

“Old Lights” vs. “New Lights” _DEBATING THE GREAT AWAKENING_ 1742-1743

It is not hyperbole to describe George Whitefield, the English clergyman who riveted colonists with his dramatic evangelical preaching, as a star celebrity. He was the “Grand Itinerant,” the travelling preacher with no home church (a troublesome point for American clergy) who toured the colonies seven times from the 1730s to the 1760s, delivering open-air sermons that left his huge audiences spellbound, penitent, and with souls “awakened” (thus the term “Great Awakening”). His core question was that of all evangelicals — *What must I do to be saved?* — and his answer conformed with the prevalent Calvinist doctrine of predestination: that one’s eternal fate (salvation or damnation) was determined by God before creation and manifested by a conversion experience, i.e., repentance and “rebirth.”

Where the evangelicals parted with traditional clergy was the path to conversion: how one received God’s divine grace. Evangelicals depicted a sudden, intense, and overpowering experience, achieved through one’s direct personal relationship with God. Traditional clergy preached a more gradual and subtle conversion experience, achieved within the church through the rational guidance of learned ministers. To the critics, revivalism was a “great abandoning” — of the true path to godliness, of the clergy’s role as interpreters of God’s will, and of the stabilizing influence of the home church. Revivalist preaching was not new to the colonies, but revivalism as a mass phenomenon arrived with Rev. Whitefield. The established clergy split on its merits, at times rancorously.

- ◆ “New Lights” such as Jonathan Edwards heralded the renewal of faith and the increase in church membership and defended the transformative effect of emotion in religious experience (while encouraging some preachers to moderate their oratorical excesses).

- ◆ “Old Lights” such as Charles Chauncy considered revivalists to be ill-guided exhorters offering sensationalist theater as religious experience, to the detriment of true religious growth.

Presented here are brief excerpts from two lengthy treatises written by Boston Puritan clergyman on each side of the issue – “New Light” Jonathan Edwards and “Old Light” Charles Chauncy. What aspects of revivalism merit Edwards’s praise and Chauncy’s censure?

Rev. Jonathan Edwards ___ 1742 **SOME THOUGHTS CONCERNING THE PRESENT REVIVAL OF RELIGION IN NEW ENGLAND**

Treatise (378 pages), published in Boston, excerpts.

Part. III. Showing, in Many Instances, wherein the Subjects, or zealous Promoters [revivalist preachers] of This WORK, have been injuriously blamed. . . .

Section I. *One Thing that has been complained of is Ministers addressing themselves rather to the Affections [emotions] of their Hearers than to their Understandings, and striving to raise their Passions to the utmost Height . . .*

To which I would say, I am far from thinking that it is not very profitable for Ministers in their Preaching to endeavour clearly and distinctly to explain the Doctrines of Religion, and unravel the Difficulties that attend them, and to confirm them with Strength of Reason and Argumentation . . . Yet I believe that the Objection made [that] affections raised without enlightening the Understanding is in a great Measure built on a Mistake, and confused Notions that some have about the Nature and Cause of the Affections and the Manner in which they depend on the Understanding. . . .

I know it has long been fashionable to despise a very earnest and pathetic Way of Preaching [i.e., emotional] and they only have been valued as Preachers who have shown the greatest Extent of Learning, Strength of Reason, and Correctness of Method and Language. But I humbly conceive it has been for want [lack] of Understanding or duly considering human Nature that such Preaching has been thought to have the greatest Tendency to answer the ends of Preaching, and the Experience of the present and past Ages abundantly confirms the same. . . Was there ever an Age [as the present] wherein Strength and Penetration of Reason, Extent of Learning, Exactness of Distinction, Correctness of Style, and Clearness of Expression, did so abound? And yet was there ever an age wherein there has been so little Sense of the Evil of Sin, so little Love to GOD, heavenly-Mindedness, and Holiness of Life, among the Professors [adherents] of the true Religion? Our People don't so much need to have their Heads stored as to have their Hearts touched, and they stand in the greatest Need of that Sort of Preaching which has the greatest Tendency to do this. . . .

Another Thing that some Ministers have been greatly blamed for, and I think unjustly, is speaking Terror to them who are already under great Terrors [spiritual turmoil] instead of comforting them. . . . Why should we be afraid to let Persons who are in an infinitely miserable [sinful] Condition know the Truth, or Bring 'em into the Light, for fear it should terrify them? 'Tis Light that must convert them, if ever they are converted. The more we bring Sinners into the Light while they are miserable, and the Light is terrible to them, the more likely it is that afterward the Light will be joyful to them. The Ease, Peace, and Comfort, which natural [unsaved] Men enjoy have their Foundation in Darkness and Blindness. Therefore as that Darkness vanishes, and Light comes in, their Peace vanishes, and they are terrified. . . .

