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Jonathan Edwards and the Heidelberg Catechism¹

ABSTRACT

As part of the ongoing effort to reappraise the influence and use of the Heidelberg Catechism in early America, an important tradition to consider is New England Puritanism, and an important figure in that tradition, Jonathan Edwards. Though it might be assumed that Edwards had no interaction with the “Palatine Catechism,” a closer look reveals that it was actually a part of the religious culture. This essay looks for the first time at Edwards’ exposure to the document and commentaries on it through colonial book-owning, and then focuses on two episodes in his life in which the Catechism played a role.

INTRODUCTION

In this 450th anniversary year of the Heidelberg Catechism, many different lines of influence are being drawn that illustrate the Catechism’s formative role around the world. But there are some areas, and some figures, for which we might assume the Heidelberg Catechism had little if any relevance. One such region is colonial New England, chock full of mad dogs and Englishmen, creed-bucking Dissenters, ecstatic New Lights, and Separatists. And a pivotal figure from this region is Jonathan Edwards, the 18th-century colonial British theologian, philosopher, revivalist, and missionary, who never made a single reference to the Heidelberg Catechism.

However, some careful digging yields discoveries that, hopefully, are indicative of the nature of the Heidelberg Catechism’s background presence in Edwards and in his New England. While initial efforts have been made by others scholars to show the congruity of Edwards and the Heidelberg Catechism on theological issues such as conversion and the definition of faith,² here I will focus on episodes in Edwards’ life in which the Heidelberg Catechism came into play, both obliquely and directly.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM IN EDWARDS’ BOOK WORLD

Not only did Edwards never cite the Heidelberg Catechism, but, so far as we know, he did not own a copy of it. Nor, for that matter, did he list any catechism or confession in his “Catalogue of Reading,” a list of more than 700 books he read and wanted to read.³ The catechism and

1 This paper was originally written, in shorter form, for the conference, “Profil und Wirkung des Heidelberger Katchismus,” held at Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, 9-11 May 2013, and will be published, in a different version, in the conference proceedings.

2 See Johannes Lilik Susanto, “Jonathan Edwards and the Heidelberg Catechism,” M.A. thesis, Calvin Theological Seminary, 2005; and “Jonathan Edwards vs. John Calvin: Got Assurance?” on Beggars All: Reformation & Apologetics Blogspot (beggarsallreformation.blogspot.com/2012/04/jonathan-edwards-vs-john-calvin-got.html), April 3, 2012.

3 Published in *Works of Jonathan Edwards Online* (edwards.yale.edu; hereafter, WJEO) 26.

confession with which he was most familiar, the Westminster, was, he allowed, something he could subscribe to the “substance” of, though not every statement.⁴ While he was an inheritor and defender of the Reformed and Puritan legacy, he was willing to experiment with it. As one of his disciples put it, Edwards “called no Man, Father. He thought and judged for himself, and was truly very much of an Original,” be it theologically or confessionally.⁵

However, the story does not end there, for he did have ready access to the Heidelberg Catechism. Edwards attended Yale College, and while its library at the time lacked a copy of the Heidelberg Catechism, it did have the three-volume Opera of Ursinus, possibly the edition published in Heidelberg in 1612, which of course would have included Zachary the Bear’s commentary.⁶ To this Edwards would have had quick entrée as a student and later as tutor, when he organized the library. Harvard College library owned the Sparke and Seddon 1576 translation of the Heidelberg Catechism, as well as Ursinus’ *Doctrinae Christianae Compendium* (London, 1586) and his *Corpus Christianae Doctrinae, cum Explicationibus*, specifically the edition of David Pareus printed in Heidelberg in 1621.⁷ Edwards made constant trips to Boston, and, as a part of the clerical elite, he availed himself of the collection whenever he could, as when he attended commencement, gave a lecture, or conducted business.

