

## The Doctrine of the New Birth From Bullinger to Edwards

Paul R. Hinlicky

### Introduction

It has been famously said that "the history of doctrine is its true criticism" (Strauss), and in this essay I wish to synthesize the fruits of a number of historical scholars from a Lutheran theological perspective to relate the story of the doctrine of the New Birth. This development runs chiefly from the Swiss Reformation through England to America—and from America's evangelical movement it has spread out to affect global Christianity. In the first section I will sketch the historical development during which an amazing reversal of meaning occurred. The New Birth ceased to be understood as a miraculous event bestowed by the Spirit as He wills and came to be understood as a human act of self-determination. In the second section, we will shift gears from history to theology and learn from a great American theologian, Jonathan Edwards, who opposed this change in meaning, even as he tried to reground the miracle of the New Birth in the historical event of preaching Christ. With this theology in mind, in the conclusion we will bring the results of our study to bear both critically and constructively on the practice of baptism in Lutheran churches.

It may come as a surprise both to partisans and opponents of the New Birth that this doctrine has a history's history. The study of history's disillusion, and its function in theology is largely critical. But I think that critical knowledge of the history of the New Birth cuts both ways. If it undercuts some of the pretentious claims of neo-evangelicals to have rediscovered original biblical Christianity, it no less exposes the spiritual poverty of their usual opponents in Protestant liberalism or Lutheran orthodoxy. We all need to be born anew in Luther's sense. By this expression is not so much meant a conscious experience of personal conversion that can be dated at the moment in which one "accepts Christ," but rather a real, life-long personal transformation, namely, that we cease to live in and for ourselves and begin to live outside of ourselves in faith towards God and in love for our neighbor—as Luther described the ecstatic nature of life in the Spirit. Such a profound New Birth is established in sacramental baptism. It is realized every day in the life of the Christian who dies to sin and rises with Christ to newness of life. However, this new life is only completed on resurrection day, when the *visio dei* will hold believers rapt in praise and joy forever.

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These Reformation convictions are in no little tension with common emphases among neo-evangelicals; for example, they hold that sacramental baptism represents a false trust in externals, that the New Birth is a once and for all experience, that Christian existence is not *simul justus et peccator*. Rather than argue directly against these convictions, we will tell the story of the doctrine of the New Birth. Its history quite effectively makes the argument. But it also witnesses to a Lutheran need for the New Birth and implies much that is critical about the all too typical Lutheran complacency, including abuses in the practice of the baptism of infants.

### The Puritan Background

The story of the doctrine of the New Birth began in England in the 17th century, at a time of considerable religious turmoil. In 1530 King Henry the VIII severed relations with the papacy. The Church in England became the Church of England as a result, but the question of reformation in the spiritual and theological sense was left unresolved. For the next 150 years a protracted religious and political conflict ensued, as English Christianity sought to define itself in a conflict between Roman Catholic restorationists, Anglican nationalists, and Puritan dissidents. During a period of Roman Catholic restoration under Queen Mary (1553-58), Protestant dissidents found shelter in Switzerland. There they came under the influence of Calvin's great attempt to realize a thorough reformation of Church and society according to the Word of God. Here these dissidents also learned the new doctrine of the covenant, sometimes also called "Federal Theology," which had originated in Zurich with Zwingli's successor, Heinrich Bullinger. Originally this covenant was conceived as a justification of the baptism of children against the criticism of Anabaptists. Bullinger's theology appealed to the notion of the covenant as a moral contract between a gracious God and His faithful people to demonstrate that the children of believers are to be baptized, just as Jewish baby boys were included in the covenant by circumcision. With this rationale, however, baptism of an infant ceased to be understood as a sacramental act in which God adopts the child. Rather it came to be understood as a mutually obligating pact. Baptism of infants becomes a covenant-making act in which the parents undertake the obligation to raise the child in the knowledge of God, and God is obligated in time to bestow the miracle of New Birth upon it.

Returning to England under the reign of Queen Elizabeth, these Christians now agitated for reformation of church and society in the Calvinist sense. As a result they came into increasing conflict with the Anglican state-church establishment. The term, Puritan, came into existence as an Anglican insult. It referred derisively to those who undertook to "purify" the Church of England. The Puritans, however, welcomed the name and made it into a byword, even as they became increasingly radicalized.<sup>1</sup> More

<sup>1</sup>"Puritanism in [a] generic sense is 'strictness of living and simplicity of worship'—Christianity in its pristine purity, and opposed to fleshly and worldly compromise, as well as to ecclesiasticism, ritualism, the multiplication of sacramental mysteries, and the elaboration of dogma. [This] is a recurrent phenomenon in Christianity." Ralph Barton Perry, *Puritanism and Democracy* (Vanguard, 1944) 66.

and more they viewed the established Church of England as mired in papistical errors: composed of a false membership, including nominal Christians who had not actually experienced rebirth; maintaining a false ministry of Episcopal clericalism inherited from the hated Roman Catholic past; offering false worship of a liturgical type mandated in the "Book of Common Prayer"; yoked to the crown, far too little inspired by the Spirit of Christ at work in His reborn people.<sup>2</sup> A critique so radical could hardly be tolerated, and in time the Puritans were harassed and persecuted by the Anglican establishment.

The Puritans of 17<sup>th</sup> century England, in the words of one their writers, wanted a "reformation without tarrying for any"—reform now! That demand led them to immigrate to America. They could settle in America without officially separating from the Church of England, holding out hope for its eventual reformation. In the freedom of the new world, however, they would be able to live according to their own convictions, establishing a church and society governed by the Word of God. Their reformation would mean, as William Bradford, the first Puritan governor of Massachusetts wrote in his account *Of Plymouth Plantation*, that "the churches of God revert to their ancient purity; and recover their primitive order, liberty and beauty." The doctrine of the New Birth which they developed coheres with this desire to be freed of human traditions and purified of the entanglements of history, to return to the golden past and re-establish church and society on the basis of the original revelation of the will of God. These first Americans believed that they "were new in that they had been cut loose from the constraints of history and time and stood on the threshold of a radically new age which was wholly discontinuous with all previous epochs."<sup>3</sup> So a New Birth was envisioned for a new life in the new world!

