

Lesson 5

Jonathan Edwards and Revival**The Marks of Revival**

Revival is an exciting and scary subject for many folks. Most Christians want revival but they want it on their own terms. They say they desire revival but don't want the emotional excesses and abuses that seem to go along with it. Yet, the fact of the matter is, there has never been revival without emotion and some abuses.

Sometimes I wonder if people are afraid of revival or they are in actuality really afraid of the Holy Spirit. They are frightened that the Spirit might do something in them and for them and to them that they will not like, that will make them look weird or make them too different from other people. Christian, we should never fear the Holy Spirit as long as we have the Scriptures to be our guide and safeguard on how the Holy Spirit moves and operates. The Holy Spirit can only bring us good not evil, and through the Scriptures we can discern what is from the Lord and what may be from the enemy.

Jonathan Edwards was the key player in the Great Awakening, and he of all people was surprised by the Spirit when revival broke out in his church in the city of Northampton, Massachusetts in 1734. Edwards did not reject the awakening, but he did not accept everything that went on in the revival as from God. Edwards promoted the revival but kept a careful written account of his observations. He watched and interviewed people who shook, laughed, wept, fainted, seemingly falling under the power of the Holy Spirit. Edwards has been called the Father of Revival or the Father of American Evangelicalism. Edwards at first was very skeptical of revival but as he studied it and participated in it, he came to see revival was of God even with its defects.

Today in America tens of thousands of men attend Promise Keepers and rededicate their lives to their Christ, marriages and the church. Students in Christian colleges stand in line to confess their sins. Para-church organizations and some local churches are experiencing a wonderful spiritual renewal. Out of Toronto, Canada has come the so called Toronto Blessing which is having an impact on the world. Are these events an overture to another great awakening? Jonathan Edward's writings on revival still provide us with the best standards available to help us judge what is genuine, what is spurious and what is a mixture of good and bad waiting to be purified.

THE BACKGROUND OF EDWARDS

Jonathan Edwards born in 1703 was America's greatest theologian. His father was a pastor and his mother was the daughter of Rev. Solomon Stoddard. Jonathan was an only son with ten sisters.

He was very intelligent and entered Yale College at thirteen. After graduation from college, he became the assistant minister of Northampton Congregational Church which was pastored by Solomon Stoddard. In 1734, Stoddard died and Edwards became the pastor of the church. While preaching a series on justification by faith, revival broke out in the church and in the city that same year. The Great Awakening in New England went from 1734 - 1746 and during this time about 50,000 people were converted. While Edwards was the key person in the revival, the favorite preacher was George Whitefield.

Edwards lived a consistent Christlike life and had a very happy marriage. He and his wife Sarah had eleven children. This was attested to by George Whitefield who stayed in Edward's home when in Northampton.

Whitefield writing in his diary said of Edwards:

Friday, October 17.... Mr Edwards is a solid, excellent Christian. I think I have not seen his fellow in all New England.

Sunday, October 19. Felt great satisfaction in being in the house of Mr. Edwards. A sweeter couple I have not yet seen. Their children were not dressed in silks and satins, but plain, as become children of those who, in all things, ought to be examples of Christian simplicity. Mrs. Edwards is adorned with a meek and quiet spirit; she talked solidly of the things of God; and seemed to be such a helpmeet for her husband, that she caused me to renew those prayers, which, for some months I have put up to God, that He would be pleased to send me a daughter of Abraham to be my wife.

THE REVIVAL UNDER EDWARDS

Edward's church was solidly orthodox but dead spiritually. They could rattle off the catechism but there was no life. The people were more fascinated by business, making money and living a comfortable life than God. In 1734, Edwards preached a message "A Divine and Supernatural Light" in which he said that real Christianity requires an encounter with truth (the Bible), but that truth must be illuminated by the presence of the Holy Spirit. He said, "A true Christian does not merely rationally believe that God is glorious, but he has a sense of the gloriousness of God in his heart..." For Edwards Biblical Christianity was a belief in the truth of the Bible coupled with a work of the Holy Spirit which transforms the heart and reorients the whole life to focus on God and seek His will. For Edwards, Christianity was a personal, vital,

dynamic relationship with Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. God converted Edwards as a teenager and in his book Faithful Narrative tells about his own encounter with God through the Spirit.

“My mind was greatly engaged to spend time in reading and meditating on Christ, on the beauty and excellency of his person, and the lovely way of salvation by free grace in him... I walked abroad alone, in a solitary place in my father’s pasture, for contemplation... There came into my mind so sweet a sense of the glorious majesty and grace of God, as I know not how to express... I seemed to see them both in a sweet conjunction; majesty and meekness joined together: it was a sweet, and gentle, and holy majesty; and also a majestic meekness; an awful sweetness; a high, and great, and holy gentleness” (Personal Narrative).