Members within his extended family, many of them ministers, also had impressive book collections given their frontier settings. For example, Cotton Mather, Edwards’ relative, owned a 1621 edition of the Pareus edition of Ursinus, and Edwards’ uncle, John Williams, pastor of Deerfield, Massachusetts, whose family was so devastated by the famous raid by French and Indians in 1704, owned a copy of *Catechesis Religionis Christianae*, a Latin translation of the German Heidelberg Catechism printed in 1563.⁸ Most to the point here, however, is the library of Edwards’ grandfather, Solomon Stoddard. Among the considerable number of books he already owned as a student were *Catechesis Religionis Christianae quae in Ecclesiis Palatinatus Traditur* (Edinburgh, 1591) and *Explicationum Catechetarum . . . Editio Altera* (Cambridge, 1587), not to mention the London 1618 edition of the Judgement of the Synode Holden at Dort (no sign of the Belgic Confession, otherwise we could suspect Stoddard of being a closet Reformed).⁹ Therefore Stoddard, under whom Edwards served for two years and then replaced as pastor of Northampton, Massachusetts, owned both a text of the Heidelberg Catechism and Ursinus’ explication of it. We know that, upon Stoddard’s death in 1729, these books stayed within reach for Edwards, either in the possession of his uncle John Stoddard, who lived in Northampton, or his uncle Anthony Stoddard, a minister in not-too-distant Woodbury, Connecticut. We see, therefore, that when we look beyond the simple lack of citations to the Heidelberg Catechism in Edwards’ reading lists, we find many points of potential contact. And this seems to have been the case with the generality of Edwards’ peers in the early New England intelligentsia as well.

4 Edwards to John Erskine, Aug. 5, 1750 (A117), WJEO 16 .

5 Samuel Hopkins, *Life and Character of the Late Reverend Mr. Jonathan Edwards* (Boston, 1765), 41.

6 *D. Zacheriae Ursini theologi celeberrimi . . . Opera theologica . . .* 3 vols. (Heidelberg, 1612).

7 *Eighteenth-Century Catalogues of the Yale College Library*, ed. James E. Mooney (New Haven: Yale University, 2001), A27; *The Printed Catalogues of the Harvard College Library, 1723-1790*, ed. W.H. Bond and Hugh Amory (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1996), A92, 97.

8 Inventory of the Estate of Rev. John Williams, n.d. [c. 1729], photocopy, Jonathan Edwards Center, Yale Divinity School; Julius H. Tuttle, “The Libraries of the Mathers,” *American Antiquarian Society Proceedings* 20 (1909-10), 341.

9 Norman S. Fiering, “Solomon Stoddard’s Library at Harvard in 1664,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 20 (1972), 266.

CHURCH GOVERNANCE AND THE LORD'S SUPPER: TWO CASES IN EDWARDS' LIFE

At two points in Edwards' career, the Heidelberg Catechism became a point of reference or appeal, directly or indirectly. These two episodes came, it should be noted, at crucial points in Edwards' increasingly combative and deteriorating relationship with his Northampton congregation. These appeals to the Heidelberg Catechism, or to the church communities that relied on the Heidelberg Catechism, came in the contexts, first, of Edwards' efforts to change church structure in order to implement more effective decision-making and discipline; and second, in the context of his attempt to alter the qualifications for admission to the sacraments of the church, a controversy that ended with his dismissal.¹⁰

"JUDGING OF CAUSES": THE CHURCH COMMITTEE OF 1748

In June 1748, Edwards delivered a sermon series over four Sabbaths on Deuteronomy 1:13-18, in which Moses recounts how he took "wise men, and understanding," and set them up as judges over the tribes of Israel to "hear the causes between your brethren."¹¹ From this passage Edwards derived the Doctrine, "'Tis the mind of God, that not a mixed multitude, but only select persons of distinguished ability and integrity, are fit for the business of judging of causes." Here, seeming to overthrow the congregational tradition of governance by the fraternity, Edwards asserted that God "did not leave difficult judgments" to the congregation in common, because such a company was not fit for it. Rather, God directed that a few persons of "noted and distinguished [abilities]" be chosen to judge cases, because "he knew it was requisite." To force his argument, Edwards appealed in turn to Scripture, citing literally dozens of texts; to reason and the "nature of things"; and to experience, as in determining civil causes, where justice is "committed to certain persons."