For most of Christian history, the several biblical allusions to the New Birth were taken to refer to the new status in the eyes of God to which believers attained at their baptism, since baptism unites them with Christ and so makes them children of the same heavenly Father. New Birth referred to baptismal adoption, and to the person's *objective* status before God, whether or not he or she was conscious of it. This is certainly how Luther understood things, as is clear in his sharply worded essay, *Concerning Rebaptism*.<sup>4</sup> But for the Puritans New Birth referred primarily to the miraculous transformation of the human heart, which God the Spirit graciously bestowed in a miraculous, sovereign visitation. Thus according to Bullinger, and the Puritans who fell under his influence, the reformation doctrine of justification by faith was understood in a way quite distinct from Luther, or even Calvin. The covenant of grace was free, they said, but not without conditions. A covenant is by definition conditioned; it obligates all parties involved and defines their relationships. The grace of New Birth is mediated through a conditional covenant in which God for Christ's sake pledges to be merciful, and the believer in exchange pledges to love God and neighbor. "Bullinger disagreed with Luther on law and gospel... His entire theological system was organized around the

<sup>2</sup> John Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism: 1620-1957* (Pilgrim, 1992) 11.

<sup>3</sup> Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen, *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630-1875* (University of Chicago, 1988) 1.

<sup>4</sup> Luther, *Concerning Rebaptism*

idea of a bilateral, conditional covenant, made first by God with Adam, a covenant that would endure until the end of the world."<sup>5</sup>

Spiritual certainty inevitably becomes the predominant concern when one's relation to God is made to depend on fulfilling certain conditions. This concern cannot be satisfied with Luther's counsel, "I am baptized!" which holds onto the objectivity of the Word and Sacraments, nor can it be content with Calvin's gratuitous, Spirit-given conviction of God's election. According to covenant theology, one does his or her part by fulfilling the covenantal obligations. This may or may not lead to the experience in one's self of the birth of new, holy desires of love for God and neighbor. Spiritual certainty finally comes about only with this miraculous, life-changing event in one's interior life. So one can, by introspection, look and see whether that new love for God is present in one's heart. One can detect the evidences of sanctification. Lacking that, one can prepare one's self and work toward attaining the precious experience of rebirth. One can conform one's self to the conditions of the covenant. Thus the process of salvation follows a definite pattern, climaxing in a personal, datable experience of regeneration. Human beings cannot save themselves. God must save them. This occurs in the supernatural work of rebirth. If we prepare ourselves, however, if we conform to the conditions of the covenant, God will surely work our rebirth. "God helps those who help themselves."

This scheme in many respects sounds like a return to the pre-Reformation perspective of "works righteousness" (the *facere quod in se* of late Nominalism and its distinction between God's absolute power to do whatever He wishes and God's ordered power by which He has bound Himself to covenants with man). So it sounds because *it is* a return to "the program of medieval monks and nuns," according to E. Glenn Hinson's convincing study of Puritan spirituality.<sup>6</sup> In many ways, Puritanism is a Protestant version of monastic asceticism, focused intently on a rigorous process of personal transformation. It is Protestant in that it replaces the Sacrament of baptism as the basis of this effort at personal transformation with the free event of the New Birth, but the basic scheme is more similar to than different from the monastic quest for self-transformation through spiritual exercises and pious works.

#### The Puritan Doctrine of the New Birth

It is in this context that we have to understand their doctrine of the New Birth. Distrust in human authority, whether in Church or State, and distrust in the mediation of God's Word and saving grace through external means, were the occasion for the formation of the Puritan's positive convictions. Sacraments and even sermons were not means of grace but outward signs, seals or testimonies to an independent, inner, supernatural work of the Spirit. It was this inner work of the Spirit which really counted:

<sup>5</sup> Charles S. McCoy and J. Wayne Baker, *Fountainhead of Federalism: Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenantal Tradition* (Westminster, 1991) 11-13, cf. 52; 24-26.

<sup>6</sup> *Protestant Spiritual Traditions* ed. Frank C. Senn (Paulist Press, 1986) 172.

the coming of the Spirit, who pours the love of God into a person's heart, producing the newly born soul. Everything depended on this experience of New Birth. Only such persons were actually Christians. Only such persons who could credibly tell the story of their regeneration were to be admitted to the fellowship of the Church. In turn, the Church would not be, as in Luther's theology, the assembly gathered around Word and Sacrament, but rather a purified fellowship of the regenerate. In a godly order, moreover, in a Church *and society* governed by the Word of God, secular governance too would fall to the regenerate, who would take up the civil sword to enforce obedience to both tables of the law.

In all the foregoing we note the general Reformed suspicion of 'reliance on material symbols,' or 'trust in externals' as opposed to inner change. There was a deliberate distancing from the Church of England that had recognized sacraments as the 'cementing bond.' For the Puritans the only 'cementing bond' was the covenant which one owned through a public attestation of one's regeneration. The covenant, not the Sacrament, revealed and communicated God's will and salvation. As in all Reformed Christianity, there was the influence of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, which implied the ultimate irrelevance of historical circumstance vis-a-vis God's eternal decree. God's regal act of election in sending his Spirit and conferring the New Birth could occur quite apart from the ministrations of the Church. On the other hand the more rationalistic and humanistic influences of Zwingli and Bullinger implied that God subjected himself to covenants out of mercy for humanity, and would surely give his Spirit to those who sought it.

