

The Characteristics of Authentic Conversion in Jonathan Edwards' Perspective: A Survey of Youth at Church X in Mataram City

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Abstract

This study aims to evaluate the authenticity of repentance among youth at Church X in Mataram City by employing Jonathan Edwards' systematic theological framework. Filling a gap in existing literature that often focuses on general issues, this study specifically applies Edwards' concepts to quantitatively assess the spiritual state of young people. Using a descriptive quantitative survey method, data were collected through an online questionnaire from 57 respondents aged 15–25. Analysis of 52 valid responses revealed that 55.77% of respondents met the criteria for authentic repentance according to Edwards, while 44.23% did not. These findings confirm the gap between formal faith and spiritual transformation among youth, as highlighted in relevant literature. A deeper analysis also shows that while most respondents have a personal experience with God, there is a weakness in practical manifestation, particularly in turning away from sin. This research highlights the importance of spiritual formation that is not only doctrinal but also fosters a deep spiritual experience, manifesting in pure heart motivations and producing genuine fruits of repentance.

Keywords

Authentic, Jonathan Edwards, Youth, Conversion

Introduction

The phenomenon of weak spirituality among Christian youth in Indonesia has become one of the key issues in contemporary theological studies. Reports from the Bilangan Research Center (2018; 2021) show that many young Christians do not experience consistent growth in faith, and most of them struggle to integrate their confession of faith with the transformation of daily life.¹ This reality reveals a gap between the cognitive understanding of the Christian faith and authentic spiritual experience.

Jonathan Edwards, a Puritan theologian and a central figure in the First Great Awakening in eighteenth-century America, offers a theological framework that emphasizes the integration of doctrinal faith and affective experience. Through his works such as *Religious Affections* and *The*

¹ Bilangan Research Center, *Spiritualitas Umat Kristen Indonesia 2021*, 177.

Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God, Edwards asserts that true conversion is marked by the transformation of religious affections, which involves hatred of sin, sorrow for sin, humility, determination to turn away from sin, and a personal experience of God's grace.²

Studies on Edwards have been widely conducted in Western contexts,³ but the application of his thought in Asia, particularly in Indonesia, remains limited. In fact, the dynamics of Christian youth in Indonesia, who live in a plural and religious society, require an approach that integrates both doctrinal and affective dimensions. Several local studies have tended to emphasize quantitative aspects such as patterns of worship and morality among young people,⁴ but few have examined the authenticity of conversion based on a classical theological framework.

In the Indonesian context, Eka Darmaputera highlights the importance of presenting a Christian faith that is "authentic and grounded," a faith that is not merely a repetition of dogma but is manifested in daily practice within a plural society.⁵ Similarly, Robert Setio stresses that Christian faith in Indonesia must "serve as a transformative witness, not merely a cultural heritage or religious formality."⁶ These perspectives from Indonesian theologians align with Edwards' framework, which emphasizes the balance between cognition, affection, and praxis of faith.

Although various studies, such as those conducted by the Bilangan Research Center (2018, 2021) and Ricky Njoto (2019), have confirmed the gap between formal Christian identity and deeper spirituality among Indonesian youth, these studies tend to focus on general issues or ministry implications. To date, no research has specifically and quantitatively measured the authenticity of youth conversion using a systematic and profound theological framework such as that articulated by Jonathan Edwards in his works.

² Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959); Jonathan Edwards, "The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God," in *Jonathan Edwards on Revival*, ed. Richard Owen Roberts (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1984). Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959); Jonathan Edwards, "The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God," in *Jonathan Edwards on Revival*, ed. Richard Owen Roberts (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1984).

³ George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Rhys S. Bezzant, "Church Discipline," in *The Jonathan Edwards Encyclopedia*, ed. Harry S. Stout, Kenneth P. Minkema, and Adriaan C. Neele (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 96.

⁴ Bambang Budijanto, ed., *Dinamika Spiritualitas Generasi Muda Kristen Indonesia* (Jakarta: Bilangan Research Center, 2018).