This remarkable discourse, soon to be published for the first time, is a virtually unknown yet significant text in Edwards' personal journey into the nature and order of the church, as well as a key marker in the history of Congregationalism in America. Why did he broach this idea at this point? Let us step back a moment to review what was happening.

It had not always been so contentious in Northampton. Edwards and his church had become internationally famous in 1735 and the years following as the epicentre of the Connecticut Valley Awakening, as described in Edwards' trend-setting *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* (1737). Edwards had augmented his standing as a theologian of revival during the awakenings of the early 1740s and through his subsequent treatises. Pastor and congregation basked in each other's glory; these were halcyon days, marked by the promise of spiritual outpouring and the excitement of notoriety. But in their wake the revivals brought contention, schism, and extremism, which soured Edwards somewhat on certain aspects of the awakenings and on certain proponents of them. In turn, his Northampton congregation began to sour on *him*, as a series of incidents and issues gradually alienated flock and shepherd.

By 1748, therefore, Edwards was talking in his discourse on Deuteronomy 1 about "this dark day," referring to the waning of the Great Awakening. But he no doubt also had in mind the disruptive and worrisome course of King George's War (the name for the American version of

¹⁰ For the background, see George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2003), 341-74.

¹¹ Edwards, MS Sermon on Deut. 1:13-18 (June 1748), WJEO 66. All quotes below are taken and edited from this source.

the War of Austrian Succession), whose impact was felt at Northampton, where Indians had raided nearby hamlets and killed farmers in their fields, and Edwards' house was "forted in" and quartered with soldiers to protect against attack. Locally, too, a series of further portentous events included the death of Col. Stoddard, Edwards' chief confidante and ally; the burning of the town's courthouse; and, most dramatically, the tumultuous "Bad Book Case" of 1744, in which a group of young men were found to be reading and abusing young women with knowledge gained from an illicitly acquired illustrated midwives' manual. In this event, evidence for Edwards of the declining morals of young people, he publicly demanded that all the culprits be disciplined severely, but the church resented the high-handed manner in which he handled what they considered a "private matter," and voted only to have them give a rather pallid public confession – a mere slap on the wrist.¹²

The resentment between pastor and people festered. In early 1748, in what seems to have been the immediate impetus for Edwards' call for the formation of a church committee, a daughter of the congregation had illegitimate twins by the son of a local prominent family (close relatives of the pastor); Edwards went after the couple, trying to force them to marry, despite their parents' wish that they would not. In the end, the father's family provided the mother with a sum of money to help raise the child, with the church's tacit approval.¹³

By this point, Edwards' frustration with Congregational procedure was palpable; to his way of thinking, it had become disorderly, cumbersome, and confused. Even worse, as far as he was concerned, it enabled and condoned immorality. He searched for ways to adapt or change Congregational polity to make it more efficient – more conducive, it can be said, to getting the results he wanted. His later expression of frustration to a Scottish correspondent no doubt extended back at least to this time: "I have long been perfectly out of conceit with our unsettled, independent, confused way of church government in this land."¹⁴ As a person who began and ended his career within Presbyterian contexts, first as a minister and then as president of the College of New Jersey, he was willing to cross ecclesiastical lines. Secretly, he was considering an exit from Northampton; one of his daughters, summarizing in a letter all of the contentions between her father and his congregation, admitted, "these things I am sensible have done much toward making my Father willing to leave his people if a Convenient Opportunity Present."¹⁵

In the discourse on Deuteronomy 1, Edwards' appeal to the community of Reformed churches that embraced the Heidelberg Catechism and related confessions appeared within a series of objections to his Doctrine, real and anticipated. One objection stated that creating a committee of select judges, a sort of oligarchy, was "a new thing." To this, Edwards responded:

'Tis no new thing in the church of God. This is the old way of talking. [It began with] Moses in the wilderness, [and] continued all along, in Christ's and the apostles' days.