Admission to the Lord's Supper was sharply restricted. As a "meal for the holy rather than a meal to produce holiness," only those publicly certified as regenerate could receive. This was only a fraction of those in attendance on Sundays.<sup>7</sup> Thus for the Puritans a reformed Church was a purified Church. A congregation came into being as, and only as, a "gathering" of such who are regenerate. John Cotton (1584-1652), a towering figure in early New England, was the great theoretician of this rigorous ecclesiology. In express opposition to all "human invention" still honored in the Church of England, Cotton rigorously reasoned an ecclesiology "bound by biblical precedent: nothing was to be done but 'that which you have the express warrant of God's Word for.'" All ceremonial pomp and circumstance must be swept out as so many distractions! The task of preaching was singular and central in such an ecclesiology: "opening the doctrine of salvation to the sinner and articulating, as an instrument of the Holy Spirit, the experience of grace so that the elect might be settled and joyous in their estate."<sup>8</sup> The Puritan preacher was to lead his hearers step by step through the process of salvation, culminating in the saving event of the New Birth.

Attaining the New Birth was no stroll through the park. Puritan theologian William Perkins outlined the order of salvation in no less than ten steps: beginning with some "cross" that exposed the "self's insufficiency," and led to awareness of "the rigor of

<sup>7</sup> Von Rohr, 102-8.

<sup>8</sup> Hughes & Allen, 25-52; Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Eerdmans, 1992) 46. Also *Cotton Mather: Selections* ed. Kenneth B. Murdock (Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1926) 76.

God's demand." Faced with God's demand, one discovered in oneself the resisting "power of sin," and so experienced the "fear of damnation." Thus far, according to Perkins, we have only "works of preparation." To proceed in the pilgrimage to God a special gift of grace is now required. For the next step is "a serious contemplation of the promise of salvation." This produces the "first sparks of faith." But our pilgrim is far from safely arrived. Now the devil attacks! The little seed of faith is overwhelmed in a "travail of doubt and despair"; to survive at all, it must press through to a full sense of personal assurance. The first sign of such assurance is a period of "evangelical sorrow in which sin becomes grievous to the saintly person purely because it is sin." At last, God crowns the struggle "with the grace of heartfelt, voluntary, joyful obedience": a new spirit for the living of the lifelong walk of sanctification.<sup>9</sup>

The living wellspring of the whole New England order was the continuing miracle of personal regeneration. God gave the New Birth, and the newly born soul qualified for Church membership with a public attestation. These new Church members received the franchise, the political right, to participate in public affairs. But what if there were a huge drought? What if the wellspring of regeneration went dry? What if the spiritual fires of the fathers failed to rekindle in the souls of their children? In fact, that is what happened in New England. In the second and third generation, increasing numbers failed "to find conscientiously within themselves that which was most required, the personal life-changing religious experience."<sup>10</sup> "The Puritan dilemma was delicate: leaders wished to preserve the church for genuine believers but they also wanted to keep as many people as possible under the influence of the church. Their solution was to propose a "halfway covenant"<sup>11</sup> This "half-way covenant" meant that the right to have children baptized would be extended to those adults who would profess the faith, even if they could not narrate a personal conversion experience. These were still barred from full membership and participation in the Lord's Supper. In the meantime, moreover, the economic and demographic growth of the New England colony simply overwhelmed the restriction of the franchise to the regenerate; there were too few reborn to handle all the affairs of state!

At this juncture, American Christianity, dominated by the leading ideas of Puritanism, faced a profound dilemma. By 1701 Cotton Mather had to concede "a gloomy vision of need among his own fallen-away people." Martin Marty also calls attention to Mather's lament over the loss of spiritual and doctrinal uniformity:

"[Mather] mourned the fact that the American Jerusalem in the wilderness was no longer pure, but had to include—and he named them all—antinomians, familists, Brownists, Separatists, old-style Quakers, Pelagians, Arminians and the Roman Papists "whose religion is anti-Christian," and whose errors came from the devil of hell. [Marty comments:] It was clearly time for true Protestantism to assert itself."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization* (Abingdon, 1983) 27.

<sup>10</sup> Von Rohr, 119.

<sup>11</sup> Noll, 48.

<sup>12</sup> Martin E. Marty, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America* (Little, Brown & Co., 1984) 109-10.

Compounding the problems of pluralism and dissension was the loss of the first generation's fervor. Apathy led to neglect of mission, Cotton complained, both to the Native Americans and Black African slaves. Likewise the "common people [were] neglected by the established churches."<sup>13</sup> Behind such concerns about the loss of Puritan influence stood the specter of an expanding Catholicism. To the north lay New France, which was penetrating southward, a papal outpost in the would-be "Protestant empire" (Marty). Nonetheless, the most profound challenge came from within, with the rapid commercial success of the colonies and the rise of the urban market place, i.e. a "morally neutral arena of goods exchanged and services governed by impersonal rules of supply and demand."<sup>14</sup> Economic success and commercial prosperity were making worldlings of the second and third generation Puritans. Thus bands of legally coerced religious uniformity were unraveling; the hearts and minds of the younger generation were being lost to worldly concerns; dissent and the sheer diversity of the sects made all religious claims suspect. What was to be done? Ralph Barton Perry articulates the dilemma: "The rise of apathy and dissension brought the Puritan theocracy to a parting of the ways. Two alternatives presented themselves: revival of flagging zeal and the re-conquest of dissent, or...the separation of church and state. The former was the way the "new light" Puritans took, the latter the way of their secularized step-brothers and sisters, the Democrats. Revivalism was born as a strategy for "theocratic reinvigoration."<sup>15</sup>