⁵ Eka Darmaputera, *Pergulatan Kehadiran Kristen di Indonesia* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1988), 45.

⁶ Robert Setio, "Iman Kristen di Tengah Pluralitas Agama," *Gema Teologi* 41, no. 2 (2017): 123.

This is the gap that the research study seeks to address. While existing literature has already identified the problem (the shallowness of faith), this research provides measurement tools and empirical analysis to assess the extent to which Christian youth truly experience genuine conversion. Thus, this study not only reaffirms an already recognized issue but also offers methodological and theological contributions by applying Edwards' concepts in a practical way to understand the current spiritual condition of young people.

Based on this background, the purpose of this research is to analyze the authenticity of conversion among youth at Church X in Mataram City by using Jonathan Edwards' theological framework. This study seeks to answer the following main questions:

1. What are the characteristics of conversion among youth at Church X when measured against the indicators of true conversion according to Jonathan Edwards?
2. To what extent is Edwards' framework relevant for assessing the spiritual experiences of Christian youth in Indonesia today?

Accordingly, this research is expected to make an academic contribution by enriching contextual theological literature on authentic conversion, as well as a practical contribution to pastoral ministry and the spiritual formation of young people in the local church.

Jonathan Edwards' Thought on True Conversion

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) is recognized as one of the most influential theologians in the history of Christianity, especially through his involvement in the First Great Awakening in New England. The central focus of his thought was to distinguish between true and false conversion. In *Religious Affections*, Edwards emphasized that genuine faith is not merely cognitive but also involves affections that arise from an experience of God's grace.⁷

In his sermon on Acts 8:22, Edwards described several characteristics of true conversion, namely:

⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 4-5.

1. Universal Hatred of Sin

A true convert universally hates sin, particularly his or her own sins.⁸ This hatred is grounded in love for God. The convert perceives the uncleanness of sin because it opposes God's delight. Sin is rebellion against God, and it deeply dishonors Him.

Therefore, a true convert must hate sin while loving God. The surpassing beauty of God compared to sin leads a true convert to hate all forms of sin, but especially his or her own personal sins.⁹

2. Sorrow for Sin

A true convert will inevitably experience a sense of brokenness when committing sin. This feeling arises as a result of his or her love for God. The convert realizes that sin has grieved the heart of God.¹⁰ Edwards also explained that a sinner's heart is hard, like stone. Yet, when he repents, he is described, as in Zechariah 12:10, as having a heart that is broken and softened.¹¹

Edwards' explanation of sorrow for sin aligns with McClymond's statement that repentance and grief over sin produce a soul that is not attracted to worldly temptations.¹² Such sorrow and regret are caused by the awareness of having offended God through sin. Edwards also added that a person who grieves over sin is at the same time softened by God to immediately turn away from sin and direct his or her life back to God.¹³

3. With Humility, Placing Oneself in a Lowly Position

This sense of lowliness in this context is not a feeling of shame due to accusation, but rather a deep hatred of sin—even to the point of lamenting oneself because of the sins committed. This feeling is also not driven by fear of the consequences that may follow.¹⁴ Instead, it arises as a response to God's majesty and glory. The beauty and holiness of

⁸ Jonathan Edwards, "Acts 8:22," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Online*, vol. 45, ed. Harry S. Stout et al., margin 4, <https://edwards.yale.edu>.

⁹ Edwards, "Acts 8:22," margin 4.

¹⁰ Edwards, "Acts 8:22," margin 5.

¹¹ Edwards, "Acts 8:22," margin 5.

¹² Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 90.

¹³ Edwards, "Acts 8:22," margin 4-5.

¹⁴ Edwards, "Acts 8:22," margin 6.

