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“TALK OF EXPERIENCE”: JONATHAN EDWARDS ON RELIGIOUS SPEECH

For a person who left behind him millions of words, Edwards had more than his share of reservations about the limits of language. Several factors in his inherited thought and in his experience contributed to this awareness. First, he was born into New England’s intramural ecclesiastical experiment to found and sustain pure churches, which included a requirement for potential members to describe their spiritual experiences before the congregation. Compounding this feature were the innovations for church membership that Edwards’ grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, introduced at Northampton and that Edwards had to negotiate. Second, the religious revivals at mid-century, in which Edwards played so important a role, highlighted preaching, religious self-disclosure, and other forms of expression that led to a diversity of speakers, forms, and contents. These two discursive sites—one ecclesial, the other largely extra-ecclesial—both posed increasing challenges for Edwards, who in his revival tracts and in subsequent essays and sermons came to examine the use and abuse of religious “talk of experience.”

The New England Conversion Narrative

The first trajectory to trace here is the church model of New England Congregationalism in which Edwards was raised. The covenanted, primitivist model formulated by the New England puritans beginning in the 1630s had, as its core, the individual seeking grace through a process or morphology of stages of spiritual

awareness, a method called “preparationism.” These stages could be many and complex, but at their simplest they included: conviction, or being alerted to one’s miserable condition on account of sin; humiliation, or an awareness of God’s justice in their condemnation; and “discoveries,” or that comfort in realizing God’s mercy accompanied by earnest longings after God and Christ. The individual was guided through these stages by using “the means of grace,” including worship, hearing sermons, prayer, reading, and the like.¹

But the individual was part of a faith community, in which each individual’s striving to live a godly life contributed to the commonweal, and in which neighbors supported and interacted with each other spiritually and physically in all the spheres of human activity. This collective expression of sanctified living had its embodiment in the local congregation, which was voluntary and self-ruling. Polity was an important extension of the Reformational impulse, but it was also a function of the puritans’ efforts to resolve the identification of the invisible church within the visible. Recognizing that there would always be a “mixed multitude” of true and only nominal believers within the visible church, New England Congregationalists nonetheless instituted a polity to insure, as much as possible, that full members were of the elect, or the invisible church. They did this through a graduated membership system, as codified in the *Cambridge Platform* of 1648. Baptism was the first level of membership, under which a person was brought into church watch and education; beginning in the 1660s, baptismal membership was extended under what became known as the Half-Way Covenant. Full membership was the second and final level, in which the individual was entitled to partake of the sacrament, have children baptized, vote in church meetings, and hold church and civic offices.²

To achieve full membership could be, to varying degrees depending on the congregation, an onerous process: one had to present oneself and be questioned by the minister, by the elders or deacons, and finally by the assembled congregation after giving a “particular” or extended oral description of one’s spiritual experience. And there was no guarantee of success. We have scores of these written autobiographies, “relations,” or “conversion narratives,” as they are variously

¹ On preparationism and devotional practices, see Norman Pettit, *The Heart Prepared: Grace and Conversion in Puritan Spiritual Life* (Yale Univ. Press, 1966); Charles Cohen, *God’s Caress: The Psychology of Puritan Religious Experience* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1986); and Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1982).

² On the colonial New England church polity and practices, see Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (New York Univ. Press, 1963); Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1986); and James F. Cooper, Jr., *Tenacious of Their Liberties: The Congregationalists in Colonial Massachusetts* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1999).

called, from the early 17th to the early 19th century, from men and women, old and young, native, black and white—an incredibly rich resource. Many were printed, or circulated in manuscript, read and re-read, so that the forms and cadences of the genre were absorbed, repeated, revised, and embodied, “turning texts into life even as they turn[ed] life into texts.”³

Growing up, Edwards would have read or heard a good number of lay relations, such as in his father’s church at East Windsor, Connecticut.⁴ A typical relation, though very brief to serve our purposes here, was that given by a Samuel Grant around the year 1710, which Edwards as a boy may well have heard orated in the meetinghouse:

*I hope I may truly say that God has enabled me to see my sinfulness by nature, and that I was shapened in iniquity and conceived in sin, and by the fall of our first parents I am altogether become filthy, vile and sinful, and that I cannot make any satisfaction by the works of the law: and this I know, that my sins have lain as a heavy burden upon me, and although I have [been] kept from many great enormities or sins, yet have thought myself to be the most vilest creature in the world, and nothing but as it were a sink of sin: and in the midst of my distresses I hope I may truly say that God has discovered his grace to me in pardoning my sins, and enabled me to trust in him for my life and eternal salvation, and made me heartily to loath and hate all sin, as it [is] against God, and to trust in ye Lord Jesus Christ. And I desire to live a holy life here for Christ’s sake, as well as in happiness with him hereafter, [in his] ordinances, [and] that I may have [my] faith and love still increasing towards them.*⁵

Though the religious culture of American Puritanism endured, forming gen-

³ For examples of early New England relations, see *Thomas Shepard’s ‘Confessions,’* ed. George Selement and Bruce Woolley, Colonial Society of Massachusetts Collections 58 (1981); “The Notebook of the Reverend John Fiske, 1644-1675,” ed. Robert G. Pope, Colonial Society of Massachusetts Collections 47 (1974), 6-10, 29-30, 33-34, 61, 100-101, 146-51; *The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth, 1653-1657*, ed. Edmund S. Morgan (Harper, 1946). The quote is from Nancy Bradley Warren, *The Embodied Word: Female Spiritualities, Contested Orthodoxies, and English Religious Cultures, 1350-1700* (Univ. of Notre Dame, 2011), 16.

⁴ For relations from this church, see “The East Windsor Conversion Relations, 1700-1725,” ed. Kenneth P. Minkema, *Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin* 51 (1986); Minkema, “The Relation of Samuel Belcher,” *William and Mary Quarterly*; and Timothy Edwards, MS, Sermon on II Cor. 2:16 and five relations, 1720-25, transcript, Jonathan Edwards Center, New Haven, Conn. JE also referred to “a book of Relations” in his “Catalogue” of Reading, no. [34], WJE 26:125.

⁵ Edwards Papers, Trask Library, Andover Newton Theological School, Newton Centre, Mass. The emphases are mine, in order to draw attention to the parallels in the relation quoted at the end of the essay.

erations to come, by the time Edwards began his ministry, puritanism as a political experiment had ended, and requirements for entering the churches had shifted. This was the case in particular in Solomon Stoddard's church of Northampton, Massachusetts, where extended narratives before the congregation were not required but only consent to a form. This is the form, as recorded by Stoddard in the church records in 1672:

I doe here publickly take hold of the covenant of the Lord, giving up my selfe unto him, to be one of his, subjecting my selfe to the teaching & gov't of Jesus Christ in this Church, & engage according to my place & power to promote the welfare thereof.⁶

This, as well shall see, became problematic for Edwards. But Stoddard points to the second trajectory for us to trace: the development of a revival culture, in which emphasis was placed on dramatic, identifiable experiences of conversion. Stoddard was widely known as a very successful conversionist preacher, overseeing no less than five awakenings during his six decades at Northampton, and Edwards' own father saw at least that number of "stirs" among his own congregation. More generally, New England churches had seen occasional awakenings, with accompanying additions to the church membership roles, during times of natural disasters and wars, but Edwards was instrumental in the emergence of revivals as an integral feature of church life, on the local, regional, and international levels.⁷

The Connecticut Valley Revival

The story of the rise, nature, and decline of the Connecticut Valley revival of 1734-35, beginning at Northampton, is well known thanks to Edwards' *Faithful Narrative of a Surprising Work of God*, published in London by Isaac Watts in 1737. Interestingly, the spiritual "flexibleness" began with "the relation of a young woman that had been one of the greatest company-keepers in the whole town, in whom there appeared evident a glorious work of God's infinite power and sovereign grace."⁸ Reaching its height in the early months of 1735, by the spring it had spent itself, quashed in part by the tragic suicide of Edwards' uncle Joseph Hawley.

