

The “Great Awakening” Was it ?

by Allen Baird

The Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s in New England, North America, did not arise from the desire of a pure and orthodox people for revival as an “extraordinary something” which might lift them above their common lot although this is where it ended, or even as a general method for furthering the advance of Christianity in the land, but as a reaction over two doctrinal errors. “It is a fundamental and forgotten fact about the American Christian heritage: revival was not in its founding beginning a means to promote religion; it was the surprising result of a critique of religion.”¹ The two errors were Arminianism and the Half-Way Covenant. The Great Awakening, especially as it centred round Jonathan Edwards and his parish at Northampton, if seen in terms of an attempt to combat these errors, must be judged to be nothing other than a total failure. In Northampton, Edwards encountered an eighteenth century form of religious liberalism that was in the ascent, which emphasised not only the active part played by the human will in salvation, but the need that this human will should be moved, not by the grace of God, but by its own power. Around 1734 “a violent controversy, respecting Arminianism, prevailed extensively over that part of New England, and the friends of vital piety in Northampton regarded it as likely to have a most unhappy bearing on the interests of religion in that place.”² Edwards tried to combat this heresy by preaching some of his most powerful and famous sermons. In “A Divine and Supernatural Light”³ Edwards argued that spiritual knowledge and saving grace are imparted to the sinner immediately, or without the use of intermediate natural causes, making any sort of self-salvation impossible. A series of sermons was preached on “Justification By Faith Alone”, in which Edwards expressed his discontent with viewing faith as a condition fulfilled by man in order to be pronounced righteous, seeing it rather as a relation or union immediately caused by God the Holy Spirit by which Christ and His people are constituted as one federal or legal entity.⁴ Although some religious fervour was the immediate result, Sereno Dwight, Edwards’ first biographer, notes

¹ Robert W. Jenson, *America’s Theology: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards.* Oxford University Press, 1988. p.63.

² *The Works of Jonathan Edwards.* Banner of Truth Trust. 1992. Vol.1, p. xlii.

³ *ibid.*; Vol. 2, pp. 12-17.

that by the latter part of May, 1735, the “great work of the Spirit” had begun obviously to decline. He lists three reasons for this sudden declension.⁵ Firstly, the physical excitement created by the revival was greater than the human constitution could take for a prolonged period, as “nothing exhausts the strength of animal spirits like feelings.” Second, those sinners not swept away in the initial excitement had become “hardened and impenitent” and thus the unbelief of those outside the church had thwarted the progress of the Spirit within it. Third, an ecclesiastical controversy arose - surely a strange phenomenon in a community which had just been extraordinarily blessed by God - in one of the local churches about the ordination of a young minister in Springfield. Thus the first revival ended and Arminianism was still undefeated, so much so that Edwards found it still necessary to warn his congregation of it some decades later.⁶

The minister in Northampton before Edwards was his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard. Stoddard had taken into semi-membership those in the local community who were prepared to accept the outward doctrine and discipline of Christianity, but did not profess personal conversion. These persons were considered “half-way” into the church. They had a right to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, which was considered a “converting ordinance”, though they knew they had no true saving faith. The need of “revival” arose over against the “half-way” situation,⁷ simply because Edwards found himself preaching to a congregation of unsaved persons who needed saving grace. Rightly, Edwards opposed the “half-way” theology, believing that communicant membership was only for such as professed faith in Christ and obedience to Him, preached against it, and was ultimately discharged from his pastoral duties in the revived congregation in 1750 by a very sizable majority. So far the following conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, as Edwards did not agree with Arminianism or Half-way Theology to begin with, they ought not to have existed in a Reformed congregation or community. Therefore, there should have been no need of “revival” to remedy these evils in the first place. Secondly, as remedies go, “revival” proved a poor and ineffective one, for although Edwards’ stance against both errors was victorious in the sense that truth always is, the practical effect was unsuccessful, and ended in derision and isolation for Edwards. But how did such an evil situation arise in a congregation and community that, less than twenty years beforehand, believed itself to be experiencing the extraordinary blessing of God? The Great Awakening is thought properly to have reached its climax around the Spring of 1740 with the arrival of George Whitefield at Northampton. But reading the account of what ensued is a disconcerting, if not disturbing experience- much like the revival itself! The candid Reformed reader soon comes to the conclusion that, if this was a great revival, it is the very last thing needed by the Church of Jesus Christ in the late twentieth century. From the start there was conflict between

5 *ibid.*; Vol. 1 p. xliv.

6 *ibid.*; Vol. 1 p. ccvii.