Actually, Jonathan Edwards was an intellectual introvert. He spent fourteen hours a day in his study reading and praying but disliked pastoral visitation. He read his sermons from a manuscript and stared out over the audience. He was the last person to know how to promote and conduct a revival, but he was God’s man and revival broke out, and primarily at first among the young people. The revival later reached adults. There was an intense conviction of sin as people were dealing with immorality, pride, envy, materialism and many other sins. Though the people knew the catechism in his church many of them were not saved. Their Christianity was intellectual with no heart. The people flocked into Edward’s office, so the pastoral aspect of his ministry which was lacking now was actually brought to him as he led many to Christ.

The results of revival were enlivened congregational worship, witnessing by the people, new converts and folks desiring a deeper spiritual life. There was also emotion in which people would come from church singing and praising God, and this disturbed the traditional folks. Yes, and there were some manifestations which Edwards observed - weeping, laughing, great joy, praising, shouting and fainting where people went into a trance. These things happened but they were not the center of the revival. There were also a few abuses like people roaring like lions or barking like dogs, which I believe was nothing more than demons manifesting themselves in order to disturb and distract from the true work of God.

Edwards is famous for preaching the sermon “Sinners In The Hands Of An Angry God.” He gave this sermon in 1741 as a visiting pastor of Enfield Congregational Church in Connecticut. He read his sermon in a monotone saying things like, “O Sinner! Consider the danger you are in! ‘Tis a great Furnace of Wrath, a wide and bottomless Pit full of the Fire of Wrath...!” People screamed out, some fell flat on the floor, others held on the back of the pew to keep from sliding into hell. Edwards was so disturbed by all the commotion he stopped his sermon and requested they be quiet in order to hear the rest of the message. It did no good. Edwards is thought of as a hell fire and brimstone preacher because of this

one famous sermon but actually out of the 1000 sermons he preached and put into manuscript only about 10 were of this type. Stereotypes can be dangerous.

EXCESSES IN REVIVALS

The Great Awakening was ver^y powerful from 1739 - 1742, especially under the preaching of George Whitefield and Gilbert Tennet. Edwards saw the growing opposition to revival, especially to the emotional excesses, and wrote the book Distinguishing Marks Of A Work Of The Spirit Of God to defend the awakening.

Edwards sought to show that not everything in revival is from God and Christians must be discerning, using scripture to back up his premise.

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world (1 Jn. 4:1).

His point was just because people wept, shouted out, shook, fainted, got religious and had visions did not prove one way or the other whether they had a true work of God. Even if these phenomena were unsolicited and unwanted did not prove God was in them.

Edwards clearly understood that when true revival comes, Satan had his demons work overtime by counterfeiting and disrupting the movement of the Spirit. Edwards would agree with J. Edwin Orr who said, "In any true awakening, the first person to wake up is the Devil."

According to Edwards a revival movement might be diluted, disfigured and even invaded by Satan and his cohorts.

And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14).

He believed the more the Spirit worked in revival the harder Satan worked to bring false phenomena. Edwards did not reject all weeping, shouting, praising, fainting as from the devil but would say that some of it was. Things like barking like a dog or roaring like a lion would be demonic activity in Edward's mind and should be rejected as spurious. The devil knows the way to destroy a mighty movement of God is to make Christians look weird. For sure Christians are to be distinctly different from the unsaved world, but not obnoxiously weird.

"It is in the Devil's interest to make Christians weird, He does not need possession to do this; he can manage by suggestion. The goal of his strategy is to

create a church that is so institutionally strange that unbelievers will detour around it. The goal of revival is conformity to the image of Christ, not imitation of animals" (Richard F. Lovelace, "The Surprising Works Of God," Christianity Today).

Some revival preachers in Edward's day believed if audiences remained calm under fiery preaching, this indicated a lack of concern. They erroneously felt that emotional outbursts indicated a supernatural moving of the Holy Spirit on souls. Edwards could not accept this and said, "Great effects on the body certainly are no sure evidences (of revival)." He believed preaching was to be to the mind and conscience and not to the emotions so as to encourage outbursts of emotion. But if they occurred, he did not reject them all as from the devil.