⁶ "Northampton Church Records, Book I," First Churches of Northampton, Mass.

⁷ On awakenings under Stoddard's and Timothy Edwards' ministries, see Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (Yale Univ. Press, 2007), 6-9. On revivals sparked by natural events and war, see George Harper, *A People So Favored of God: Boston's Congregational Churches and Their Pastors, 1710-1760* (Univ. Press of America, 2004), chs. 3-4.

⁸ Edwards, *Faithful Narrative*, WJE 4:116.

During the Connecticut Valley Revival, Edwards endorsed and even extended the traditional reliance on the relation. He had privately received persons into his study to hear their descriptions of their spiritual experiences, much as scores of pastors over the generations since the early seventeenth century had. The difference here was in number and time: for Edwards met with literally hundreds of persons in the space of only several months, which is more than a typical New England pastor would have heard in his entire career. Also, following the pietist model, he had instituted religious “conferences” in town, for mixed groups and for young men and women, for the purpose of religious edification and exchange, which came to feature individuals giving accounts of the work of the Spirit on their souls. And in the *Faithful Narrative* he had given a new cast to the genre in his accounts of Abigail Hutchinson and the child Phebe Bartlett. But Edwards also had collapsed those many accounts he heard in private into a generic type, recognizing that while there was “variety” there was also an “analogy” or similarity to their experiences. His profile of the typical conversion was couched in the scientific mode, which made it widely applicable, but it basically described the three traditional preparationist phases—the difference being that he downplayed the means or order and focused on the end or result. Northampton had become the people of the *Faithful Narrative*, and—ironically for a congregation that had come of age under Stoddard repudiating the need for relations—they apparently sought to live up to that reputation by excelling in the art of talking about their experiences.

Aftermath

If Edwards still had trusted in the efficacy of talking of experiences during the hectic months of the Connecticut Valley revival, in the months and years immediately following he came to a sad realization: many of the claims to conversion and true grace were phony. All too quickly, with the waning of the revival and the temporary fad for religion, people were turning back to their old ways. Privately, Edwards contemplated this rapid and pervasive shift back to “viciousness.” In his “Directions for Judging of Persons’ Experiences,” a series of notes to himself about hearing people’s relations, he cautioned himself to:

See to it . . . Whether, when they tell of their experiences, it is not with such an air that you as it were feel that they expect to be admired and applauded, and won’t be disappointed if they fail of discerning in you

something of that nature; and shocked and displeased if they discover the contrary.⁹

Instead of appreciation for his efforts to point out his people's faults, all he was meeting with was increasing resentment.

His private sentiments became public soon enough. Discoursing in February 1736, for instance, Edwards in a "contribution" lecture on Ps. 116:12 connected religious speech with the duty of charity—essentially telling his people to put their money where their mouths were. Praising God with our mouths was important, he pointed out, but so was service to others. Those who expressed the conviction or hope that they were converted must not only talk of the things they have supposedly experienced, or of how they have been "overcome" by them, or of how they have been affected by the "dying love" of Christ. "[M]any of you," Edwards commented laconically, "have expressed those things to me." What was needed was "a behavior answering such talk."¹⁰

In his sermons, Edwards pursued this balance of profession and practice. A few months later, in May 1736, preaching on James 2:18, regarding the importance of religious *behavior*—this a full decade before the Twelfth Sign of *Religious Affections*—he proclaimed that "such manifestations of godliness are better Ground of Charity to others than anything that men say about their own godliness. 'Tis a much better way of showing our faith than professing that we have faith, and telling anything about our own faith." He went on, rehearsing the common elements of conversion relations:

[Behavior is] a better ground of charity than persons telling a very fair story of their experiences, if they seem to give an account of a clear work of conversion . . .

'Tis a better ground of charity than if men appear very forward to talk of those things of religion. Being forward to talk of things of religion is a thing that looks well, if it be done without any appearance of ostentation, but yet all that are forward to talk are not true saints.¹¹

'Tis a better ground of charity than talk, though men seem to talk very experimentally and feelingly, though their talk seems to come from the heart, and though, as far as we can see, they seem to know what they

⁹ Edwards, "Directions for Judging of Persons' Experiences," WJE 21:525.

