

UNDOING SOME MYTHS ABOUT JONATHAN EDWARDS

Over recent years, the name Jonathan Edwards has cropped up frequently in articles and reports about revival. People who had never heard of him ten years ago, are now familiar with his name. In the process of popularisation, some stories and impressions about Edwards have emerged which stray from the truth. In this article BARRY CHANT considers a few of them.

There is little doubt that Edwards was one of the great evangelical ministers of modern times. His commitment to Christ, his profound insights into Scripture, his balanced analysis of revival phenomena, his understanding of the ways and works of God — all these are as significant today as ever.

1. THE BOOKS HE WROTE

Edwards was a prolific author. He wrote on many subjects ranging from theology to revival to eschatology. When discussing his views on revival, most people quote mainly from his earlier writings. It is important to realise that he wrote four books on this subject and that his last work — not his first one — best reflects his position. As with most people, Edwards' views matured over the years, and with the benefit of experience, he was able to interpret with greater wisdom the phenomena he had witnessed.

So it is to his *Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections*,¹ first published in 1746 that we must turn for his 'final word,' as it were. Iain Murray says that Edwards 'never gave closer and more careful thought to anything than he did to this.'² To describe Edwards' view of revival without turning to this great piece of writing is to do him an injustice.

2. SARAH EDWARDS' EXPERIENCE

On occasions, Edwards' wife Sarah showed signs of what was then called 'enthusiasm.' For example, on Wednesday 27 January, 1742, after a lecture by the young Samuel Buell, she and others remained for a further three hours and during most of this time, she recalled, her 'bodily strength was overcome' and she was so full of joy and thankfulness that she conversed with those who were with her 'in a very earnest manner'.

The next morning, she was still so excited she found it difficult to complete her daily tasks. When Buell was speaking she felt so grieved at the apparent lack of gratitude among God's people she sank to the floor. People eased her into a chair and earnestly she shared with them her sense of God's wonderful grace towards her in redeeming her from hell.

During the next hymn, she was so impressed by heavenly truth that she leaped spontaneously from her chair, feeling as if she were ascending to heaven. After the reading of two more hymns, again, she collapsed and was taken and laid on a bed, where she continued to 'contemplate the glories of the heavenly world.'

During this time, she felt 'wholly indifferent' to the affairs of the world and to earthly glory and ambition. Her heart was filled with love and she felt so exhausted by emotions of joy that she could not rise or sit up for about four hours. That Thursday night she described as 'the sweetest night I ever had in my life.'

In recounting his version of Sarah's story, Edwards claims that two things in particular were evident — 'a peculiar aversion to judging other professing Christians' and a 'very great sense of the importance of moral social duties.' Sarah's strength failed her, he says, because of her great mourning for sin and 'a sight of the fullness and glorious sufficiency of Christ.' Furthermore, her 'sense of the glory of the Holy Spirit' was such as to overwhelm her in both soul and body (I:376f).³ He concludes —

Now if such things are enthusiasm, and the fruits of a distempered brain, let my brain be evermore possessed of that happy distemper! If this be distraction, I pray God that the world of mankind may be all seized with this benign, meek, beneficent, beatifical, glorious distraction! (I:378)

One can only say 'Amen' to this prayer. Would that more people were so overwhelmed by the wonder of Christ's sacrifice and love.

On the other hand, some popular authors seem to have misread Sarah's experience. Chevreau, for example, claims that she was 'out' for four hours, implying that she was in a comatose state.⁴ However, she makes it plain that although during this time she was too exhausted to rise or even to sit up, she spent 'most of the time' talking with friends about the things of God. Clearly, she was in full possession of her faculties.

Others have described her experience as being 'slain in the Spirit.' However, when she felt weak at the knees, it was the conscious result of her own insight into the glories of God, not an involuntary reaction to someone else's ministry or mediation or the laying on of hands. In the past, evangelical writers have attributed too little to Sarah Edwards' testimony; it is important not to go to the other extreme of attributing too much.