### The Great Awakening

The First Great Awakening, as it is known, was an extended series of local revivals in the 1730s and 40s that swept all the English colonies along the Atlantic coast. In the aforementioned climate of demoralization and loss of influence in the original churches, the Awakening began with a provocative assault on settled churches and their established ministries. Theodore J. Frelinghuysen, a Dutch Reformed preacher in New Jersey, assailed his new congregation in 1720 in a sermon that preceded a customary celebration of the Lord's Supper:

"Much-loved hearers, who have so often been at the Lord's table, do you know that the unconverted may not approach? Have you then, with the utmost care examined, whether you be born again?...whether you were of the number of those who are invited?...Remember that though morally and outwardly religious, if you still be unregenerate and destitute of spiritual life, you have no warrant for an approach to the table of grace."<sup>16</sup>

Among the Presbyterians, William Tennant directed correspondingly fierce critique at ministers, savagely satirizing their spiritual complacency and lifting up to public ridicule

<sup>13</sup> Noll, 91.

<sup>14</sup> Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Eerdmans, 1991) 34.

<sup>15</sup> Perry, 343.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Robert C. Whittemore, *Makers of the American Mind: Three Centuries of American Thought and Thinkers* (William Morrow & Co., 1964) 25-6.

the "danger of an unconverted ministry."<sup>17</sup> Tennant "urged followers to leave their churches if they were not organized around the experience of the New Birth."<sup>18</sup> These spiritually dead preachers were incapable of rousing their flocks to repentance. Fear of eternal loss of God and punishment had to be preached; despair of self was prerequisite to the New Birth. Grace could not be taken for granted, either by reliance on the outward rites of religion or by a moral conformity to the conditions of the covenant. The truth was that nothing less than the New Birth gained one's entrance to the Kingdom of God. The settled churches and the established ministers, with their "Half-Way Covenant" compromise, had lost sight of that fact.

Leading the revival was the Englishman George Whitefield, America's first great national evangelist, who in the course of his long career made thirteen preaching tours of the colonies. Whitefield's impact was spectacular, gathering, for example, a phenomenal crowd in Philadelphia that even the skeptical observer Benjamin Franklin estimated at some 30,000 people. Whitefield virtually engineered the First Great Awakening with a brand new style of public ministry and an aggressive, two-fisted message of (1) the necessity and possibility of the New Birth and (2) the attack on the established churches with their spiritually dead ministry. Whitefield once said that the Archbishop of Canterbury knew "no more of saving grace than Mahomet."<sup>18</sup> In a Boston pulpit, he compared the majority of the clergy to uncomprehending Nicodemus and relayed "Jesus' stern injunction...to be born again:" "I am persuaded the generality of preachers talk of an unknown and unfelt Christ. The reason why congregations have been so dead is because they have dead men preaching to them...How can dead men beget living children?"<sup>19</sup>

Whitefield's preaching was animated by his own deeply-felt spiritual rebirth. With great emotional energy, Whitefield dramatically portrayed on the open stage of his public pulpit the journey to the New Birth. Unlike the arid doctrinal sermons of the established pattern<sup>20</sup> Whitefield acted out the great stories of the Bible, as it were, inviting his hearers to enter the spiritual world thus depicted. Despite the fact that Whitefield considered himself a strict Calvinist and upheld the sole causality of God in salvation, his whole style of ministry brought religion out of the churches and into the marketplace, a process

<sup>17</sup> "If they can get one that has the Name of a Minister, with a Band and black coat or gown to carry on a Sabbath-days among them, although never so coldly and unsuccessfully; if he is free from gross crimes in practice and takes good care to keep at a due distance from their consciences...[then they have] a prudent, charitable man. He is not always harping upon terror and sounding damnation in our ears, like some rash headed preachers who by their uncharitable methods are ready to put poor people out of their wits or run them into despair. O! how terrible a thing is that despair! Ay, our minister, honest man, gives us good caution against it." *Ibid.* 28.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 131.

<sup>20</sup> Consider the preaching, presumably typical, which Benjamin Franklin reports hearing. "Had he been in my opinion a good preacher perhaps I might have continued, but his discourses were chiefly either polemic arguments, or explications of the peculiar doctrines of our sect, and were all to me very dry, uninteresting and unedifying, since not a single moral principle was inculcated or enforced, their aim seeming to be rather to make us Presbyterians than good citizens." *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (Walter J. Black, 1941) 126-7.

that inevitably subverted his Calvinist theology. Stout has written very perceptively about this:

"It was only a matter of time before religion was marketed alongside...other cultural endeavors...In economic terms, religion increasingly represented a product that could be marketed. In turn, the public supported its marketeers, together with the charitable and religious causes they championed, liberated from past patriarchal relations and freely responsible for making their own choice. This process of commercialization necessarily transformed concepts of religion and religious experience generally: they came to be viewed in much more individualistic and subjective terms. "Experience," "taste," and "attraction" became sufficient criteria for purchase. ... In the new revival, religion was becoming less a matter of family birthright or communal habit than an arena of choice based on personal preference and individual experience."<sup>21</sup>

Martin Marty likewise notes:

"... thanks to the new styles of the Awakening period, religion itself became more than ever before a matter of choice. Some see this increase of choice as the essence of modern faith. ... At [the heart of the Awakening] was the notion of choice: you must choose Jesus Christ, must decide to let the Spirit of God work in your heart and—note well!—you may and must choose *this* version of Christianity against *that* version!"<sup>22</sup>

With this controversial and popular irreverence toward traditional versions of religious authority, Whitefield and the First Great Awakening made a revolutionary appeal to human experience. Spiritual certainty could be had, they claimed, through the biographical event of spiritual self-determination. In this sense, George Whitefield preached *nothing but* the doctrine of the New Birth. Whitefield remarked about one of his early revivals, "The doctrine of the new birth...made its way like lightning into the hearers' consciences."<sup>23</sup> Stout gives us an excellent picture of it:

The all-consuming theme of the New Birth ... was featured in one way or another in virtually every sermon [Whitefield] preached. ... [According to the old Puritans,] after the New Birth [sinners] took on the mantle of Christ and became—*in God's eyes*—new creatures. Left unspecified in Puritan sermons was whether and to what extent the new creatures became new in their own eyes. ... In Whitefield's sermon[s], the personal experience [of such newness] was immediate and overwhelming. He preached as though there might be no tomorrow, to an audience who might never again assemble in the present configuration. Throughout, he showed no interest in theology. Instead of doctrine, he explored the feelings of the New Birth and through his exploration invited hearers to experience it for themselves. ... Repeatedly he asked his listeners to imagine a different state of

<sup>21</sup> Stout, 36, 102.