God are the motivating aspects that lead a true convert to humble himself before the Lord. These two attributes of God make a person feel unworthy to receive His forgiveness. Yet at the same time, he realizes that God is full of mercy.¹⁵

4. Turning Away from Sin

True conversion requires a Christian to fully turn from sin to God. This act of leaving sin is driven by awe and admiration for God, so that sin loses its appeal. When someone repents but not out of love for God, this is not true conversion. Genuine conversion is when a person surrenders his or her life completely to God and abandons sin entirely.¹⁶

However, Edwards was not an idealist detached from reality. He acknowledged that a true convert remains vulnerable to falling into sin. Yet he emphasized that God's grace transforms the life of a true convert in relation to everything connected to sin.¹⁷

In line with the various characteristics of true conversion explained by Edwards, he also outlined several marks that indicate when a person has not yet experienced genuine conversion or has only undergone a general conversion.¹⁸

1. Acknowledgment of Being a Sinner

A person's confession that he or she is a sinner does not necessarily mean that true conversion has taken place. A false convert tends to hide sinful practices and is unwilling to reflect seriously on his or her sins. This is because such a person views sin as something common, practiced by many. This is one of the signs that he or she has never been truly convicted of sin.¹⁹

2. Showing Sorrow for Sin Committed

A person who shows sorrow for sin committed does not necessarily demonstrate true conversion. The sorrow expressed may simply arise because the sin has damaged his or her reputation or has brought shame in the eyes of society.²⁰

¹⁵ Edwards, *WJE* 2: 274.

¹⁶ Edwards, "Acts 8:22," margin 6-7

¹⁷ Edwards, *WJE* 2: 341.

¹⁸ Edwards, "Acts 8:22," margin 11.

¹⁹ Edwards, "Acts 8:22," margin 10.

²⁰ Edwards illustrated this point by referring to the case of a well-known evangelist of his time. The evangelist wept bitterly when confessing his sin before a television audience after being caught with a sex worker. However, after publicly displaying sorrow for his sin, he was later found again in a place associated with prostitution.

3. Conversion Based on Fear and Self-Protection

This type of person makes promises to God to repent when facing a crisis. They are those who vow to dedicate themselves to serve God if He restores their difficult circumstances. Such people use repentance as a way to soften God's heart, as if He could be persuaded by their promises.²¹

4. Claiming to Repent While Continuing in Sin

This characteristic is based on self-justification for the sins committed. Edwards explained that self-defense comes from a proud heart that refuses to be humbled or to bear the shame of sin. Such a person admits sin only out of compulsion and is motivated by the desire to escape its consequences. Edwards emphasized that true repentance and genuine self-justification can never coexist. It is impossible for someone to defend themselves for their sins while at the same time truly repenting.²²

The Spirituality of Christian Youth in the Context of Indonesia and Asia

Studies on the spirituality of youth in Indonesia reveal a gap between the confession of faith and the transformation of life. The Bilangan Research Center (2018, 2021) found that many young Christians possess only a formal Christian identity but have not yet experienced authentic personal conversion.²³ This finding is consistent with Ricky Njoto (2019), who emphasized the need for youth ministry approaches that go beyond emotional appeal and instead cultivate depth of faith rooted in sound doctrine.²⁴

However, amid the forces of globalization and pluralism, young people may remain attached to the religious traditions of their families while simultaneously adopting alternative spiritual practices or worldviews shaped by global media and cross-cultural interactions.²⁵ Across Asia (including Indonesia), there are two relevant trends. In some contexts, there has been an increase

²¹ Jonathan Edwards, *True and False Conversion*, ed. William C. Nichols (Iowa: International Outreach Inc., 2003), 338.

²² Edwards, *True and False Conversion*, 339.

²³ Bilangan Research Center, *Dinamika Spiritualitas Generasi Muda Kristen Indonesia* (Jakarta: BRC, 2018); idem, *Spiritualitas Umat Kristen Indonesia 2021* (Jakarta: BRC, 2021).

²⁴ Ricky F. Njoto, "Progressive but Conservative: Jonathan Edwards's Approaches to Youth Ministry for Today's Evangelical Churches in Asia Pacific," *Asia Journal of Theology* 33, no. 1 (2019): 116–120.

