

Desk Drawers and Sermons

Examining Edwards's working methods during these first years in Northampton reveals that some of his practices demonstrably interacted with the character of his desk. In the foregoing years, Edwards had composed his sermons in octavo booklets, writing out the texts fully and carrying the booklets into the pulpit to be read. Although in later years Edwards would partially outline his ordinary sermons, he returned to a fully written-out text for all special occasions. He always considered this lack of trust in his memory—or his inability to effectively extemporize—to be a defect, and it must have been particularly annoying at the outset in Northampton when, for two years, his grandfather was sitting behind him as he preached. Solomon Stoddard had published a critique of preaching just two years before his grandson's arrival in which he declared with his usual finality that reading sermons in the pulpit was so uninspiring that "ordinarily it is not to be allowed."¹ The octavo sermon booklets that Edwards had been using since 1720 measured roughly four by six inches and would be quite visible to the congregation when opened in the hand of the preacher. Significantly, after a few months with Stoddard, Edwards changed his booklet form from octavo to duodecimo, measuring about four inches square, when he composed new sermons. The duodecimo was much easier to palm, or conceal in the hand, than the octavo and thus would make Edwards's continued reading of the sermons less visually obtrusive.

At the time of his move to Northampton, Edwards had a library of about fifty octavo sermons, and he drew on them to substantially furnish his contribution to the joint pastorate with his octogenarian grandfather. The sermon booklets probably were tied in bundles to be sorted through when another sermon was called for. However, as his collection grew, Edwards soon must have realized that if his sermons were to be a resource for pulpit and study, they would have to be better organized. Edwards's many notebook references to particular sermons indicate that the sermons were eventually stored in a file by biblical text, written in the upper left-hand corner of each booklet's first page. As time passed Edwards also began to record each sermon's preaching history, with the date of first preaching in the upper right-hand corner and shorthand notes respecting re preaching in the middle. If the sermon booklets were stood on end in a row, like file cards, it would be relatively easy to recognize a sermon by text, date, and preaching history. As it happens, the two top drawers of Edwards's new desk were a generous four inches in depth, just allowing for such a file of duodecimo manuscripts (though not of octavos). It is noteworthy that scholarly dating of the early, undated sermons (composed before 1733) has revealed that Edwards's change from octavo to duodecimo format occurred during the summer of 1727, the most likely time for his acquisition of the desk.² The depth and width of the top drawers would have permitted four rows of sermons horizontally or three rows front-to-back in each drawer. By the end of his sermon-writing career, Edwards would have had enough duodecimo sermon manuscripts to fill about ten linear feet when stood on end; the desk drawers provide eight linear feet when sermons are

¹ Solomon Stoddard, *The Defects of Preachers Reproved in a Sermon Preached at Northampton, May 19. 1723* (New-London, 1724), 23. Samuel Hopkins relates Edwards's own reservations about reading his sermon notes in [Hopkins], *The Life and Character of the Late Reverend Mr. Jonathan Edwards, President of the College at New-Jersey . . .*, (Boston, 1765), 48–49.

² How common tying bundles of papers together was is uncertain, though other figures of the time were known to do it. Edwards's sermons came to Yale University at the end of the nineteenth century in packets tied by red and blue ribbons. On Edwards's early sermon production, see *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 10, *Sermons and Discourses, 1720–1723*, ed. Wilson H. Kimnach (New Haven, Conn., 1992), 90–94.

stored in three rows, or ten linear feet when stored in four. So there were two good reasons for Edwards's switch to duodecimo booklets in 1727, even though his great sermon library was just in the early stages.

As Edwards assumed sole leadership of the Northampton church upon Stoddard's death in 1729, he experienced the pressure of attempting to renew a church that, according to Stoddard himself, had not been significantly awakened in twenty years. Thus sermon manuscripts of the period poured forth with visibly rushed calligraphy, and Edwards made increasing use of sermon notebooks in which he noted ideas and promising biblical texts, sketched arguments, and ultimately provided topical indexes to his growing store of sermons. "Sacrament," "Lecture," "Virgins," "Peace," "Singing," "Fast," "Contention," "Children," "Moral Honesty," "Covenant," "Rulers," "Affliction," "Education," "Ordination," "Natural Persons," and "Relative Duties" are typical of the seemingly arbitrary but probably useful topical notations written in a bold hand beside presumably notable entries in the sermon notebooks.³ The occupant of a prominent pulpit, Edwards was soon asked to preach abroad, and thus some sermons are marked as having been delivered in several towns, not to mention preachings in Northampton (usually with alterations and after intervals of several years). Using a variety of techniques Edwards revised and modified sermons, sometimes combining parts from two or more sermons until the formal identity of the original sermon was obliterated.⁴ His efforts in the art of homiletics were energetic and imaginative, and he seemed to reap a just reward when Northampton anticipated the Great Awakening by six years with a "Surprizing Work of God," the narrative of which won Edwards some notice in New England and was sufficiently well received to be published in London with an introduction by Isaac Watts.⁵

Beyond fulfilling the requirements of the pulpit, Edwards's sermons were an important part of his rapidly expanding manuscript library. Many of the notebooks mentioned above contain notes referring Edwards to sermons, sometimes with the suggestion that the sermon contains a better statement of the subject than that in the notebook.

³ For sermons with these subject titles, see sermon notebooks 14, 19, and 45, in *Works of Jonathan Edwards Online*, vol. 36, <http://edwards.yale.edu/research/browse>.

⁴ For a brief account of Edwards's methods of sermon composition and his exploitation of homiletical resources, see Kimnach, "Jonathan Edwards' Sermon Mill," *Early American Literature* 10, no. 2 (Fall 1975): 167–78.

⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprizing Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton, and the Neighbouring Towns and Villages of New-Hampshire in New-England* (London, 1737).