

ENGAGING THE GREAT CONVERSATION January 2012

After what must seem like a vast territory of unfamiliar spiritual and theological geography, much of it in Europe, this final year of engaging the Great Conversation will present religious landscapes more familiar to us. Our focus this month is on Puritans and Revivalists, mainly on the American scene.

Recall that the Puritans were out to reform the Anglican Church, itself a reform movement away from the Roman Church. In 17th Century America the Puritans, having moved away from church hierarchy and having established congregational polity, faced a question: upon what condition does a person become a member of the church? Their answer was *by a profession of faith*. But, what constitutes an *authentic* profession of faith? It was deemed not enough merely to be able to recite cognitively correct answers to doctrinal questions; rather, one had to give account (*accountability*) of personal experience of the grace of Christ working in one's life, leading to conversion and saving faith (recall the Pietist emphasis on heart religion). A *pastoral problem* arose. What about church membership for the *children* of church members, young persons who cannot attest to such an experience? Are they church members? Two other problems arose, as well. Because Congregationalists constituted the established church in Massachusetts and Connecticut, only church members had full citizenship, a *political* issue. Additionally, just as now, *numbers* of church members were of significant import in church and political life. So, how do you wed the issue of authentic faith to church rolls, given that there are varying degrees of life experience and that only adult Congregationalists are qualified members? In 1662 the *Halfway Covenant* was introduced, which allowed baptized nonmembers to have their children baptized, taking care of the numbers problem and the political issue. Additionally, Samuel Stoddard, a Congregationalist minister, allowed Halfway members to take communion, insisting that this would aid in their conversion. Opposing this approach was Samuel Hopkins, arguing that when *unregenerated* persons participate in sacrament, scripture, and prayer, they misuse and profane them, thus becoming further alienated from God. Here, on American soil, Christians continue to struggle with *authority* and *accountability*. What authorizes one's belonging in the community of faith, and how do individuals in community express mutual accountability with respect to faith and belonging? I remember my Grandmother Sterling soberly explaining to me as a little boy that, even though I sat beside her in worship, I could not have any of that fragrant and, no doubt, tasty bread and grape juice as it was being passed because, she said, "I was not ready." It seemed she knew something I didn't and would have to learn, or grow into, before I could participate in communion. Have you had similar experiences? Do you see that, behind the various solutions, there are significant questions of authority and accountability?

Jonathan Edwards was Samuel Stoddard's grandson. Rejecting the Halfway Covenant, Edwards initiated *revival* as a more fitting response to addressing authentic faith and church membership. A Calvinist, he felt that salvation is God's prerogative alone (protecting the "godness" of God), and cannot be accomplished by human effort. In an attempt to engineer experienced grace, Edwards preached in a fashion that he hoped 1) convicted and awakened hearers by *inducing anxiety and guilt*, showing the unregenerate that they *deserved damnation*, 2) induced *heartfelt surrender* and an *admission that God is right to condemn*, 3) which demonstrated the beginning of selfless faith honoring the truth and righteousness of God. His most famous sermon is entitled, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

Subsequent revivalists attempted to soften Edward's sharp edges a bit by nuancing the issue of human inability to achieve salvation. Edwards maintained that we are *naturally* able to obey God but are *always morally unwilling* to do so, and thus can be held accountable for our selfish refusal. Charles Finney, another revivalist, accepted that we are unwilling to obey God, but doesn't make this unwillingness a human *inability*. More pragmatically than doctrinally oriented, Finney fostered revival *technique*: an avowed "soul winner," he *stirred emotions, involved laity including women, and advocated praying for persons by name* as they sat on "the anxious bench."

Wesleyan revivalism differed. Arminian rather than Calvinist, John Wesley insisted that, because the Gospel itself conveys grace, *anyone who hears the Gospel may choose* to receive grace and, thus, salvation. Christian perfection is *possible*, Wesley taught, because God's grace continues to be effective in our lives. So in the new world we have continued to struggle with issues of authority, accountability, God's intentionality (grace), and human possibility. Threat and thrill: can you identify these dynamics in your own religious experience?