¹⁰ Edwards, MS Sermon on Ps. 119:12 (no. 378), Feb. 1736, WJEO 51.

¹¹ Note Edwards' lack of any qualifier here.

say, and to have much of an acquaintance with the life of religious talk, and yet be a hypocrite.¹²

Edwards’ concern was “counterfeit humiliation,” in which, paradoxically, converts were proud of their humility. From Edwards’ perspective, they relied too much on a presumed day of grace, or a locatable conversion experience; now that they felt they had “gone through” conversion, individuals rested secure in their state, even became smug about it, and engaged in rhetorical one-upmanship. Small wonder then that during this period, as Ava Chamberlain points out, Edwards began committing entry upon entry in his notebooks treating spiritual pride and self-righteousness, over against the evidences of persevering behavior.¹³

In a sermon from February 1737, Edwards extended the theme, painfully aware, even as he was preaching, that *A Faithful Narrative* was about to be published in London, while the people of whom he wrote so glowingly could do little more than exhibit, through their high speeches, what he saw as their own hypocrisy.

Many that are looked upon as saints, and pass for such amongst their neighbors, are accepted as such in the visible church of Christ, . . . yet are those that God’s soul hates. . . .

Tis so with respect to the profession and shows that many persons make of religion in words. Many make a very splendid profession of religion, and men have a great esteem of it; . . . Many are forward for religious discourse, and in this way make great shows of piety among men. And others admire their talk . . . feelingly, and like men of experience.¹⁴

In response, Edwards in this between-awakenings period developed distinctions between true and false Christians to an extent and depth he had not before. The most ambitious exploration of this theme to date was his sermon series on the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, preached in late 1737 and early 1738. The text, while full of categories for distinguishing the two sorts, focuses on hypocritical religious talk of experiences.

A false Christian may make profession of special experience of a work of grace in their hearts, as well as true Christians. He may not only make such a profession of Christianity as visible Christians in general do, in professing their assent to the fundamental doctrine of the

¹² Edwards, MS Sermon on James 2:18, no. 393 (May 1736), WJEO 51.

¹³ “Editor’s Introduction,” WJE 18:18-24.

¹⁴ Edwards, MS Sermon on Luke 16:15, no. 421 (Feb. 37), WJEO 52.

gospel, and in either explicitly or implicitly owning their baptismal covenant; but they may pretend that they have had experience of a special work of God's Spirit in their hearts.¹⁵

With all of the suspicion Edwards was casting on "professions of special experiences," it is worthwhile to point to his own "Personal Narrative," written in late 1740—not coincidentally, hard on the heels of George Whitefield's first emotional visit to Northampton, when high-flown talk of experiences abounded. In drafting his own "relation" Edwards combined the traditional elements—childhood and youthful experiments, near-death experiences, cycles of dullness and reviving, significant moments of enlightening—with a retrospective model that included key teachings in which he took delight and benefit. The "Personal Narrative" at once looks backwards and forwards as a form of self-writing, which others would then emulate.¹⁶

Still, he was not yet willing to broadcast beyond his own pulpit his reservations about religious talk. In the *Distinguishing Marks*, preached at Yale College commencement and published in 1741, he inveighed against the increasing amount of censuring that was going on, as well as judging the spiritual state of others. In a remarkable admission for someone who was intently exploring the marks and signs of true versus false faith, he states, "I once did not imagine that the heart of man had been so unsearchable as I find it is. I am less charitable, and less uncharitable than once I was. . . . The longer I live, the less I wonder that God challenges it as his prerogative to try the hearts of the children of men, and has directed that this business should be let alone till the harvest"¹⁷—the "harvest" here being the final judgment.