7 *Jenson Op.Cit.* p. 57

Edwards and Whitefield, when Edwards publicly spoke to Whitefield about the too large place he gave to impulses as signs of God's direction, and about Whitefield's customary and unbiblical practice of judging other persons to be unconverted. After this incident relations were somewhat less intimate between the two.⁸ What comes next is like reading some sort of catalogue of errors. Problems arose over lay preaching in particular, which, although the leaders of the revival tended to discourage it, caused suffering and confusion in the church.⁹ The state of persons under the preaching of the revivalists became more and more "extraordinary".¹⁰ "It was about that time that there first began to be crying out in the meetinghouse....It was a very frequent thing to see a house full of outcries, faintings and convulsions....There were some that were so affected, and their bodies so overcome, that they could not go home....There were some instances of persons lying in a sort of trance, remaining perhaps so for a whole twenty-four hours motionless, and with their senses locked up, but in the mean time under strong imaginations, as though they went to heaven, and had there a vision of glorious and delightful objects....A great deal of caution and pains were found necessary, to keep the people, many of them from running wild." ¹¹

In the beginning of the summer of 1742 things became worse. Dwight described it as time of "extraordinary appearances."¹² "There was a greater visible commotion....the outward appearances were more extraordinary....Some that have had great raptures of joy have been extraordinarily filled, have had their bodies overcome." Trouble was caused as the people from different areas entered competition with each other to see who had the most "boldness for Christ" as the expression was, or to see who could go the furthest "in raptures and violent emotions of the affections and a vehement zeal." During this time Mrs. Edwards made a diary of their own experiences. She records how she lost control of herself. "My feelings took away my bodily strength....I leaped unconsciously from my chair....my strength failed me, and I sunk down....I could not forbear rising up and leaping with joy and exultation."¹³ More seriously, she seems to have had extraordinary divine revelations. "They appeared to my mind in all their reality and certainty, and as it were in actual and distinct vision." Although Edwards favoured exclusive Psalmody ¹⁴ Mrs. Edwards mentions the use of hymns in revival for the first time at this point. ¹⁵ All this she called "the riches of full assurance".¹⁶ Perhaps if this was all that had

⁸ Banner Edition: "*Works of Jonathan Edwards*;" Vol. I p. lii.

⁹ *ibid.*; Vol. I pp. liv-lv.

¹⁰ For an excellent analysis of the phenomenon of revival as viewed from the motif of the "extraordinary", obtain taped lecture given by Pastor Ronald Hanko on "*Reformation or Revival: Which does the Church need*", from Mr. D. Callender 127, Cregagh Road, Belfast, BT6 OLA.

¹¹ Banner Edition; "*Works of Jonathan Edwards*", Vol. I p. lviii-lix.

¹² *ibid.*; Vol. I p. lxi.

¹³ *ibid.*; Vol. I p. lxiv.

¹⁴ *ibid.*; Vol. I pp. 240 & 554.

¹⁵ *ibid.*; Vol. I p. lxiv.

¹⁶ *ibid.*; Vol. I p. lxix.

occurred by the way of proto-charismatic experiences, because of the general good that otherwise might have been accomplished, a charitable judgment could be passed on the whole. But it did not end here. Lists of “extravagances and irregularities” became commonplace: a disposition among the people to make secret impulses on the mind a rule of duty, laymen invading the ministerial office, ministers invading each other’s provinces, indiscreet young men rushing about and preaching at every opportunity, unscriptural separations from churches, and ministers from churches, a rash judging of the spiritual state of others, a controversial, uncharitable and censorious spirit, outcries and faintings during public worship, the speaking and praying of women in the church and at mixed assemblies, the meeting of children by themselves without supervision for religious worship, and visible social commotion.¹⁷ Why did a man of such orthodoxy, spirituality and rational power as Jonathan Edwards suffer these things? Two answers can be given. The first is Edwards’ strong post-millennial orientation. “So auspicious indeed was the opening of these memorable works of God, and so rapid its progress, that the promised reign of Christ on earth was believed, by many, to be actually begun,” observes Dwight.¹⁸ When writing to a Scottish minister in 1743, Edwards writes, “I cannot think otherwise, than that what his now being doing, is the forerunner of something vastly greater, more pure, and more extensive.....I believe God will revive his work again before long, and that it will not wholly cease till it has subdued the whole earth.¹⁹ To the same minister he again says, “I looked upon the late wonderful revivals of religion as forerunners of these glorious times so often prophesied of in Scripture, and that this was the first dawning of that light, and beginning of that work, which is the progress and issue of it, would at last bring on the churches latter-day glory.”²⁰

Understand that I am not here trying to argue that since Post-millennialism is false, Edwards suffering the ill effects of the revival was unjustified [although this would be true]. Rather, even if the postmillennial position is true, I am arguing that it is still false for Edwards to have believed that the millennium was ready to begin during the Awakening. It is simply “brute fact” that religion in the revival areas has suffered and declined ever since. Today in New England only a small minority go to church at all, and most of the churches that remain are of a unitarian character. Many of the old church buildings have been turned into shops. Is this not the very opposite of what the millennium is supposed to bring? But Edwards asserts, “It is not unlikely that this work of God’s Spirit, so extraordinary and wonderful, is the drawing, or at least a prelude of that glorious work of God so often foretold in Scripture, which, in the progress and issue of it, shall renew the world of mankind. And patriotically he adds, “And there are many things that make it probable that this work will begin in

17 *ibid.*; Vol. 1 pp. lxx-lxxi.