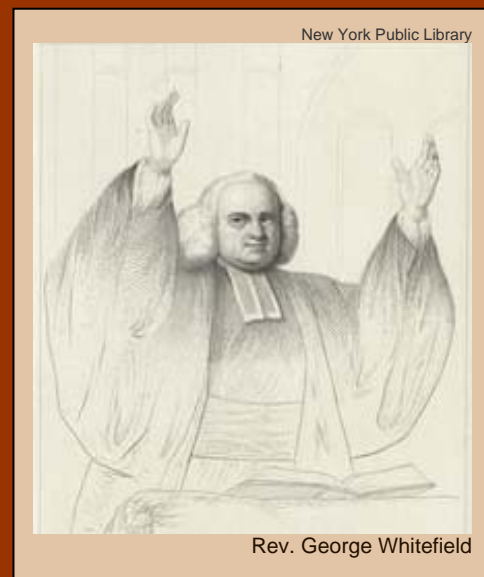
Indeed something besides Terror is to be preached to them whose Consciences are awakened: the Gospel is to

Benjamin Franklin on Rev. George Whitefield

In 1739 arrived among us from Ireland the Reverend Mr. Whitefield, who had made himself remarkable there as an itinerant preacher. He was at first permitted to preach in some of our churches; but the clergy, taking a dislike to him, soon refus'd him their pulpits, and he was oblig'd to preach in the fields. The multitudes of all sects and denominations that attended his sermons were enormous, and it was matter of speculation to me, who was one of the number, to observe the extraordinary influence of his oratory on his hearers, and how much they admir'd and respected him, notwithstanding his common abuse of them by assuring them that they were naturally half beasts and half devils.

It was wonderful to see the change soon made in the manners of our inhabitants. From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seem'd as if all the world were growing religious, so that one could not walk thro' the town in an evening without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street.

_____Autobiography



be preached to them. They are to be told that there is a SAVIOUR provided that is excellent and glorious, who has shed his precious Blood

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for Sinners, and is every way sufficient to save 'em that who stands ready to receive 'em, if they will heartily embrace him, for this is also the Truth, as well as that they now are in an infinitely dreadful Condition [i.e., a soul in danger of damnation]. This is the word of GOD. Sinners, at the same time that they are told how miserable their Case is, should be earnestly invited to come and accept of a SAVIOUR, and yield their Hearts unto him, with all the winning, encouraging Arguments, that the Gospel affords. . . .

Part V. Showing positively, what ought to be done to promote this WORK. . . .

Ministers, at this Day in a special Manner, should act as Fellow-helpers in their great Work. It should be seen that they are animated & engaged and exert themselves with one Heart and Soul, and with united Strength to promote the present glorious Revival of Religion; And to that End should often meet together & act in Concert. And if it were a common Thing in the Country for Ministers to join in public Exercises and second one another in their Preaching, I believe it would be of great Service. . . . Only such an appearance of united Zeal in Ministers would have a great Tendency to awaken Attention, & much to impress and animate the Hearers; as has been found by Experience in some Parts of the Country. . . .

Great Things might be done for the Advancement of the Kingdom of CHRIST at this day by those who have Ability:

- ◆ by establishing Funds for the Support and Propagation of Religion
- ◆ by supporting some who are eminently qualified with Gifts and Grace in preaching the Gospel in certain Parts of the Country, which are more destitute of the Means of Grace;
- ◆ in searching out Children of promising Abilities, & their hearts full of Love to CHRIST, but of poor families (as doubtless there are such now in the Land), & bringing them up for the Ministry; and
- ◆ in distributing Books that are remarkably fitted to promote vital Religion, and have a great Tendency to advance this Work; or if they would only bear the Trouble, Expense & Loss of sending such Books into various Parts of the Land to be sold, it might be an Occasion that ten Times so many of those Books should be bought as otherwise would be; and
- ◆ in establishing & supporting Schools in poor Towns and Villages, which might be done on such a Foundation, as not only to bring up Children in common Learning, but also might very much tend to their Conviction & Conversion, and being trained up in vital Piety.; and Doubtless something might be done this way in old Towns and more populous Places that might have a great Tendency to the Flourishing of Religion in the rising Generation. . . .

If the People of GOD at this day, instead of spending Time in fruitless Disputing and talking about Opposers, and judging of them, and animadverting upon the Unreasonableness of their Talk and Behaviour, and its Inconsistence with true Experience, would be more silent in this Way and open their Mouths much more before GOD, and spend more Time in Fasting & Prayer, they would be more in the Way of a Blessing. And if some Christians in the Land that have been complaining of their Ministers, and struggling in vain to deliver themselves from the Difficulties they have complained of under their ministry, had said and acted less before Men and had applied themselves with all their Might to cry to GOD for their Ministers, had as it were risen and storm'd Heaven with their humble, fervent, and incessant Prayers for them, they would have been much more in the Way [direction] of success.