12 On the Bad Book Case, see Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 292-302; Ava Chamberlain, "Bad Books and Bad Boys: The Transformation of Gender in Eighteenth-Century Northampton, Massachusetts," *New England Quarterly* LXXVI (June 2002), 179-203.

13 For documents relating to this case involving Elisha Hawley and Martha Root of Northampton, see WJEO 39; and also see Kathryn Kish Sklar, "Culture Versus Economics: A Case of Fornication in Northampton in the 1740s," *University of Michigan Papers in Women's Studies* (May 1978).

14 Edwards to John Erskine, Aug. 5, 1750 (A117) WJEO 16.

15 Sarah Edwards Jr. to Elihu Spencer, n.d. [c. Jan. 1748], WJEO 32, Letter C78.

Those that are looked upon as credible and authentic histories, do represent [that this was the way].

And it is at this day the way of the churches of Scotland, Holland, the other United Netherlands, Geneva, Switzerland, France, [and] almost all the Calvinist churches, ever since the Reformation.

And [it] is at this day the way of the dissenting churches in New York [and] New Jersey, [as in] in the famous Mr. Dickinson's church; [and in] Pennsylvania and Maryland, and of some churches in New England, or was so lately."

This was, for the most part, an appeal to the model of Reformed churches, some of which used the Heidelberg Catechism.

The allusion to the churches in New York and New Jersey is an important clue to understanding Edwards' aim. Churches in those colonies, and in Pennsylvania, represented a welter of confessions, including Dutch Reformed going back to New Netherland, French Huguenots, and German and Swedish Lutheran, Reformed, Pietist, and Anabaptist groups that had been immigrating to these areas for nearly a century. Of special note is Edwards' reference to the "famous" Jonathan Dickinson. Dickinson, who had died in 1747, was the Presbyterian pastor of Elizabethtown, New Jersey, and the first president of the College of New Jersey. He had been the most prominent participant in the "subscription controversy" of the 1720s, objecting to the requirement that ministerial candidates in the Synod of Philadelphia subscribe to the Westminster Confession. A renowned defender of Calvinism who acted as a liaison between colonial Presbyterian and Reformed churches, he had engaged in a long print debate against defenders of the Church of England (the nominally official church of New Jersey and the southern counties of New York), arguing the illegitimacy of episcopal government and ordination and the legitimacy of presbyters.

Edwards makes his reference to "Mr. Dickinson" without any framing, implying that his audience knew the controversies and Dickinson's positions and sources. And they probably did, because Dickinson the Presbyterian and Edwards the Congregationalist were acquainted. Perhaps the two had met as early as 1722 or 1723, when Edwards was a supply preacher for a small breakaway Presbyterian fellowship in Manhattan, but they certainly met when, following the Connecticut Valley Awakening in fall of 1735, Edwards had travelled around New York and New Jersey, where Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen, the German-born Dutch Reformed revivalist whom Edwards greatly admired (and cited in *A Faithful Narrative*),¹⁶ had laboured in coordination with the Presbyterians William and Gilbert Tennent. Also, Edwards reportedly preached at this time in Dickinson's church.¹⁷ During these periods, Edwards had direct exposure to Reformed and Presbyterian forms of church governance, perhaps with Dickinson himself as his guide. Furthermore, when Dickinson toured New England during the spring of 1742 in the aftermath of the split in the Philadelphia Synod caused by the revivals, he visited Northampton, where he stayed at Edwards' home; and we can be sure that Edwards would not have allowed him to leave without preaching to his congregation.