<sup>22</sup> Marty, 108-9.

<sup>23</sup> Stout, 37.

being, to imagine being birthed into a new creature. What would happen, he asked, if one were consciously to live through 'a thorough, real, inward change of heart'?"<sup>24</sup>

#### The Transformation of the Puritan Idea of the New Birth

Theologically, the human will is here tacitly given the decisive role in the New Birth. This functional Arminianism (or practical semi-Pelegianism) of the officially Calvinist Whitefield helps us to understand the stunning reversal in meaning that was occurring in the notion of the New Birth during the birth of Revivalism. What had been for the old Puritans the unpredictable experience of the Spirit's granting a new heart and will to love and obey God was now becoming the experience of the religious Ego, the self-determination of the believer. True, the seeds of this development already lay in the Puritan notion of the conditions of the covenant, the order of salvation, and the works of preparation. Nevertheless, for the old Puritans the gift of the New Birth was, in the final analysis, a mysterious and miraculous work of God's free Spirit who "blows where He wills." But now in Revivalism the New Birth was becoming the precisely opposite experience, emphasizing human self-determination, i.e., the personal decision to accept Christ and follow Him.

Despite Whitefield's official Calvinism and despite his repeated affirmation of God's sovereign election, his actual rhetoric directed everything to human hopes and human efforts, arguing that out of human interest in an "eternity of happiness," one "should never cease watching, praying, and striving till he find a real, inward, saving change wrought in his heart, and thereby knows of a truth that he dwells in Christ and Christ in him."<sup>25</sup>

The effect of the First Great Awakening was a complex series of polarizations which have characterized American religion to the present day. At the time of the First Great Awakening, Puritans of Separatist tendency finally made the break and organized themselves in the new denomination of Baptists, rejecting not only the last vestiges of the sacramental understanding of baptism, but also the Puritan tradition of an educated ministry and the hope of social reform.<sup>26</sup> Revivalism promoted a general anti-intellectualism in popular Christianity, which taught people to look more for the sign of the New Birth in their religious leaders than in their mastery of Scripture and Christian doctrine. In the same vein, it promoted anticlericalism, as people educated by the revival "saw less reason for an educated and set-apart clergy and more reason for using the talents of any person whom God empowered to preach."<sup>27</sup> There was a corresponding democratization in the fact that "the Great Awakening was, for many, a time of emancipation from certain authoritarian restrictions of the past."<sup>28</sup> All this gave vast impetus to sectarian multiplication. If salvation is mediated in no other way than this experience of rebirth, then all inherited religious institutions are groundless, and the

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 38-9.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 39.

<sup>26</sup> Von Rohr, 193.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 227.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 200.

reborn are free to create new communities. Their leaders would be distinguished by their charismatic powers and recognized by a laity educated through "individual Bible reading and by the intuitive persuasion of personal religious experience."<sup>29</sup> Whitefield's approach "moved in a democratic direction" because it forcefully asserted that "it was not formal education or prestige in society that mattered most but the choice of the individual for or against God." His whole appeal to the mass audience over against the established authority of tradition, and congregation, and local pastor expressed unprecedented "confidence in the religious powers of the people."<sup>30</sup>

The fires of revival left the ground scarred with broken relations and considerable personal enmity. Appalled at the profanation of sacred things in the carnival-like atmosphere of the revival, embarrassed by the disgraceful and manipulative behavior of Whitefield's many lesser imitators, some "Old Light" Calvinists, as traditionalistic Puritans came to be called, began to drift toward Anglican decorum, order and tradition. This tendency created quite a scandal in 1722 when several students at Yale converted to Anglicanism. One of them expressly stated that revivalism "occasioned endless divisions and separations, so that many could find no rest to the sole of their feet till they retired into the [Anglican] Church as their only ark of safety."<sup>31</sup> Moreover, all settled preachers and congregations, whether or not sympathetic theologically to the doctrine of the New Birth, united in complaining of Whitefield's itinerancy which, they said, promoted "his fame at their expense:" "He was not on the mission field winning new souls to the gospel but robbing parish priests of their congregations and offerings. His services competed with theirs, and badly needed offerings were piling up in his coffers while the poor at home suffered."<sup>32</sup> Revivalism of Whitefield's type was "destructive of stable congregational life,"<sup>33</sup> where the real work of evangelism and rebirth had to occur. Coupled with this was the criticism from the "Old Lights" that Whitefield's methods of mass gatherings with emotional and dramatic preaching were merely "manipulative," that his revivalism conducive less to democracy than to demagoguery.<sup>34</sup> One could make a strong case that liberal theology in America was given birth as a reaction against revivalism's unleashing of passions and its disdain of reason in religion.