Rhetorical Hyperbole in the Great Awakening

However much the Great Awakening was beheld by many as a work of God's Spirit, its critics characterized it as an exercise in excess, pointing to interruptions of worship services by moaning, crying out, fainting, trances, and bodily contortions; exhortation by women and people of color; claims to visions and revelations; censuring and judging others as unconverted, accompanied by separatism, schism, and contention—not to mention a detrimental flood of printed polemics. While there was a broad range of controversial behavior, speech was a

¹⁵ Edwards, Sermon on Matt. 25:1-12, no. 454 (Jan. 1738), published in *Sermons by Jonathan Edwards on the Matthean Parables, Volume I: True and False Christians (On the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins)*, ed. Kenneth P. Minkema, Adriaan C. Neele, and Bryan McCarthy (Wipf & Stock, 2012), 76.

¹⁶ Printed in WJE 16:790-806.

¹⁷ Edwards *Some Thoughts*, WJE 4:285.

key and perhaps the most highly contested sphere in terms of who could speak, how, when, and to whom. For his part, Edwards ramped up his efforts to contain “evil speaking” and “corrupt communication,” especially among young people, as epitomized in the “Bad Book” case of 1744. He also continued to criticize religious rhetorical inflation amongst converts and proponents of the revivals. Descriptions of ever more dramatic religious experiences became something of a linguistic marker among converts, while radical New Light leaders claimed an ability to discern true grace in others.

As a moderate New Light, Edwards tried to pull his more enthusiastic counterparts back from what he saw as their extremism. In a “Miscellanies” entry from the early 1740s, devoted entirely to “Talk of Experience,” he wrote:

The profession that persons make of the divine gifts they have received from God, and their declaring their experiences abroad, is like the wind that accompanies a cloud. . . . So if professors place religion very much in religious discourse, and abound very much in talking of their own experiences, it is a wonder if their religion don’t spend itself that way, so that [there] should be but little fruit in good works.¹⁸

So persistent and widespread had the problem with talk of experiences become that Edwards finally went into print with his observations. The issue was, as he saw it in *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*, published in early 1743, that the sheer frequency of such windy professions made sincere ones not only the source of doubt but of “prejudice,” which would all the more constrain the spread of true religion. “Spiritual pride disposes to speak of other persons’ sins” instead of one’s own, or to “speak of almost everything that they see amiss in others, in the most harsh, severe and terrible language.” In the end, those claiming to be the most zealous Christians, proclaiming the virtue of speaking truth to sin in others in the most plain-spoken way, all the more easily condemned any that they saw as less righteous than themselves. Certainly Christians are to watch over one another, Edwards allowed, but “it don’t thence follow that dear brethren in the family of God, in rebuking one another, should use worse language than Michael the archangel durst use in rebuking the devil himself.”¹⁹

By the time Edwards wrote *Religious Affections*, his views on the efficacy of relations and “forwardness” to religious talk as party badges and as means of condemning others were fully formed. Hypocrites “make a great show of their

¹⁸ “Miscellanies,” no. 951, WJE 20:210.

¹⁹ Edwards, *Some Thoughts*, WJE 4:418-20.

humility in speech; but they commonly make a bungling work of it," if not apparent to them, then to observers. Plucking phrases used from relations for decades, Edwards in the Sixth Sign actually parodies the genre:

And therefore they have no other way, many of them, but only to be much in . . . telling how they were humbled to the dust at such and such times, and abounding in very bad expressions which they use about themselves; such as: "I am the least of all saints, I am a poor vile creature, I am not worthy of the least mercy, or that God should look upon me! Oh, I have a dreadful wicked heart! my heart is worse than the devil! Oh, this cursed heart of mine," etc. Such expressions are very often used, not with a heart that is broken, . . . But with a light air, with smiles in the countenance, or with a pharisaical affectation: and we must believe that they are thus humble, and see themselves so vile, upon the credit of their say so; for there is nothing appears in 'em of any savor of humility, in the manner of their deportment and deeds that they do.²⁰