MARKS OF TRUE REVIVAL

Edwards concluded there were five biblical marks of a genuine revival: 1) it exalts Jesus Christ. ***"He (the Holy Spirit) will bring glory to me (Christ) by taking from what is mine and making it known to you (Christians)" (Jn. 16:14)***; 2) it attacks the powers of darkness; 3) it exalts the Holy Scriptures; 4) it lifts up sound doctrine and 5) it promotes love to God and man. He gives insufficient signs that neither discredit or validate a revival such as intense religious emotion, involuntary bodily effects, talkativeness, self-oriented forms of love, slavish fear of God, intense religiosity, praise of God that brings attention to self and even wanting to please other godly persons.

Edwards says the true signs of revival in an individual, city or church is when people are changed at the heart level. He says the heart must be touched by the Holy Spirit. The work of the Spirit on the heart (the inmost center of the personality) generates true affections for God and for others which shows up in a desire to please God, joy, hope, sorrow from brokenness of heart over sin, gratitude, compassion and zeal. *Bottom line, Edwards said the mark of a truly converted person was in a changed life.* There is a change in one's nature, producing a meek and tender spirit and a tender sensitivity to sin. He felt if the supernatural phenomena people experienced brought a lasting love for Christ and others, then it was of God. Therefore, no one could really tell whether phenomena experienced was of the Holy Spirit until after the fact; time would tell whether it was real or spurious, true or false, of God or of the flesh or Satan. This whole premise is set down in his book Treatise On The Religious Affections written in 1746.

DIVISIONS IN REVIVAL

Opposition to true revival grew basically because of the excesses. Edwards found himself in the middle of two extremes. On the right was James Davenport who was a radical revivalist demanding all kinds of signs to prove conversion. He also would pray publically every Sunday for all the pastors he knew in New England who he thought were not saved. Davenport later admitted he did not know what spirit drove him during the revival. On the left was Charles Chauncy a Unitarian in Congregational clothing who probably was not converted and he hated everything about revival.

Edwards was pro-revival and he said to be against it or be silent about it was to stand in the way of God. He was the first to admit excesses and felt the abuses hindered the awakening. Yet, to the very end, he promoted the revival.

“Let us all be hence warned, by no means to oppose or do anything, in the least to clog or hinder that Work that has lately been carried on in this Land, but on the contrary, to do our utmost to promote it” (Jonathan Edwards, The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God).

Edwards tried to help people understand that when someone was awakened, he or she was not automatically mature in Christ. Both Christians and non-Christians expected too much from those awakened.

“When any profess to have received Light ... from Heaven ... many are ready to expect that now they should appear like Angels...” (Edwards).

In 1747, Edwards wrote the book Thoughts On Revival In New England where he was very concerned about leaders like James Davenport who claimed special revelation believing his hunches and impulses were always God’s leading. This led to spiritual pride because folks were claiming superiority since they had an experience that others had not had. This pride led to a censorious and critical attitudes. Leaders became dogmatically inflexible and refused even to dialogue among themselves about the abuses in revival.

By 1747, Edwards was discouraged over revival because of the arrogant and pompous leaders, and there were more tares being sown than wheat. Yet, he continued to pray for revival but it had stopped by 1747. He felt the errors of radical revival leaders had temporarily derailed the revival.

DEMISE AND DEATH OF EDWARDS

Just a few years after the Great Awakening stopped, Jonathan Edwards found himself in a theological dispute with the leaders of his church over baptizing infants of unbelievers. In 1750, they kicked Edwards out and he went on the mission field to

reach the Indians until 1758. This seems like such a tragedy but it was a great blessing. It was on the mission field Edwards wrote many of his theological books such as The Freedom Of The Will. We would have never known Jonathan Edwards as the greatest theologian America has ever produced except he was kicked out of his church for standing on truth. God is in control.

Edwards was asked to become president of Princeton University in New Jersey. He accepted and after a few months died during a small pox epidemic in 1758. It is believed Edwards took a small pox vaccination to show people not to be afraid of catching the disease. Many took the vaccine and never caught small pox. Edwards took it and died at 55 years of age. God's work for Jonathan Edwards was finished and he went home to heaven, to Christ and a great reward.

CONCLUSION

Edwards taught us that God alone brings revival through a mighty moving of the Spirit. He taught us how to determine the true from the false in revival. He taught us not to be afraid of the Holy Spirit but to open ourselves to His working in us. He taught us that spiritual experiences may or may not lead to conversion. He taught us that the truly converted person will love Christ and others. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me (Jn 10:27).

Edwards was a staunch Calvinist who believed in sovereign grace.

Edwards was at times baffled by extremism just as you and I are today as we see the seeds of revival stirring in our country, but he did not stop seeking revival because there were abuses. He kept the baby and threw out the bath water, and so must we if we are going to understand what is happening in America among Christians who are having powerful experiences. May God give us the gift of discernment!