After a succession of Congregational ministers since its founding in the 1670s, the Elizabethtown

¹⁶ Edwards, *A Faithful Narrative*, in WJEO 4:156.

¹⁷ Bryan F. Le Beau, *Jonathan Dickinson and the Formative Years of American Presbyterianism* (Lexington, Ky., Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1997), 213, n. 34.

church was first thoroughly converted to Presbyterian polity by Dickinson following his arrival in 1709.¹⁸ The church's structure included a session, presumably made up of elected elders, which, aside from normal duties, functioned in addition as a "church court" with disciplinary powers.¹⁹ Working off the models he had seen in the Presbyterian and Reformed churches, Edwards was calling for a Congregational version of a Presbyterian kirk session or a Reformed consistory. This was not unprecedented in New England; Connecticut, where Edwards was born, had had Presbyterian congregations since the 1660s, and Stoddard, in his *Doctrine of Instituted Churches* (1703), had advocated a national, more hierarchical ecclesiology. Still, the idea of a session or consistory ran counter to the New England churches, which by the turn of the eighteenth century had ended the practice of ruling elders, clung to fraternal rights as enunciated in the *Cambridge Platform* of 1648, and fought the concentration of authority, as seen in the appeals of advocates of "democracy" such as John Wise.²⁰ Edwards was pitting the Congregational Way against the Heidelberg Way, so to speak, and taking sides with the latter.

Despite the potential for uproar, Northampton had been used to deferring to the rather dictatorial Stoddard, so Edwards won the day, at least for the present. In July, a fifteen-man committee was appointed to oversee church "order and purity" and the "trial and judgment" of cases. In June 1749, a council met to deal with the young rake, and the following month he was excommunicated (apparently by direction of the super-committee). This was part of a more sustained campaign by Edwards to insure the purity of the church, to secure his vision of it as a place of harmony, order, and love. But the means he came to use towards that end became harsher and harsher. For example, no one had been excommunicated in Northampton for several decades, but in the space of a few years during and in the immediate aftermath of the Great Awakening, Edwards oversaw the excommunication of at least four people, and the public admonition of at least twice that many, tellingly, for "contempt of the authority of the church."²¹

A NOT-SO-HUMBLE INQUIRY: QUALIFICATIONS FOR COMMUNION

If Edwards' appeal to Heidelberg via the Reformed churches of Europe and of the British North American "middle colonies" of New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania was at several removes in his Deuteronomy sermon, the next time references to the Palatine Catechism appear in his writings, they are absolutely explicit. His success in establishing a Congregational form of a consistory was short-lived, for in December 1748, a young man approached him and asked to be admitted into full membership. No one had done this for several years, and in the meantime Edwards had had a change of mind about the process for admitting applicants. Previously, he had been following Stoddard's procedure, which was that an eligible person who was of "non-scandalous behaviour" and could assent to a two-sentence form, promising to "take hold of the covenant," to subject him or herself to the government of the church and to

18 Mary E. Alward, "Early History of the First Presbyterian Church of Elizabeth, N.J.," *Proceedings of the Union County Historical Society*, 2 (1923-24), 155.

19 Leonard Trinterud, *Forming of an American Tradition: A Re-examination of Colonial Presbyterianism* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1949), 205-6.

20 John Wise (1652-1725), minister of Hatfield and Essex, Mass., was a strident defender of the autonomy of the churches and author of *The churches quarrel espoused* (Boston, 1713) and *A vindication of the government of New-England churches* (Boston, 1717).

21 See MS, Northampton Church Records, bk. I, Northampton (Mass.) First Churches; and Douglas A. Sweeney, "Jonathan Edwards and the Church," in *The Princeton Companion to Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005), 167-89, esp. 183-84.

promote its welfare, could be admitted to the church and to the sacraments. From about 1744, however, Edwards had embarked on an intensive study of the Bible, and had decided that applicants should be able to profess, in their own words, that they sincerely hoped they were saved and that they desired to live a godly life. This was not, as is often thought, an effort to reinstitute a lengthy public testimony of spiritual experience, but rather a call to demonstrate to themselves and to the church that they were truly saints.

