "the great end of all other works of God, and of which the work of creation was but a shadow." Since the ultimate mark of divine agency in history is revival, which concerns in part the work of conversion, Edwards declared: "I am bold to say, that the work of God in the conversion of one soul . . . is a more glorious work of God than the creation of the whole material world." The many conversions of souls during the revival led him to claim that the Awakening "is very

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 318–19.

<sup>63</sup>Edwards, *Distinguishing Marks*, 230

<sup>64</sup>Edwards, *Some Thoughts*, 323–25.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 331, 344.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 343.

<sup>67</sup>Miscellany # 547, in "Miscellanies," 93–95.

glorious" work because it is "vastly beyond any former outpouring of the Spirit that ever was known in New England," as well as "in other British colonies in America."<sup>68</sup> In his ardor, Edwards abandoned the cautious tone of his 1739 sermons with respect to enthusiasm, contending that the Great Awakening, along with other contemporary revivals in the Protestant world, marked the dawn of the coming of the New Jerusalem which signified a prelude to the millennium: "The New Jerusalem . . . has begun to come down from heaven, and perhaps never were more of the prelibations of heaven's glory given upon earth."<sup>69</sup>

Edwards had no doubt that "so great and wonderful work of God's Spirit is a work wherein God's hand is remarkably lifted up, and wherein he displays his majesty."<sup>70</sup> In 1739 he had argued that a remarkable effusion of the Spirit would precede the millennium and the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God. At that future time God's "Spirit shall be gloriously poured out for the wonderful revival and propagation of religion." This "great work shall be accomplished, not by the authority of princes, nor by the wisdom of learned men, but by God's Holy Spirit." But in 1739 he was not sure when and where it would take place: "We know not where this pouring out of the Spirit shall begin, or whether at many places at once." All he was certain of was that this future dispensation "shall soon bring great multitudes" to return to "vital religion" through the "work of conversion."<sup>71</sup> Since this prognosis of "multitudes" was realized in the Great Awakening, Edwards announced that "these times are times of remarkable pouring out of the Spirit."<sup>72</sup> He therefore abandoned the cautious tone of 1739 and speculated that "this work of God's Spirit" is "the dawning, or at least a prelude, of that glorious work of God, so often foretold in Scripture, which in the progress and issue of it, shall renew the world of mankind." With *Some Thoughts* Edwards's apocalyptic and eschatological view of the Great Awakening reached a zenith. He did not hesitate to declare that now the Lord "comes forth in that last and greatest outpouring of his Spirit, to introduce that happy day of God's power and salvation" when he "is setting his king on his holy hill of Zion."<sup>73</sup>

This theological and ideological context gives Edwards's *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* its full meaning and significance. This is not an isolated text in Edwards's revival corpus, and its rhetoric of "hell-fire" can not be separated from his overall philosophy of history, or his view of the Great Awakening. With this sermon Edwards launched his historicization of the New England revival whose developed interpretation appeared in *Distinguishing Marks* and *Some Thoughts*. In the time of the pouring out of the Spirit of God, the experience of conversion becomes a necessary condition for salvation, and those who fail to undergo such spiritual

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<sup>68</sup>Edwards, *Some Thoughts*, 344–45.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 346.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 352.

<sup>71</sup>Edwards, *History of the Work of Redemption*, 460.

<sup>72</sup>Edwards, *Some Thoughts*, 350.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 353, 358, 370–71.

experience belong to Satan and his minions: "The devil stands ready to fall upon them and seize them as his own" and the "old serpent is gaping at them."<sup>74</sup> The horrors facing sinners at the hands of an angry God are inextricable from the apocalyptic drama engulfing New England during the Awakening.

The visions and symbols contained in this sermon, therefore, should not prevent us from seeing its rhetoric of history, and hence its importance as an historical text, a text which tells much about Edwards's historical consciousness as well as about the special time he believed he was living in: "We live in a day wherein God is doing marvelous things," he wrote in 1743, "in that respect we are distinguished from former generations." Thus, he continues, "I cannot think otherwise, than that what has now been doing, is the forerunner of something vastly greater, more pure, and more extensive." Although in the end the revival petered out, this did not shake Edwards's redemptive mode of historical thought, or make him doubt the validity and relevance of his philosophy for salvation history. He was convinced that "God will revive his work [of redemption] again before long; and that it will not wholly cease till it has subdued the whole earth,"<sup>75</sup> and that "the beginning of that glorious work of God's Spirit, which in the progress and issue of it, will overthrow Antichrist, and introduce the glory of the latter-days, is not far off."<sup>76</sup> This general rule of God's historical scheme of redemption applies not only to past events but also to the future. Edwards did not survive to see himself vindicated in another revival. However, he would not have been surprised by the Second Great Awakening at the end of the eighteenth century and early in the nineteenth, as well as the many later revivals which have taken place in America.

## "THE VERY VITAL BREATH OF CHRISTIANITY" Prayer and Revival in Provincial New England

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In his 1739 *The History of the Work of Redemption*, Jonathan Edwards noted that prayer accompanied all great historic outpourings of the Holy Spirit. He cited the age of Enos from Genesis 4 as the first such outpouring. Although godly people had always prayed, Edwards interpreted the passage "then men began to call upon the name of the Lord" as something special, some "great addition" in praying. However, he emphasized that the outpouring of the Spirit caused a great increase of prayer rather than prayers bringing the Spirit. "A remarkable pouring out of God's Spirit" effected a "great increase . . . of prayer." Edwards believed that at particular times in the history of redemption God sent special dispensations of the Holy Spirit and that a final great dispensation would signal the last days. He looked forward to the fulfillment of the prophecies of Zephaniah 3:9 and Zechariah 12:10 which predicted the final great outpouring of the "spirit of grace and of supplications," and he wondered if the reformed Protestant world would soon see this promised time.<sup>1</sup> For provincial New Englanders, among whom Edwards was only the most articulate, prayer became in its most ambitious form a tool to hasten the course of redemptive history and the return of Christ.

From all appearances, eighteenth-century New Englanders prayed a great deal. They heard from pastors about the necessity of prayer in regular church meetings and on special days devoted to prayer and fasting. New England's evangelical leaders devoted a great deal of print to guiding and exhorting the people to prayer. This article examines the evangelical theology of prayer through the awakenings and demonstrates the crucial role that prayer played in the theology of revival.<sup>2</sup> The first section of the article addresses the generally accepted theology and

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<sup>1</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1974), 1:539. Referenced in Michael Crawford, *Seasons of Grace: Colonial New England's Revival Tradition in Its British Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 135–36.

<sup>2</sup>Discerning the private prayer activity of the laity is predictably difficult. Despite his claims about the centrality of prayer, not even Erik Seeman's helpful account *Pious Persuasions* gives many specific examples of private lay prayer (Seeman, *Pious Persuasions: Laity and Clergy in*

<sup>74</sup>Edwards, *Sinners*, 52.

<sup>75</sup>Edwards, "To the Rev. William McCulloch," 106.

<sup>76</sup>Edwards, "Humble Attempt," 1747, in *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 5, *Apocalyptic Writings*, ed. Stephen J. Stein (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 421.