But the greatest irony of all is that revivalism itself quickly adapted itself to these criticisms and the consequences of its own success. Within Whitefield's lifetime, long after the blazing fires of the 1740s had expired, revivalism institutionalized itself and became the basic pattern of American Christianity. Stout writes,

What had initially been a convulsive and mysterious force upsetting ordinary life and catching participants by surprise had become something different—a familiar event that could be planned in advance, executed flawlessly and then repeated at the next stop. Gone was the sense of religious crisis. ... [Revival] took on

<sup>29</sup> Noll, 104-5.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 112.

<sup>31</sup> Von Rohr, 197-8.

<sup>32</sup> Stout, 46.

<sup>33</sup> Von Rohr, 188.

<sup>34</sup> Marty, 119-20.

a new meaning as a staged, translocal event, held outdoors on weekdays in open competition with more secular entertainments and diversions. ...<sup>35</sup>

With this the transformation in meaning of the doctrine of the New Birth was complete.

#### A Path Not Taken

I want now to shift gears from history to theology and consider a path that could have been but was not followed, namely, the way of Jonathan Edwards. Edwards was a pastor at the forefront of the First Great Awakening, yet one who tried to point the doctrine of the New Birth back to Reformation theology. Recall, as Stout has acutely noted, that in revivalistic American Evangelicalism,

individual experience became the ultimate arbiter of authentic religious faith...over against family, communal covenants, traditional memberships, baptisms or sacraments. ... The conversion experience engulfed all else. Revivalists might argue about the means of the New Birth and the respective roles of human will and supernatural grace in regeneration, but the experience itself ruled supreme. ... Instead of theological indoctrination being the foundation of spiritual experience, individual experience became the ground for a shared theology of revival.<sup>36</sup>

Edwards had an equally intense interest in the event and reality of regeneration, yet no such development as Stout here describes could have been further from his mind. For Edwards, it was precisely the "theological indoctrination" of Christ which elicits the particular "spiritual experience," namely of death and resurrection with Christ, of being born anew into the eternal life of the Triune God. It is a matter of great theological import to show exactly how Edwards' notion differs from what I called George Whitefield's "functional Arminianism," and the incipient idea of spiritual experience as individual self-determination.

As previously mentioned, the seeds of the Arminian theology of the revival were already sown in the "God helps those who help themselves" theology of the covenant in old Puritanism. Edwards detected it. In 1731, several years before the beginning of the Great Awakening, the young Edwards traveled from Connecticut to Boston, New England's cultural capital. His purpose was to present the traditional "Thursday lecture" for the assembled Puritan clergy. His lecture was entitled, *God Glorified in the Work of Redemption by the Greatness of Man's Dependence upon Him, in the Whole of It*. This had to have been an unsettling event for the traditional New England Puritans. The thesis that man depends completely and wholly on God in redemption was none too hidden an attack on the shaky system of covenant theology.<sup>37</sup> Edwards' title reflects the lecture's retrieval of a strictly Calvinist conception of the divine sovereignty, and therewith a

<sup>35</sup> Stout, 210, 99.

<sup>36</sup> Stout, 205-6.

<sup>37</sup> John E. Smith, *Jonathan Edwards: Puritan, Preacher, Philosopher* (University of Notre Dame, 1992) 4. I am greatly instructed in my understanding of Edwards by Robert W. Jenson, *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford University, 1988)

rejection of the crucial notion of the "conditions of the covenant"<sup>38</sup> that had evolved among the Puritans under the influence of Bullinger. In his lecture, Edwards spoke pointedly of "the mere and arbitrary grace of God" which God bestows as He wishes. He criticized the false assurance of those who presumed to bargain with God on the basis of their supposed "covenant," and at the same time he implied the truly drastic thought that salvation utterly depends upon the sovereign gift of the New Birth, *for which no one can prepare, to which no one is able to apply himself*.<sup>39</sup>

Another tendency in Federal theology, and later in Revivalism, was to regard the experience of New Birth as providing personal assurance of election.<sup>40</sup> To be born again was "proof" that one was really a Christian, and proof was yours for the taking if you decided for Christ as your Savior. Edwards, however, was not primarily interested in the New Birth as a source of personal assurance. That was a benefit which he acknowledged, but for the rather different reason that the experience of New Birth extended to the deepest roots of human motivation, transforming us because it transformed the object of our love. Thus Edwards' interest in the New Birth has a completely different motive. Holifield describes it as follows:

"A truly converted person was one whose love for God had been evoked purely by God's own loveliness rather than by any selfish motive. Such a disposition of love would find expression not only in a new depth of understanding and firmness in conviction but also in an inward harmony and balance that would produce quietness of spirit, humility and tenderness. Edwards was therefore more interested in people's "seeing" than in their willing or knowing. ... Because the new sense of things was an orientation of the whole self, with no sharp distinction between the heart and head, the minister was not to be unduly impressed either by the fervency of the heart or the acuteness of understanding."<sup>41</sup>

Edwards and his friends among the so-called "New Lights" saw that the Gospel inaugurated a real drama and contest of wills which involved the whole person and which had to happen in history as a biographical experience: "What was meant by *rebirth*? The New Lights wanted the proud heart broken and sinfully assertive self suppressed. And they knew that only a crisis, whether sudden or extended, could subdue the prideful will. The crisis was a dissolution of the old defensive self, and such a demise was the necessary condition of any saving change."<sup>42</sup> For all the New Lights, rebirth was thus dramatically envisioned as the death of the sinner, who lives in self-assertive rebellion against God, and the resurrection of a new creature, a reconciled child of God in Christ.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* 5, 141.

<sup>39</sup> Cited in Whittemore, 34-5.

<sup>40</sup> Stout, 38-9.

<sup>41</sup> Holifield, 88-9. John E. Smith states categorically, "Edwards is not at all interested in finding some 'moment' when conversion was supposed to take place. His concern is focused entirely on the change of nature involved in the new orientation--a turn to God and away from the corruptions of the world."

<sup>42</sup> Holifield, 85.