To challenge Stoddard in this manner, whom the people of Northampton regarded to be a "sort of deity," as Edwards described their relationship, proved the last straw.²² The church began a series of meetings in which they sought to compel Edwards to reaffirm Stoddard's policies, or to begin the dismissal process. Edwards lobbied for an opportunity fully to explain his views, and, after much resistance, he did so, both in the lectern and in print, in a treatise entitled *An Humble Inquiry into the Rules of the Word of God, Concerning the Qualifications Requisite to a Complete Standing and Full Communion in the Visible Christian Church*, published in August 1749. Not surprisingly, Edwards noticed that very few of the townspeople attended the lectures or read the book.

The controversy that prompted and was codified in *An Humble Inquiry* arose from Northampton's adoption of the Half-Way Covenant under Stoddard on the one hand and the formalizing effects of popular religion on the other. The churches of Massachusetts Bay had been founded on the premise that only "visible saints" would be admitted to the privileges of full church membership: access to the sacraments, the right to vote in church meetings, and the right to hold civil offices; under this system, only those who were full members could have their children baptized. The Half-Way Covenant had been implemented in the 1660s as a means of extending church membership privileges to those who were the children of merely baptized parents. In Northampton at least, this practice had led to a routinized process whereby those about to get married would "renew" their baptismal covenant or become full members for the sake of their communal standing and to entitle their children to the seals. This process had become for many void of much personal spiritual meaning, which Edwards found reprehensible. "The key in the situation in Northampton and in Edwards' lifelong concern," writes historian David D. Hall, "which deepened in the aftermath of the Great Awakening, was the difference between true and false spirituality. As his ministry rapidly deteriorated . . . Edwards came to think of most of his congregation as hypocrites."²³ *An Humble Inquiry* therefore asserted that only those who "in profession, and in the eye of the church's Christian judgment," are "godly or gracious persons," should "be admitted to the communion and privileges of members of the visible church of Christ in complete standing," that is, to either baptism (as adults or on behalf of their children) or to the Lord's Supper. Through the ensuing discussion – really an extended exercise in biblical exposition – Edwards sought to comprehend visible sainthood, evangelical hypocrisy, and the practices of the primitive church. He closed by considering no less than twenty anticipated objections to his view, dealing with passages of Scripture that have historically yielded multiple interpretations, and with the affiliation between certainty of faith and visibility of faith, the qualifications to the sacraments, and the nature of profession and requirements for adult baptism.

An Humble Inquiry is the only one of Edwards' treatises to include an appendix by another author, another voice. For this, though Edwards read as widely as he could in church history, he

²² Edwards to Thomas Gillespie, July 1, 1751, WJEO 16, Letter A130.

²³ Hall, "Editor's Introduction," WJEO 12:84.

called on Thomas Foxcroft, colleague to Charles Chauncy at the First Church of Boston – an odd couple, given that Foxcroft was as pro-revival as Chauncy was anti-revival. Aside perhaps from Thomas Prince, New England’s respected though scatter-brained chronologer, Edwards could not have chosen a more recognized figure, regionally and beyond, because of his wide reading and network. He asked Foxcroft to provide an overview of other Protestant denominations in Europe and America on the issue of qualifications for church membership. Here, again, we see the importance of personal connection. Foxcroft, who came to be Edwards’ trusted literary agent in Boston, seeing his later treatises through the press, was a friend and ally of Dickinson. The two had begun corresponding in 1740, and had contributed publications to the same debates. Foxcroft had written the preface to one of Dickinson’s essays, and when Dickinson reached Boston in April 1742, he made sure to visit Foxcroft. Completing the circle, Foxcroft responded to Edwards’ request with a lengthy letter, dated June 1749, answering a series of questions relating to the controversy. Edwards included a condensed version of the letter as an appendix to his treatise,²⁴ seeking to widen the circle around a seemingly parochial, intramural argument of New England Congregationalism by including the European perspective and showing that his position was actually that of the Reformed and dissenting churches in Great Britain, on the Continent, and in neighbouring colonies.