18 *ibid.*; Vol. 1 p. lxx.

19 *ibid.*; Vol. 1 p. lxxii Letter dated May 12th 1743 to M’Culloch leader in Cambuslang revival.

20 *ibid.*; Vol. 1 p. lxxix. Letter dated March 5th 1744, again to M’Culloch.

America.”²¹ As one modern “Edwards” scholar has put it, Edwards’ support for the Awakening was for the sake of the millennium, and “his trumpeting the cause of the Awakening cast him willy-nilly into the role of defending the excesses of revivalism”.²² The second answer lies in how Edwards judged the extraordinary bodily affects caused by the revival. Such physical manifestations, although already evident in the first revival of 1735, were particularly prevalent in 1740 to 1742, and are connected with George Whitefield. Edwards held that such outward manifestations were not excluded by Scripture, which [he reasoned] gives us rules respecting our state of mind and soul for moral conduct and voluntary behaviour, not the physical state of the body- but are not the actions of the body a sort of behaviour? The Bible, he said, teaches divinity, not anatomy. He used Scripture to try and argue that such manifestations are to be expected citing the examples of Daniel [Dan.10: 6-8], Habakkuk [Hab.3:10] and John [Rev.1:17]. Therefore, these manifestations are not, in themselves, either good or bad, but merely to be ascribed to man’s human nature. Edwards did not want these manifestations to get out of hand, stating that “they do greatly err who think that these things should be wholly unlimited”, but surely if these things are the result of the blessing of God, the more the better? At any rate, Edwards’ cautious attitude stopped well short of placing an immediate ban on the manifestations. His claim of biblical support for these outward manifestations is unconvincing. He mentions the disciples in the boat seeing Christ and the jailor falling down before Paul and Silas. But both Matthew and Mark indicate that the fear of the disciples was because they thought they had seen a ghost; and the jailor had suffered a series of emotional shocks, between earthquakes and contemplating suicide. Where we should expect to find such phenomena if they are to be thought of as normative in accompanying true revival, on the day of Pentecost itself, there are none. What about the Reformation? And it is dangerous for Edwards to give examples of inspired Hebrew prophets and Apostles under the special influence of God as patterns for us today. Some hard questions have to be asked. How is it that contemporary charismatics are able to use Edwards to justify their own practices? Why did Edwards have so little regard for church order? Did he believe that the ends justified the means?

But Edwards was not wholly ignorant of the problems. He admits, for example, to the great mystery that during the time of “the late extraordinary appearance....so much bad” should be found in the church of God. Indeed, he claims that, “it is no new thing, that much false religion should prevail, at a time of great revival”, and that there now are “multitudes of hypocrites” mixing with saints. He laments that “the devil has prevailed against the late revivals of religion in New England....he has foiled us”.²³ “God was provoked that he was not sanctified in the height of Advancement....There had been a great mixture of false experience....Many high

21 *ibid.*; Vol. 1 p. 381.

22 C. Conrad Cherry, *“The Theology of Jonathan Edwards”* Indiana University Press 1990. p. 216.

23 *“The Works of Jonathan Edwards”* :Banner Edit. Vol. 1 pp. 234-5.

professions are fallen, some into gross immoralities.”²⁴ “What is to be done? What treatment can be used to save Christ’s church from all these tragic consequences? Yet I cannot but steadfastly maintain a hope and persuasion that God will revive his work, and that what has been so great and very extraordinary is a forerunner of a yet more glorious and extensive work.” The cure? Another revival to try and rectify the mess of confusion and impiety left by the first! May God save us from such a downward spiral of extraordinary grief and harm, and revive in His church a return to the glorious ordinary - expository and confessional preaching, a correct and full administration of the sacraments, godly church discipline and worship in Spirit and in truth.

Faith, as our Heidelberg Catechism says, is, though also confidence in Christ, a certain knowledge whereby I hold for true all that God has revealed in His Word. That is the amazing wonder of the Scriptures.

When I appropriate the Scriptures and lay hold on their truth and receive as true all that they teach, I lay hold on Christ. Not by some emotional high, not by reducing religion to some kind of a spiritual shot of adrenalin, but by laying hold on the truth of the Scriptures.

And in that way I lay hold on Christ and on God and live in fellowship with Him.

Faith, the faith that brings assurance, true assurance, and assurance not built on the shifting sands of emotional experiences which are here today, and gone tomorrow, but a faith which is solid as a rock, a faith which withstands the onslaughts of Satan, a faith which says with Job, “I know that my Redeemer liveth,” a faith which is the calm, quiet confidence of victory over all our enemies, over the devil and his hosts and even our own flesh, the faith which is the victory that overcomes the world.

*From : “Ought the Church to Pray for Revival”?
by Herman Hanko*

²⁴ *ibid.*; Vol. 1 pp. lxxvii-lxxix.