Dying and rising with Christ is the specific way in which God has redeemed His creature in order to bring him to communion with Himself. The metaphor of New Birth is re-grounded by Edwards in the biblically far more significant image of death and resurrection. In Christ's merciful and victorious love for sinners, revealed in His cross and resurrection, the "loveliness of God" is revealed, which inspires our love. The beauty of God transforms everyone who beholds it, if only we cease to look at ourselves and look upon the Lord whose glory is to show love to His enemies. Preoccupation with personal certainty, by contrast, can mean that we are still trapped in human egocentricity. Then even when we are talking about God, we are in reality only talking about ourselves: whether we have faith or not, whether we are strong or weak. Such anxious talk reveals that we have still not seen the Lord, that we are in danger of confusing our own self-determination—even, if not especially our determination to be Christians—with the true experience of God in Christ, who has sought and found us in the down-to-earth event of preaching the Gospel of Christ, the friend of sinners. According to Edwards, the true question in regeneration is whether we come to see the true God truly, namely, in Christ who befriends sinners.

#### The Beauty of God Perceived in Christ

Whitefield's brand of revivalism proclaimed, as it were, the divine bargain, the "good-deal" grace which is ours if only we take it and accept it. So Whitefield summons the hearer to strike the bargain while the offer is on the table. But Edwards proclaimed in the first place the reality of what God has done in Christ. He summoned his hearers to leave themselves behind and entrust themselves to the new reality, the true theocracy, the kingdom of God. Edwards too was a theocrat, just like his Puritan forefathers before him. But his thinking about the idea of God's sovereignty far surpassed both predecessors and contemporaries in its depth and consequence. If theocracy cannot be legally established and successfully legislated, then God Himself must install His reign in the hearts of human beings in the historical event of New Birth. He accepted the demise of the old Puritan legal system because he saw that it was a premature attempt to bring in the Kingdom by force. Edwards grasped theologically what eluded all the other heirs of the Puritan hope of the kingdom of God: As befits God's sovereignty, only God could and would awaken faith and revive a sleeping Church. God does just this through the preaching of His Word, which not only communicates grace as an idea, but is itself the expression and actualization of God's sovereign, electing grace.

So grace is unconditioned and unconditional, and Edward re-thought the whole cosmos in order to conform it to it. So radical was Edwards' conception of God's sovereignty that he would argue all his life that if there is any self-determining initiative in the human will, God is excluded from the universe. Edwards was repudiating the whole rationalistic picture inherited from the Stoics of a person intellectually contemplating good and evil, freely and disinterestedly choosing the good, and effectively instructing his passions to desire the good and thus acquire it—all in the interest of achieving personal autonomy and inner harmony. But like Augustine, Edwards rather saw human beings as moved by their loves. Such human beings are *not*

rationally autonomous. They are most profoundly *governed* beings, governed by what they love. Human beings cannot be thought to be composed of the three ordered faculties of reason, will and desire. A human being is instead an integrated whole, an embodied self, a person who loves something or other, whether worthy or unworthy, whose life is a history, in fact, a love story. Because human beings are moved by their loves, they exist essentially in time, seeking what they love; their lives are the dramas of their loves' quests. This is what we really mean when we speak of the human "will," i.e., love's desire for its beloved, the tense stance an unfulfilled human being must adopt toward the future. Since the whole human being is a person who loves, a person must have some stance towards the future. A human being simply must "will" some future for itself, some way forward to its beloved. In this sense the human will is not free to do whatever it pleases; it cannot be neutral or disinterested or dispassionate—disembodied! Rather as a creature, not a demigod, a human being cannot but be moved by love.

It is a rationalistic fiction to think of "free" will, as if to picture a sovereign mind freely surveying possibilities and choosing its good, and then unproblematically acquiring it. In fact the human will is constantly constrained to choose the future from the objective possibilities that appear on the horizon. The will is "bound" to what it sees, what possibilities actually present themselves and inspire its love. The question is not *whether* we shall love but *what* we shall love. Yet what if none of those possibilities is good, truly good? What if the entire human horizon of possibilities is concretely bound by the disaster of Adam's fall? What if we have no choice but to choose in one fashion or another to repeat and perpetuate Adam's rebellion, to love something unworthy, something less than God? What if we are incapable of willing the one thing needful and truly good, to love God above all? What if we cannot love God until Christ appears in our field of vision, and gives us the God, his own heavenly Father, whom we can love and his Spirit in whom we do love?

The only true resolution of the human dilemma of the will bound to sin is the new initiative of God in Christ, which manifests a glorious, beautiful divine love for the lost creature. God opens up anew to lost sinners the future which God wills, which is his very self. The liberated will is now bound to God, who has appeared and made Himself lovely in Christ. Christians do not speak of a "free" will, but of a *freed* will, freed from bondage to self-love, freed for God, for service in the Kingdom, for a new life of love.<sup>43</sup> The true response to God's Word is an integrated response of a whole human person to an intelligible communication. Holifield summarizes Edwards' teaching this way:

Edwards believed that true religion consisted "chiefly in affections"—his reason being that the affections constituted the hidden source of all human action. ... "The informing of the understanding is all vain, any further than it affects the heart." "The affections not only necessarily belong to human nature, but are a very great part of it...the spring of men's actions." "God has so constituted human nature that the affections are very much the springs of men's actions, this also shows, that true religion must consist very much in the affections..." "Doctrinal

<sup>43</sup> Smith, 44-5.

knowledge" had to "penetrate" to the heart, beneath the level of "mere rational convictions."<sup>44</sup>

Because the Christian Gospel is a message of God's salvation, human transformation consists in the love of that saving God. We are whole and healed persons when we love the God of the Gospel wholly and purely. God works such love for himself in human beings by actually bestowing himself by the Spirit and making a person to experience his loveliness or beauty in the face of Christ. It follows that human beings are utterly captive to their false loves until such an event transpires, when and where God the Spirit bestows himself and thus liberates the will from the false future it seeks for the one true future, the kingdom of God.