In three of his answers, Foxcroft describes for Edwards the beliefs and practices of those who follow the Heidelberg Catechism. In the treatise, Edwards devoted an entire section to a consideration of I Corinthians 11:28, which suggests that he consulted Ursinus’ commentary, since Ursinus makes that very text central to his exposition on Question 81.²⁵ Hence, Edwards’ Question One for Foxcroft read: “What is the general opinion respecting that self-examination required in I Cor. 11:28, whether communicants are not here directed to examine themselves concerning the truth of grace, or their real godliness?”²⁶ The consensus on this, Foxcroft reported, was that all Reformed confessions worthy of the name held the importance of examining whether one had true faith or had committed an unrepentant offense before approaching the table. Continuing, Foxcroft set up the general practices of English, Scottish, Dutch, and German Protestants against Stoddard’s controversial view that the Lord’s Supper was a “converting ordinance”:

“Mr. Stoddard’s gloss on the text, who tells us [. . .] “that a man must come solemnly to that ordinance, examining what need he has of it,” is quite foreign from the current sense of Calvinist writers . . . I might easily confront it with numerous authorities. But the Palatine Catechism and that of the Westminster Assembly, with the common explanations and catechizings upon them, may be appealed to as *instar omnium*.”²⁷

Interestingly, Foxcroft drew both Westminster and Heidelberg adherents under the umbrella of “Calvinist,” but this may have been Foxcroft’s strategy to convince New England readers, among whom “Calvinist” was the acceptable label over against “Arminian.”

The next question asked, “Whether it be the general opinion of those aforesaid, that some who know themselves to be unregenerate and under the reigning power of sin, ought

24 Edwards to Thomas Foxcroft, May 12, 1749 WJEO 16, Letter A92, in which JE says that he intends shortly to “send an abstract of your former letter to be added to my book as an appendix.”

25 *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharius Ursinus, on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (Columbus, Ohio, 1852), 424-25.

26 Edwards, *Humble Inquiry*, WJEO 12:327.

27 Edwards, *Humble Inquiry*, WJEO 12:328.

notwithstanding, in such a state, to come to the Lord's Table?" This elicited from Foxcroft his most fulsome and explicit praise of the Heidelberg Catechism, as well as of Ursinus' and Peter de Witte's commentary, in support of restricting the table only to the visibly regenerate:

"Among the foreign Protestants, in Germany, France, etc., I shall name but two out of many instances before me. The Heidelberg or Palatine Catechism, which had the solemn approbation of the Synod of Dort, and was especially praised by the divines of Great Britain; which has been in a manner universally received and taught, formerly in Scotland and still all over Holland, and by reason of its excellency has been translated into no less than thirteen several languages; this is most express in claiming the Lord's Supper for a special privilege of such as have true faith and repentance; and forbidding it to hypocrites, as well as scandalous persons, declaring that none such ought to come. See the 81st and other questions and answers, with Ursin's Latin *Explications* and De Witte's English *Catechizings* thereon. Here, sir, indeed you have the judgment of a multitude in one."²⁸

Question Four took up the issue of the requirements that adult persons should possess in order to receive baptism. As he was writing *An Humble Inquiry*, Edwards queried Foxcroft in a letter concerning admission to baptism in "in your Parts," that is, eastern Massachusetts.