²⁵ Jensen, *The Cultural Psychology of Religiosity, Spirituality, and Secularism in Adolescence*, *Adolescent Research Review* (2021), 277–288.

in the number of religiously unaffiliated adolescents and young adults, while in other contexts, affiliation remains strong—but the meaning and practice of religiosity have changed (e.g., becoming more individualistic and shaped by non-institutional spiritual experiences).²⁶ This suggests that youth ministry programs that simply replicate old models often fail to address the plurality of spiritual experiences and identity needs of the younger generation.²⁷

Practical challenges frequently reported in Asian and Indonesian literature include: (a) secularization and the growing secular orientation among some youth (disconnection from institutions and preference for non-dogmatic spirituality); (b) religious and value pluralism that undermines the assumption of homogeneity within local faith communities, thus requiring more contextual approaches; and (c) weak spiritual discipline (e.g., irregular practices of prayer, Bible reading, or communal discipline), which contributes to the shallowness of faith.²⁸

Research Method

This study employed a descriptive quantitative approach through a survey. This method was chosen to measure and describe the characteristics of conversion among youth at Church X in Mataram City, using Jonathan Edwards' theological framework. Data were collected on May 19–20, 2025, by distributing an online questionnaire to 57 respondents aged 15–25, of which 52 responses were declared valid for analysis.

The target population of this research was young people aged 15–25 years at Church X in Mataram City. This age group was selected because it is relevant to the issue raised in the introduction, namely the phenomenon of weak spirituality among Christian youth in Indonesia. Furthermore, from a theological perspective, Jonathan Edwards had a particular emphasis in his ministry toward young people. Church X was chosen as a specific case study because it is the community where

²⁶ Jensen, *The Cultural Psychology of Religiosity, Spirituality, and Secularism in Adolescence*, 277–288.

²⁷ Pew Research Center & Pew-Templeton Project

Data and analysis on global religious demographics and religiosity that are relevant for understanding shifts in religious affiliation across regions, including the observation that the proportion of the unaffiliated has increased in many countries and is largely concentrated among younger age groups. See Pew summary reports (e.g., “*How the Global Religious Landscape Changed From 2010 to 2020*” and related publications). Pew Research Center+1. (The Pew summary report; the full report includes age analysis and changes in proportions, see PDF and summaries; see Pew documents, 2015 & updated 2025).

²⁸ I. Putu A. Darmawan, Jamin Tanhidy & Yabes Doma, *Youth key persons' digital discipleship process during the pandemic and post-pandemic era*, HTS Teologiese Studies (2024)

this phenomenon was observed, thus allowing the research to analyze the authenticity of conversion within the concrete context of a local church community.

Questionnaire Design and Indicators of Authentic Conversion

The questionnaire was designed with five main indicators that reflect the characteristics of true conversion according to Jonathan Edwards: hatred of sin, sorrow for sin, a sense of unworthiness because of sin, turning away from sin, and personal conversion experience. Each indicator consisted of several statements representing different levels of spiritual understanding and experience.

To identify authentic conversion, the analysis focused only on the statements explicitly aligned with Edwards' theology. These statements were:

- **Statement Code A3 (Hatred of sin):** "I acknowledge that I am a sinner and I hate any sin, because I love God more than I enjoy the sins I often commit."
- **Statement Code B3 (Sorrow for sin):** "I feel sorrow because I realize that every time I sin, I grieve the heart of God whom I love."
- **Statement Code C4 (Sense of unworthiness because of sin):** "I feel unworthy to receive forgiveness from God, but I also know that God always accepts the confession of sins I bring to Him, so I rise again."
- **Statement Code D3 (Turning away from sin):** "I have repented, and I am gradually leaving behind the sins I often commit because I love God more than those sins."
- **Statement Code E3 (Conversion experience):** "I have believed in Jesus Christ as my Savior, I love Him, and I strive every day to keep my life for the God I love."