### Conclusion

For Lutherans, that event simply is the down-to-earth preaching of Christ by which the Spirit creates faith—not some inward miracle of the Spirit which is in principle separable from the Word. The entire development of the doctrine of the New Birth was determined from the beginning by a disastrous separation of the Word and the Spirit. Consequently, the claim of today's neo-evangelical proponents of the New Birth to have rediscovered authentic biblical Christianity is without historical foundation. The doctrine of the New Birth is a modern historical development originating in the post-Reformation disaster of the schism and fragmentation of Western Christianity. The doctrine bears within it a radical rejection of the previous understanding of human salvation in 1500 years of Christian history. The meager material in the New Testament which employs the metaphor of New Birth alone ought to give us pause. But the fashion in which this slight material was construed to indicate a personal act of self-determination over against the overwhelming biblical depiction of the calling and electing love of God in the Gospel should really alarm us.

The previous understanding of human salvation was embodied in the sacramental baptism, which the Lutheran Reformation did not merely passively inherit from the Christian past but actively appropriated and tried to renovate. What is at stake in this differentiation? Sacramental baptism, both as a unilateral divine act of adoption and as our dying with Christ, stands in direct conflict with the claims of the predominant doctrine of the New Birth. In baptism, God acts to adopt us. It is God who elects and calls, whether we are conscious of it or not; from this angle, infant baptism is not only allowable but particularly appropriate. So Luther teaches: baptism is for the sake of faith, not on account of faith. In turn, real faith, howsoever we psychologically come to it, is only the faith which receives and accepts this election or adoption which is enacted in sacramental baptism. It makes no difference whether biographically one is an adult or a child, because faith for each is nothing but the response to this same divine calling in baptism.

<sup>44</sup> Holifield, 81-82.

Maturity in Christianity means becoming again as a little child, abandoning attempts to establish one's self before God, i.e., to define one's relation to God. For Luther, baptism means living all of life on the basis of Christ's righteousness rather than one's own. Such spiritual death to self is the decisive content of the personal transformation or conversion for which neo-evangelicals, like Roman Catholics, at their best are calling. But precisely here the danger of the biblically marginal metaphor of New Birth becomes obvious, since this happy image can overlook the painful, life-long discipline of dying to the old Adam. Personal transformation in Christian faith is not to be understood as at root self-determination, which leads only to another form of human self-assertion and boasting--the real source of the spiritual pride and Pharisaism which too often characterizes the "born-again." Rather it means to let God be God, reckoning oneself among the sinning, the hurting, and the dying whom God graciously promises to save. Such spirituality does not separate itself into a band of better, real believers, but rather identifies with the *corpus mixtum* of the Church, and out of compassion serves those who are like sheep without a shepherd.

As we have seen in Edwards, however, the predominant understanding of the doctrine of the New Birth among neo-evangelicals is not the only way to understand it. Nor does the fact that the doctrine of the New Birth is a modern historical development as such refute its claim to truth, for all Christian doctrine develops in a historical process. The real question is how we evaluate its original, radical critique of sacramental baptism. Is the Lutheran confessional belief in baptismal regeneration a kind of false reliance on external ritual, which obscures from sight the personal transformation which faith in the Gospel surely does offer and expect? Here it seems to me that the doctrine of the New Birth, as Edwards understood it, validly criticizes much Lutheran practice touching on: 1) the indiscriminate baptism of infants, 2) the lack of catechetical (or even evangelistic!) preparation of parents and sponsors, 3) most grievously, the removal of the Sacrament from the framework of the worship service and the context of Christian community (which contradicts the essence of baptism as the rite of entrance into the Ecclesia), 4) the corresponding reduction of the saving significance of baptism to the forgiveness of original sin, which overlooks the primary meaning of the sacrament as union with Christ and in Christ with His community, and 5) finally, the failure regularly to preach baptism as God's electing act, not only to the community in general as the foundation of its common life (Gal. 3:26-28), but to each child as he or she grows, so that the message of what God has already done for him or her in baptism is actually the source and inspiration of the child's developing faith.

Sacramental baptism does not "work" automatically or impersonally, *ex opere operato*. Baptism is the gospel itself; it is the Word in a visible form and specific function, namely, uniting us with Christ and initiating us into His people. As the Spirit's personal calling of each believer to union with Jesus Christ through whom we become children of His heavenly Father, *sacramental baptism is always valid as God's own Word, but "works" in us in the act of its being communicated*. Baptism creates personal faith in the event of our grasping what God has done for us before we had any faith, what God continues to do now in nurturing faith in us and will yet do for us all in Christ.

Baptism includes all of this; the whole Christian life is founded in baptism. Such baptism had better transform us personally! If not, something has gone terribly wrong!

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- Language should be clear, informative, and stimulating. We try to avoid redundancy, overly pedantic style, pejorative terminology, over-use of professional jargon. Language and content should reflect logical coherence not to be too oral in style if it has been delivered as a conference paper. We try to avoid controversial and polemical issues in writing, for our journal has very limited space to share.
- We appreciate carefully documented notes and references based on research.
- Length: about 12 double-spaced, typewritten pages (about 3000 words). If possible, submit your article on computer disk--preferably IBM.
- The Editorial Committee of the Journal will examine the manuscript. We regret that we are unable to provide a monetary honorarium. We will send you five copies of the issue in which your article appears.

We also encourage you to contribute to our "Mission Observer" section of the journal: about 500 words, preferably one thematic thought or accent in a brief presentation. All writings should include a brief biographical note.

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