3. BODILY MANIFESTATIONS

In all his writings, Edwards argued strongly for the need for the affections to be stirred. By the affections, he meant both the emotions and the will. Without the affections being moved, he declared, there could be no true Christianity —

Who will deny that true religion consists in a great measure in vigorous and lively actings of the inclination and will of the soul, or the fervent exercises of the heart?

Nothing is more manifest in fact, than that the things of religion take hold of men's souls no further than they affect them.

I am bold to assert that there never was any considerable change wrought in the mind or conversation of any person ... that had not his affections moved.⁵

Words could hardly be plainer. Edwards fervently believed that genuine faith touched the whole personality — including the affections. He was careful to point out that such stirring of the affections was always in response to the clear preaching of the gospel of Christ —

How can they sit and hear of the infinite height, and depth, and length, and breadth of the love of God in Christ Jesus, of His giving His infinitely dear Son, to be offered up a sacrifice for the sins of men, and of the unparalleled love of the innocent, and holy, and tender Lamb of God, manifested in His dying agonies, His bloody sweat, His loud and bitter cries, and bleeding heart, and all this for enemies, to redeem them from deserved, eternal burnings, and to bring to unspeakable and everlasting joy and glory — and yet be cold and heavy, insensible and regardless!⁶

How, indeed!

Yet, this does not mean that Edwards gave blanket approval to any and all kinds of manifestations. In fact, he strongly disapproved of extremist behaviour. One of his favourite phrases in *The Religious Affections* is ‘stony ground hearers,’ by which he means people who demonstrate great emotional fervour, but who quickly fade away through lack of depth. Furthermore, Edwards was not even comfortable with the Quakers who relied on the experience of ‘inner light’ for guidance and direction. He was uneasy about dependency on feelings.

He makes particular reference to an extremist Huguenot group known as the ‘French prophets,’ who had migrated to London in the early eighteenth century. According to Knox, when their preacher shouted, people often fell on their backs while he ‘conducted them’ with his hand movements as if they were some kind of orchestra. It was ‘a mark of reprobation if you did not fall when you were told to.’ Some drove knives into themselves; others spoke in tongues; most were unconscious of what they did or said while under inspiration. ‘Violent agitations,’ foaming at the mouth and bodily swelling were common. A speaker might lie as dead for an extended time and then begin to tremble violently until his limbs all shook. In at least one case, one person ‘gobbled like a turkey cock.’

A contemporary writer refers to people shaking their heads, crawling on the floor, quaking and trembling, drumming, trumpeting, thundering, snuffling, blowing as with a horn, panting, sighing, groaning, hissing, laughing, pointing, shaking, threshing, using childish repetition, howling like a dog and generally acting in a disorderly fashion.⁷ While these descriptions all come from their critics, there seems to be sufficient evidence to suggest they are not widely inaccurate.

These ‘French prophets,’ caused some embarrassment to John Wesley. Edwards also distanced himself from them. On several occasions, he makes it

plain that the experiences of the Great Awakening and these bizarre expressions of ‘enthusiasm’ have nothing in common.

Over recent years and in various places, falling, shaking, ‘drunkenness’, crying, laughter, jerking, animal noises, ‘roaring’, catalepsy, writhing, being thrown across the floor, trances and the like have all been reported during revival meetings.⁸ Edwards would have rejected most of this.

Many years later, when a group of Presbyterians in Virginia entreated Edwards to accept a pastorate there, Samuel Davies, the first permanent evangelical pastor in that colony, wrote this about him —

Fiery superficial ministers will never do in these parts: they might do good; but they would do much more harm. We need the deep judgement and calm temper of Mr Edwards among us.⁹

Edwards had the remarkable capacity both to welcome genuine expressions of emotional and volitional response to the gospel and yet to reject spurious extravagances.

For Edwards, it was the cause, not the effect that was important. The gospel brought peace, joy and glory, which are ‘the fruits of the true Spirit.’ When the Spirit was poured out, ‘very joyful and glorious times could be expected.’ He plainly defended ‘bodily agitations’ — but only in response to an appreciation of the glories of Christ, never in their own right.