"You say, you believe the generality of the churches and elderly ministers, your way hold to the first principles of New England in this matter: if you mean not only with respect to qualifications for the Lord's Supper, but also baptism, 'tis what I was by no means aware of, and quite otherwise than I supposed. I did suppose it to be the universal, and long-established custom of the country to admit to baptism on lower terms than to the Lord's Supper."

In other words, Edwards had operated on the assumption that virtually all of the Massachusetts churches observed the Half-Way Covenant, which Edwards identified with "Mr. Stoddard's principles." Furthermore, Edwards thought that "the ministers in New Jersey and Pennsylvania are many of them strict with regard to qualifications for the Lord's Supper; but I understand they are not so with regard to baptism; but do admit all, on owning the covenant, not under the notion of a profession of true godliness."²⁹

But Foxcroft denied that this was the case with the Congregational churches of eastern Massachusetts and the Reformed and Presbyterian churches of New Jersey and Pennsylvania. This gave Edwards the freedom to pose in his treatise whether it was "the general opinion of Protestant churches and divines, in the case of adult persons, that the terms of admission to both sacraments are the same?" Foxcroft's reply was an unadulterated yes:

"That a credible profession of saving faith and repentance is necessary to baptism, in the case of the adult, I can show, by the authority of Claude's approved *Defense of the Reformation*, to be the general opinion of French Protestants; and by the Palatine Catechism, by the Leyden professors' Synopsis, etc., to be the prevailing judgment of the Reformed in Germany, Holland, and foreign parts."³⁰

²⁸ Edwards, *Humble Inquiry*, WJEO 12:342.

²⁹ Edwards to Thomas Foxcroft, May 24, 1749, WJEO 16, Letter A96.

³⁰ Edwards, *Humble Inquiry*, WJEO 12:342.

Hereby, Foxcroft endorsed Edwards' effort to make qualifications for baptism as strict as that of entry to the Lord's Supper. Edwards argued that there was "one covenant," and therefore the requirements for adults to receive both baptism and the Lord's Supper were identical – a repudiation of the Half Way Covenant. And a vital ingredient of Edwards' argument came, via Foxcroft, from the Heidelberg Catechism and the model of those churches that adhered to it.

CONCLUSION

While Edwards did apparently have knowledge of and exposure to the Catechism itself and to documents relating to it, such as Ursinus' commentary, his involvement with them was circumstantial, episodic, and mediated. For a select few in Edwards' circle the Heidelberg Catechism was a document with which they were readily conversant, but he perhaps was more representative in that the Heidelberg Catechism, while respected in 18th-century New England, was for him an ambient document, a source of appeal certainly, but not an everyday one.

Foxcroft's references in his appendix to *An Humble Inquiry* are affirming, but the question we might add is, To what extent did he accurately portray a "consensus" of Protestant churches on these issues? Whatever nuances may have been glossed over or misrepresented, Edwards, with the help of Dickinson, Foxcroft, and others, was willing to bring the authority of the international pan-protestant movement down upon his church, to show how isolated they were in their practices, and thereby convert them to his way of thinking. There was a strong Reformed presence in the nearby Hudson River Valley and beyond, to which Edwards had some exposure through his work, travel, and reading. Edwards' perspective as he ended his time at Northampton was increasingly inter-colonial and international, reflecting his growing involvement in the transatlantic evangelical network, while his congregation's perspective remained provincial and strictly hewed to "Mr. Stoddard's Way."³¹ Edwards' efforts to get his parishioners and their local supporters to see beyond the parameters of a religious culture that was increasingly bound to the fashion of the mother country and to local tradition, to compare their practices with other churches in the broader Reformed tradition, failed. And he paid for it with his position, though by the end it was to him a relief.

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31 See Philip F. Gura, "Mr. Stoddard's Irreverent Way," *Early American Literature* 21 (Spring 1986), 29-43; and Gura, "Going Mr. Stoddard's Way: William Williams on Church Privileges, 1693," *William and Mary Quarterly* 45 (July 1988), 489-98.

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