Criteria for Classifying Respondents

A response was classified as that of a "true convert" only if the respondent specifically selected all five indicator statements (A3, B3, C4, D3, E3). These choices indicate conversion that is grounded in deep love for God, going beyond mere feelings or knowledge. Conversely, responses that selected other statements were categorized as "not yet experiencing true conversion" or still in the early stages of conversion. This is because such choices reflect repentance based merely on self-

acknowledgment as a sinner, sorrow over the consequences of sin, or motivation driven by fear, which, according to Edwards, are not marks of genuine conversion.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using a quantitative method by calculating the percentage of respondents who met the criteria for true conversion. The formula used was:

Percentage = (number of cases / total number) × 100%.

Here, “number of cases” refers to respondents identified as true converts, while “total number” refers to all valid respondents who completed the questionnaire.

Results and Findings

Based on quantitative analysis of 52 valid questionnaire responses, this study identified two main categories regarding the authenticity of youth conversion. Overall, 29 respondents (55.77%) were classified as individuals who demonstrated the characteristics of authentic conversion according to Jonathan Edwards’ theological framework. In contrast, 23 respondents (44.23%) did not fully meet these criteria, indicating that their conversion was not yet fully authentic or remained in process.

To gain a deeper understanding of the reasons behind these findings, the data analysis was expanded by examining the percentage of responses for each key indicator reflecting true conversion. The results revealed variations across indicators, highlighting the complexity of young people’s spiritual experiences:

- **Statement CodeA3 (Hatred of sin):** Only 35 respondents (67.31%) stated that they hated sin out of love for God rather than out of fear or regret. This figure shows that while the majority of respondents expressed this element, a portion had not yet reached the point where their hatred of sin was entirely rooted in divine motivation. This aligns with Edwards’ view of true conversion as a “heart transformation” born from inner enlightenment.

- **Statement Code B3 (Sorrow for sin):** A total of 32 respondents (61.54%) specifically reported sorrow for sin because it grieved the heart of God they loved. This deeper analysis indicates that 61.54% of respondents experienced sorrow for sin due to the awareness of having offended God. This percentage is significant as it confirms that the majority of surveyed youth have experienced “holy sorrow,” which Edwards considered essential for true conversion.
- **Statement C4 (Sense of unworthiness because of sin):** This indicator had the highest percentage, with 38 respondents (73.08%) expressing a sense of unworthiness yet still trusting in God’s mercy and forgiveness. With this highest proportion, 73.08%, the finding shows that the majority of respondents had a strong understanding of their unworthiness before God. This is consistent with Edwards’ argument that the “new humility” is the clearest sign of true conversion, as it makes individuals rely entirely on God’s grace and mercy rather than on their own effort or worthiness.
- **Statement D3 (Turning away from sin):** Only 31 respondents (59.62%) demonstrated an active effort to turn away from sin motivated by love for God. Although this percentage is lower than other indicators, it highlights that the process of “bearing fruits of repentance” is, for many young people, an ongoing struggle. This data affirms Edwards’ view that true conversion does not necessarily mean perfection but rather an active struggle born from a heart that has been transformed.
- **Statement E3 (Conversion experience):** The majority, namely 42 respondents (80.77%), stated that they strive every day to keep their lives dedicated to God. This figure strongly supports the thesis that most of the youth at Church X have had a personal experience that changed their lives, leading them to persevere daily. This aligns with Edwards’ perspective that “experience” is the foundation of conversion, which must be manifested in practical and tangible commitment.

This detailed data indicates that although elements of conversion such as self-acknowledgment as a sinner and efforts to abandon sin are relatively common, the underlying motivation—love for God—is not consistently evident among all respondents. This corresponds with Edwards’ distinction between “natural repentance,” which is driven by fear or self-interest, and “supernatural repentance,” which is motivated by divine love. The phenomenon in which 44.23% of respondents

did not meet the criteria for authenticity can be explained by the lack of integration between doctrinal understanding (e.g., knowing that sin is wrong) and spiritual experience that transforms their motivation.