4. CESSATIONISM

The impression has been given by some writers that Edwards believed in the supernatural gifts and powers of the Holy Spirit listed in 1 Corinthians 12. For example, Chevreau points out plainly that Charles Chauncy, a strong critic of the Awakening, denied the need for spiritual gifts in his day and in doing so, Chevreau implies that Edwards held the opposite view. In fact, he did not. Edwards was also a cessationist. He plainly believed that the signs, wonders and miracles of the New Testament ceased at the end of the apostolic age.¹⁰

A superficial view of Edwards might yield a different impression. In his earlier writings, for example, he gives a most solemn warning to those who reject revival and in the process uses language which suggests a belief in the supernatural. When ministers stay silent about the work of God, he argues, this is ‘undoubtedly provoking’ to Him. Indeed, ‘let all to whom this work is a cloud and darkness — as the pillar of cloud and fire was to the Egyptians — take heed that it be not their destruction, while it gives light to God's Israel.’

To wait for a pure work is to wait in vain — like waiting at the river side for all the water to pass. There never was a work of God without stumbling blocks: indeed, they were likely to increase, not decrease. The apparent prudence of waiting before acknowledging the work might be to miss the greatest opportunity of blessing that God ever gave to New England.

Yet Edwards makes it very plain that, for him, consistent, godly lifestyle is the best argument for a true revival. So he expresses his desire to ‘to apply myself to those who are the friends of his work, who have been partakers of it, and are zealous to promote it. Let me earnestly exhort such *to give diligent heed to themselves to avoid all errors and misconduct, and whatever may darken and*

obscure the work; and to give no occasion to those who stand ready to reproach it' (II:273).

The strongest defence, he says, will be 'humility and self-diffidence, and an entire dependence on our Lord Jesus Christ'. Some 'true friends of the work of God's Spirit' have done it discredit by yielding more to impressions and impulses than to the revelation of Scripture. The fruits of the Spirit are far greater than the gifts. A man may have extraordinary gifts 'and yet be abominable to God, and go straight to hell' (II:274). As there are no supernatural gifts in heaven, the church is most like heaven when it emphasises the fruits of the Spirit.

He is quite specific in his stance that the gifts of the Spirit as listed in 1 Corinthians 12 are not to be expected today —

The ordinary sanctifying influences of the Spirit of God, are the end of all extraordinary gifts, as the apostle shows, Eph iv. 11, 12, 13 ... God communicates his Spirit only in that more excellent way of which the apostle speaks, viz. charity or divine love ... The apostle speaks of these gifts of inspiration as childish things, in comparison of the influence of the Spirit in divine love.

When the church is in an adult state, Edwards claims, it has no need of such gifts. So he plainly says —

Therefore, I do not expect a restoration of these miraculous gifts in the approaching glorious times of the church, nor do I desire it ... I had rather enjoy the sweet influences of the Spirit, showing Christ's spiritual divine beauty, infinite grace, and dying love, drawing forth the holy exercises of faith, divine love, sweet complacence, and humble joy in God, one quarter of an hour, than to have prophetic visions and revelations the whole year (II:275).

Of course, Pentecostal/charismatics dissent from this view. I personally do not agree. Fruit are never to be a substitute for gifts: rather, they complement each other. Nevertheless, if Edwards' position on these matters is to be quoted, his own position must be made clear.

5. CALVINISM AND ARMINIANISM

The ancient issue of Calvinism versus Arminianism is rarely mentioned today, although the Pentecostal/charismatic movement is plainly Arminian. Popular charismatic theology has it that basically it is our faith and our dedication that makes the blessing of God possible. 'Create an atmosphere of faith, by giving opportunity for the Spirit to move,' writes one denominational leader to his fellow ministers, using traditional Pentecostal terminology.¹¹

In recent charismatic writings about Edwards, I have found no reference to the fact that he was a convinced Calvinist. Yet not only did he see Arminianism as a different point of view — he saw it as a positive hindrance to the gospel! He was greatly concerned that sound doctrine be the centre of all Christian activity. Revival was a sovereign work of God so there was no room for any Arminian beliefs —