Applying Religious Affections

In the late 1740s, following the publication of *Religious Affections*, Edwards widely applied his views of "religious talk" in his preaching. One significant example was the sermon on II Kings 23:24, delivered in September 1747, with the doctrine, "Tis a very amiable thing when persons that profess religion, are lively and active in religion." Critiquing those who could talk convincingly about their religious experiences, Edwards observed, "A becoming, external liveliness in religion, consists in liveliness in the practice or business of religion, more than in the profession of it."²¹ Being able to talk at great length about personal experiences was not necessarily a good thing. As historian of sound Richard Rath writes, in the early modern period, when words were believed to have power, "Talk that did not come from an indwelling spiritual experience devalued true speeches." Edwards' criticisms, leveled against lay exhorters among the radical New Lights and Separatists coming out of the revivals and also against people in his own church and community, placed their utterances close to or within the category of what Rath calls "heated" speech, or speech that is "foolish, irrational, morally questionable—and, not least of all, dangerous."²² For Edwards' part, he declared that if he lived

²⁰ Edwards, *Religious Affections*, WJE 2:316-17.

²¹ Edwards, MS Sermon on II Kgs. 23:24, no. 875 (Sept. 1747), WJEO 65.

²² Richard C. Rath, *How Early America Sounded* (Cornell Univ. Press, 2003), 134, 136.

to see another outpouring of the Spirit, he hoped it would come with more prudence and caution about talk of experience; less talk, and more act, would make what talk there was more effective.

Sounds without Meaning

When in 1748 Edwards announced that he would no longer go along with the profession of faith established under Stoddard, insisting that applicants for full membership no longer simply assent to the old form but instead give a testimony that was more personally relevant. In her recent study of *The Science of the Soul in Colonial New England*, Sarah Rivett describes Edwards' efforts to revive the testimony of faith as a reinvestment in the empirical search for data about God's essence and activity drawn from individual, anomalous testimonies—to preserve "epistemic certainty" in a religious culture in which embodied manifestations of grace were becoming the standard. Rivett argues that Edwards, despite his claims to the contrary, was trying to establish an "exact and certain distinction between saints and hypocrites," and that this was his undoing and indeed the end of "soul science" as it had been pursued since the early 17th century. To nuance Rivett's point, I would say that Edwards wanted to breath new relevance into the genre by making it more circumspect. While he wanted to minimize hypocrisy and self-deception, he also saw these as nearly insoluble challenges among the churched, made more problematic by the unstable nature of language. His solution was not to insist on sure and certain self-knowledge, and to make one's "talk" or self-signification reflect that.

Edwards' decision was a resolution of his reevaluation of the efficacy of profession generally, and to cut short the "multitude of words" coming from talkers of experience and pretended spiritual authorities. Unlike Separatists, who reinstated the earlier requirement of a "particular" relation of grace, Edwards was not concerned so much with length (the examples he gave are no more than a paragraph long) as with accuracy. He felt that words such as "humbled," "convicted," and "awakening" had, through time and overuse, been drained of their meaning. As historian Christopher Grasso writes, in Edwards' view, "scripture words and phrases had been applied like rhetorical tags to a variety of circumstances."²³

What had happened in Northampton, and in many churches that went on similar membership principles, was, Edwards believed, that the profession for joining

²³ Christopher Grasso, "Misrepresentations Corrected: JE and the Regulation of Religious Discourse," in *JE's Writings: Text, Context, Interpretation*, ed. Stephen J. Stein (Univ. of Indiana, 1996), 22; see also Grasso, *A Speaking Aristocracy: Transforming Public Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Connecticut* (Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1999), ch. 2.

the church had become pro forma, so that not only merely nominal believers were admitted to full membership, but people who were truly ignorant of their state. In early 1750, he delivered a lecture series attempting to convince his people about his way of thinking, declaring,

If it should be allowed that 'tis lawful and a duty for a natural man that knows he do not accept of Christ nor give himself up to God, openly and solemnly to dissemble and willfully to lie in his owning and sealing the covenant, and declare before the church that he does: . . . if this be known to be the principle proceeded in, his words cease to be of the nature of a profession of the covenant . . . If he says he gives himself up to God, the principle is, that 'tis lawful for him to lie, and that is the principle that he goes upon, and that the church understands him to go upon; so that he don't intend to mean what he says, nor do the church understand him to mean any such thing.²⁴