Furthermore, these findings highlight the misalignment between self-perception and measurable spiritual reality. Some respondents subjectively felt that they had already repented but did not meet all authentic indicators, while others showed the opposite. This suggests that young people's understanding of the concept of true conversion may still be shallow. It reinforces the importance of spiritual education that is not merely cognitive but also focuses on shaping the heart and cultivating pure motivation, as Edwards emphasized in the context of revival.

This study aimed to evaluate the authenticity of conversion among youth at Church X in Mataram City using Jonathan Edwards' theological framework. Based on quantitative analysis of 52 valid responses, the findings show that 29 respondents (55.77%) demonstrated characteristics of authentic conversion, while 23 respondents (44.23%) did not fully meet these criteria.

These findings strongly support the thesis highlighted by the Bilangan Research Center (2018, 2021), which identified a gap between confession of faith and life transformation among Christian youth in Indonesia. The percentage of respondents who did not meet the criteria for authentic conversion reflects a Christian identity that is primarily formal, yet not supported by a profound personal experience of conversion, as emphasized by Edwards.

Conclusion

This study aimed to evaluate the authenticity of conversion among youth at Church X in Mataram City using Jonathan Edwards' theological framework. Based on quantitative analysis of 52 valid responses, the findings show that 29 respondents (55.77%) demonstrated characteristics of authentic conversion, while 23 respondents (44.23%) did not fully meet these criteria.

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conversion reflects a Christian identity that is primarily formal, yet not supported by a profound personal experience of conversion, as emphasized by Edwards.

A deeper analysis of each indicator also affirms the practical challenges identified in the literature, particularly the weakness in spiritual disciplines that contributes to shallow faith. Although the majority of respondents reported having a personal experience with God (80.77%), the lower percentage on the indicator of turning away from sin (59.62%) shows that this experience has not yet been fully manifested in the tangible fruits of repentance, a crucial element in Edwards' theology. This is also consistent with Ricky Njoto (2019), who emphasized the need for youth ministry that focuses on the depth of faith and sound doctrine, rather than on emotional experience alone.

Furthermore, this study also highlights the complexity noted by Jensen (2021) and related literature on the shifting spirituality of young people. The fact that some respondents met the criteria for authenticity but subjectively felt they had not fully repented—and vice versa—illustrates the inconsistency between self-perception and measurable spiritual reality. This suggests that the understanding of true conversion may still be influenced by alternative worldviews or more individualistic forms of spirituality, which in turn require a more contextual approach in ministry.

Implications and Recommendations

Based on these conclusions, it is recommended that Church X, as well as churches in general, develop a more holistic approach to youth formation, one that does not focus merely on social activities or entertainment. Ministry programs should be strategically designed to encourage heart transformation and authentic spiritual motivation, in line with the findings of this study. More concretely, several recommendations that can be applied are:

1. Developing an Applicable Doctrinal Curriculum

Adopt or develop a curriculum that engages with Jonathan Edwards' works, such as *Religious Affections* or *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*. This curriculum can be adapted for young people, focusing on understanding the attributes of God that inspire awe and love, rather than merely emphasizing commands and prohibitions. The goal is to nurture repentance motivated by love for God, rather than fear of punishment.

2. Training and Equipping Young Leaders

Train young leaders to facilitate reflective discussions (spiritual formation groups) that address key themes such as “holy sorrow” and “new humility.” The focus is to help young people discern whether their sorrow or regret for sin arises from mere shame or from the awareness that they have grieved the heart of God.

3. Strengthening Communal Spiritual Disciplines

Encourage the practice of communal spiritual disciplines such as Bible reading, prayer, and sharing spiritual experiences in small groups. This aims to foster accountability and mutual support in the struggle to bear the “fruits of repentance.” Such practices can help young people integrate their personal experiences into a supportive faith community, ensuring that spirituality is not merely individualistic but manifested in everyday life.

This study has limitations because it focuses only on one church with a relatively small sample. Therefore, further research with broader coverage and qualitative methods (e.g., in-depth interviews) would be highly valuable to gain a richer and deeper understanding of this phenomenon.

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