

Jonathan Edwards: Theologian of Revival

by Erroll Hulse

Edwards was a Puritan in theology and practice. He not only fully concurred with the Puritans in their Reformed theology of salvation but shared their emphasis on the centrality of practical and experiential Christianity. Edwards' brilliant mind and remarkable exegetical acumen equipped him for the task of describing and defending revivals.

In all, Edwards wrote five treatises on revival. The first was *A Narrative of Surprising Conversions*, which describes the revival in Northampton in 1735 in which three hundred souls were added to the church. The second was *Thoughts on the Revival in New England* (1740); the third, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741); the fourth, *A History of the Work of Redemption* (1744) and the fifth, which was his deepest and fullest work, *The Religious Affections* (1746).

To these treatises, we should add the biography of Brainerd because it describes a revival among the Indians. In this work Edwards emphasized the sovereign grace of God, since, humanly speaking, there seemed no hope whatsoever for the gospel to break through the darkness and enmity that held the Indians in Satan's vice.

Jim Packer, in a paper given at the Puritan Conference in London in 1961, helpfully summed up Edwards' teaching on revival under three headings, which, with a few principal comments of explanation, are set out in the following paragraphs

1. Revival is an extraordinary work of God the Holy Ghost reinvigorating and propagating Christian piety in a community. Revival is an extraordinary work because it marks the abrupt reversal of an established trend and state of things among those who profess to be God's people. To envision God reviving His Church is to presuppose that the Church has previously grown moribund and gone to sleep.
2. Revivals have a central place in the revealed purposes of God. "The end of God's creating the world," declared Edwards, "was to prepare a kingdom for His Son (for He was appointed heir of the world)." This end is to be realized first through Christ's accomplishing redemption on Calvary, and then through the triumphs of His kingdom. Thus, according to Edwards, "All the dispensations of God's providence henceforward (since Christ's ascension), even to the final consummation of all things, are to give Christ His reward, and fulfil His end in what He did and suffered upon earth."

A universal dominion is pledged to Christ, and in the interim, before the final consummation, the Father implements this pledge in part by successive outpourings of the Spirit. Revivals, therefore, prove the reality of Christ's kingdom to a sceptical world and serve to extend its bounds among Christ's enemies.

3. Revivals are the most glorious of all God's works in the world. Edwards insisted on this in order to shame those who professed no interest in the divine awakening that had come to New England. He believed they insinuated by their attitude that a Christian's mind could be more profitably occupied with other matters:

Such a work is, in its nature and kind, the most glorious of any work of God whatsoever. It is the work of redemption (the great end of all the other works of God, and of which the work of creation was but a shadow). It is the work of new creation, which is infinitely more glorious than the old. I am bold to say that the work of God in the conversion of one soul . . . is a more glorious work than the creation of the whole material universe.

Having outlined the subject in general in these terms, Edwards also dealt with two particular subjects related to revival that are particularly relevant for us today: Satan's tactics in revivals and the role of prayer in revival.

Satan's Tactics in Revivals

1. The first and worst enemy of revivals is spiritual pride. The adversary is the prince of pride. Edwards declared, "[Pride] is the main door by which the devil comes into the hearts of those who are zealous for the advancement of religion. It is the chief inlet of smoke from the bottomless pit." Giving to human instruments the glory due to God alone is a curse to be avoided.

Edwards urged the necessity of humility and cited Psalm 25:9: "The meek will he guide in judgment: and the meek will he teach his way" (KJV). He pointed out that the spiritually proud man is beyond correction because he esteems himself to be full of spiritual light already.

2. The second danger that Edwards warned against is prophecies and visions that people claim to have received by direct inspiration. He pointed out that, by the uncritical acceptance of such a notion, the devil has a great door opened for him. Once this principle of inspiration is accepted, Satan has the opportunity to have his word regarded as the infallible rule, thereby quickly bringing the Bible into neglect and contempt.

Because heightened levels of spiritual experience are commonplace in revivals, the temptation comes to make more of passionate inward experiences than is warranted. Satan will especially tempt some to think they are converted because they are convicted of sin, but conviction is not the same as repentance.

Edwards pointed out that inward experience is a mixed thing. It is not necessarily pure and without self-interest. Even the most exalted spiritual experiences can have defects. With hindsight, passionate experiences can often be recognized as having carnal elements. The truth that the ultimate proof of genuine experience is the fruit of the Spirit and sound

Christian practice is firmly established in his treatise *The Religious Affections*, where the theme of experience is extensively analysed.

Prayer for Revival

Besides his *Humble Attempt* treatise seeking to promote the concert of prayer for revival, Edwards stressed the importance of intercession in *Thoughts on Revival*. He reasoned there that the great and glorious work that had been witnessed in the First Great Awakening was in itself a major reason to pray for yet greater things. He went on to maintain:

It is God's will that the prayers of His people should be one great principal means of carrying on the designs of Christ's kingdom in the world. When God has something very great to accomplish for His Church, it is His will that there should precede it the extraordinary prayers of His people, as is manifest by Ezekiel 36:37: "I will yet for this be inquired of by the

house of Israel, to do this for them." And it is revealed that, when God is about to accomplish great things for His Church, He will begin by a remarkable pouring out of the spirit of grace and supplication (Zechariah 12:10). If we are not to expect that the devil should go out of a particular person, under a bodily possession, without extraordinary prayer, or prayer and fasting, how much less should we expect to have him cast out of the land and the world without it! How, then, should we pray for worldwide revival? As we have just seen, if the devil is to be cast out of his strongholds, there will be need for prayer and fasting by the Church.

Edwards had an extensive vision for the world. If Edwards could have read what is now a bedside book for many, namely *Operation World*, he would have been amazed. Now we have at our command detailed knowledge of every nation and province under the sun, forty to fifty times more than could have been assembled in the year 1750.

How should this affect the way in which we pray? Part of the answer is that we should respond to the needs that surround us. It is helpful for carefully prepared information, nation by nation, to precede times of prayer. We should think in terms of much more time being devoted to such exercises and for churches to come together for special seasons of prayer.

Conclusion

As we pray, it is important to appreciate that while the principles involved in revival are always the same, nevertheless God moves in unexpected ways. He works in various ways in different societies, and every revival has stamped on it "Made in Heaven." This feature of divine originality is important. In timing and in style, every revival has divine genius as its

Hallmark. When we look at revivals in history, we are constrained to stand back and say, "This could not have been done by men, nor could men at their best ever have conceived of such spiritual creations - which is what true revivals are in essence."

Surely, it is our responsibility not only to pray for revivals but also to prepare ourselves theologically for them. In this regard Edwards' writings are extremely useful. As he held the glory of God to be the supreme end of all things, so ought we. "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen" (Romans 11:36, NASB).

Erroll Hulse, *Give Him No Rest*, Evangelical Press. Used with permission.