This lecture series, followed by the printed *Humble Inquiry*, did not succeed in convincing his people to reform their misuse of language in the way he wanted, and this, among other factors, led to his dismissal.²⁵

Nevertheless, Edwards continued to pursue his insistence that words must have a consensual, specific meaning. In *Misrepresentations Corrected*, written as a response to a response to *An Humble Inquiry*, Edwards pointed out that “Words declare or profess nothing any otherwise than by their signification: for to declare or profess something by words, is to *signify* something by words—and therefore if nothing is signified by words of a pretended profession, nothing is really professed.”²⁶ If this were the case, human communication became nothing more than “sounds without meaning.”

Since the beginning of his pastorate, Edwards had wrestled with the problem of having a congregation that had grown up under the gospel, in “a land of light,” and had the benefit of means, ordinances, and powerful preaching, but became indifferent to divine truths, because hearing the same truths over and over made them incapable of attaching personal relevance to what they heard and were

²⁴ *Lectures on the Qualifications for Full Communion in the Church of Christ*, WJE 25:435.

²⁵ He explained himself further to the audience beyond Northampton in the preface to *Farewell Sermon* (WJE 25:490): “The great thing which I have scrupled in the established method of this church’s proceeding, and which I dare no longer go on in, is their publicly assenting to the form of words rehearsed on occasion of their admission to the communion, . . . it being, at the same time that the words are used, their known and established principle, which they openly profess and proceed upon, that men may and ought to use these words, and mean no such thing, but something else of a nature far inferior; which I think they have no distinct determinate notion of.”

²⁶ *Misrepresentations Corrected*, WJE 12:389.

taught. Their professions arose not from personal conviction, or any evidence to their minds or hearts, but as a sort of ritual that confirmed their place in the community. That is one reason why Edwards struggled with defining and presenting the idea of the “new sense” in an affective idiom.

In the end, he achieved a resolution by calling for a balance between self-description based on individual experience and on exhibiting “universal persevering obedience,” or Christian practice. He enunciated this synthesis in *Religious Affections*, but achieved it—at least as much as he was able—in the unlikelyst of places: among the Mahicans and Mohawks of the Stockbridge mission post. His sacrament sermons to the natives contained a renewed emphasis on self-examination that was an extension of his new views on covenantal qualifications. And he brought back “particular” relations, not with any view to turning Separatist or turning back the clock to the early 17th century, but in a new key in tune with what he felt were the church’s challenges in defining individual sainthood and the nature of the body of Christ as a whole. We have a couple of examples of relations, in Edwards’ hand, signed by Stockbridge Indians. These relations are characterized not by claims of full assurance of salvation, or name-dropping of the names of prominent evangelists such as Whitefield, but are full of reticence and carefully qualified estimations of motive and desire:

And I now profess, that *so far as I know my own heart*, I have from my heart consented to the covenant of grace, proposing salvation through free grace in Christ alone; and so *I hope* I have consented to that which my parents did in giving me up to God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, in my baptism, making this my own act, by giving myself up to God, choosing God for my Father and portion, and Christ as my Lord and Savior, and the sanctification of the Spirit as my happiness; *promising* to walk in a way of obedience to all the commandments of God as long as I live, and to be subject to the government of this church during my abode here.²⁷

“So far as I know my own heart” . . . “I hope” . . . “promising.” These are nearly the very phrases Samuel Grant used a half century earlier. There is a lack of finality, a conditionality, a sense that the professor’s life has yet to manifest all that he or she has professed, yet an owning and application of eternal truths that, for Edwards, brought the directives of scripture, personal experience, and the spoken word into harmony.

²⁷ My italics. Edwards, “Drafts of Professions of Faith,” WJEO 39.

A b s t r a c t

In his involvement with religious revivals in mid-eighteenth century New England, Jonathan Edwards became concerned with how converts described their religious experiences, sometimes profusely and to the exclusion of all else. Drawing upon his inherited ecclesiology and conversionist culture, Edwards embarked on a critique of his congregation and then of participants in the revivals who dwelt on “talk of experiences” rather than on practice or behavior.