And now I would beseech those who have hitherto been somewhat inclining to Arminian principles, seriously to weigh the matter with respect to this work and consider, whether, if the Scriptures are the word of God, the work that has been described in the first part of this treatise must not be, as to the substance of it, the

work of God, and the flourishing of that religion which is taught by Christ and his apostles ... Now is a good time for Arminians to change their principles. I would now, as one of the friends of this work, humbly invite them to come and join with us, and be on our side ... (I:422f)

In this matter, Edwards was at loggerheads with John Wesley, whose Arminianism led him to a very different understanding of the nature of revival. As a Calvinist, Edwards saw revival as a glorious expression of God's sovereign grace. It was the Lord's doing and it was marvellous in his eyes.

Much of the revivalist phenomena witnessed in the last few years traces its origins to the 'Faith movement', whose teachings represent an extreme form of Arminianism.¹² Edwards would no doubt have been alarmed at these doctrinal roots, as he saw Arminianism as seriously deficient. Both he and Whitefield strongly declared their Calvinist stance and were convinced that a drift to Arminianism would kill, or at least seriously maim, the revival.¹³

Sadly, in some current renewal movements, theological niceties often appear to be of little significance. In our quest for unity, we often seem to be comfortable with the lowest common doctrinal denominators. It is probably also true that most charismatics would feel uncomfortable to be labelled 'Calvinist.'

Edwards was greatly concerned that ministers were not found wanting. To him, it was intolerable that a minister should stand in the pulpit before God's people, to undertake to lead and instruct them, when there was 'nothing in his heart'. No one, he laments, will sink so low in hell as ungodly ministers (I:423). And, in a practical sense, when 'enthusiasm and wildness comes in like a flood' how could such men withstand it?

It may also be of interest to note that Edwards was a strong postmillennialist. He believed the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ was so powerful it would spread throughout the earth and usher in an age of godliness — the millennium. There is no suggestion of the pre-tribulation, pre-millennial rapture ideology which is so widespread in the Pentecostal/charismatic movement today. For Edwards, revival, not tribulation, would be the climax of the age.

CONCLUSION

As a Pentecostal, I do not agree with all that Edwards taught. I strongly dissent from his cessationist position, for example. But Jonathan Edwards was one of those rare persons who could embrace deep and profound theology and at the same time recognise the genuine work of God in revival. His mind was as tough as steel, his heart as soft as clay. He knew how to understand the profound truths of God with the mind — and at the same time to believe the wonderful blessings of God with the heart. When we consider all that he taught on revival, whether or not we agree with all his conclusions, there is much we can learn.

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ENDNOTES

1 J.Edwards, *A Treatise on the Religious Affections* Edinburgh: Banner of Truth [1746] 1986

2 I Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987, 252ff

3 For simplicity, I have included most of the references to Edwards' own writings in the body of the text. The first number refers to the relevant volume of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1984. The second number is the page reference.

4 G.Chevreau, *Catch the Fire* London: Marshall Pickering, 1994:79.

5 Edwards 1986:27ff

6 Edwards, 1986:52.

7 R.Knox, *Enthusiasm* London: Collins, 1987, 357ff.

8 P.Dixon, Signs of Revival Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1994:9ff; J.Davies, 'Toronto Blessing Reaches Australia,' ARMA Sydney Newsletter #30 November 1994; W.Jackson, What in the World is Happening to Us? Urbana: Vineyard, 1994:1ff; D.Roberts, The 'Toronto' Blessing Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1994:15ff; personal observation and knowledge.

9 Quoted in Murray, 1987:365.

10 Chevreau, 1994:112.

11 A.Evans, *Ministers Bulletin*, 5. Both Calvinism and Arminianism can go to extremes. One pastor recently told his people, 'If you don't fall down when you are prayed for, fall by faith.' Such an approach would have been abhorrent to Edwards who saw revival as a sovereign act of God. Clearly, he would have rejected such 'enthusiasm'.

12 Roberts, 1994: 61ff, 83ff; A.Morrison, 'The Genealogy of the "Toronto Blessing"' *Australian Beacon*, May 1995.

13 Murray, 1987:213.