Rev. Charles Chauncy _____ *1743*

SEASONABLE THOUGHTS ON THE STATE OF RELIGION

Treatise (424 pages), 1743, excerpts; written in rebuttal to Jonathan Edwards's
Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion (1742).

Part I. Faithfully pointing the Things of a BAD and DANGEROUS TENDENCY in the *late* and *present* *religious Appearance* [i.e., revivalism] in the Land. . . .

I shall first mention *Itinerant* [travelling] *Preaching*. This had its *Rise* (at least in these Parts) from Mr. WHITEFIELD, though I could never see, I own, upon what Warrant, either from *Scripture* or *Reason*, he went about Preaching from one *Province* [colony] and *Parish* to another, where the Gospel was already preach'd, and by Persons as well qualified for the Work as he can pretend to be. I charitably hope his Design [plan/motive] herein was good: But might it not be leavened with some undesirable Mixture? Might he not, at first, take up this Practice from a mistaken Thought of some *extraordinary Mission* from GOD? Or from the undue Influence of *too high an Opinion* of his own *Gifts* and *Graces*? And when he had got into this Way, might he not be too much encouraged to go on in it from the *popular Applauses* everywhere so liberally heaped on him? . . .

I complain not of People's hearing Ministers that are not their *own*, as they may occasionally happen among them. Nay, I object not against *one* Minister's coming among the People of *another* on Purpose that they might have the Benefit of his Gifts and Labours, provided there be a mutual Agreement between *all* the Parties concern'd . . . But for Ministers to make a Business of going out of their *own* into *other Men's* Parishes, unask'd, or at the Desire of only some disaffected people — and this in known Opposition to the *settled* Pastors — it's contrary to all *Reason* as well as *Scripture* and subversive of all *Order* in the Churches, especially when they carry the Matter so far as to *creep into private Houses* when they can't any longer force themselves into the *Pulpits* and insinuate such Things against the *fixed* Ministers as tend to leaven the Minds of their People with Prejudices against them and hinder their further Advantage from their Labours. . . .

The next Thing I shall take Notice of, as what I can't but think of dangerous Tendency, is that *Terror* so many have been the Subjects of, Expressing itself in *strange Effects* upon the *Body*, such as *swoning away* and *falling to the Ground*, where Persons have lain for a Time speechless and motionless, bitter *Shriekings* and *Screamings*, *Convulsion-like Tremblings* and *Agitations*, *Strugglings*, and *Tumblings* which in some Instances have been attended [accompanied] with Indecencies I shan't mention . . . Some say they were surprized and astonished and insensibly wrought upon, they can't tell how; Others, that they had presented to their View at the Time a Sight of their Sins in all their Number and Defect; Others, that they saw Hell as it were, naked before them, and Destruction without a Covering, and that is seemed to them as though they were just falling into it; Others, that they imagined the Devils were about them and ready to lay hold on them and draw them away to Hell. The more general Account is that they were fill'd with great Anxiety and Distress, having upon their Minds an over-powering Sense of Sin and Fear of divine Wrath. . . .

The *Way* in which *these Fears* have been Excited in many Places is not, in my Opinion, the best Evidence in Favour of them. People have been too much applied to [driven to], as though the Preacher rather aimed at putting their Passions into a Ferment than filling them with such a *reasonable* Solitude, as is the Effect of a just Exhibition of the Truths of GOD to the Understandings. . . .

I doubt not but the *divine SPIRIT* often accompanies the *preached Word* so as that, by his Influence, Sinners are awakened to a Sense of *Sin* and filled with *deep Distress* of Soul. But the *blessed SPIRIT* must not, at Random, be made the Author of all those *Surprises*, operating in *strange Effects* upon the *Body* which may be seen among People. They may be produced other Ways; yea, I trust, that has been already

said, which makes it evident they have actually been produced even by the *wild* and *extravagant Conduct* of some *over-heated Preachers*. . . .

There is yet another Thing that makes it look as though these Terrors might arise from a *lower Cause* than that which is *Divine*, and that is their happening in the *Night*. I don't mean that there han't been outcries in the *Day Time*; but the *Night* is more commonly the *Season* [time] when these Things are to be seen . . . And why should these *strange Effects* be more *frequent* and *general* in the *Gloominess* of the *Night* if they were produc'd by the Agency of the *Divine SPIRIT*? Does he need the Advantage of the *dark* to fill Men's Hearts with Terror? This is certainly a shrewd Sign that there is more of the *Human* in these Things than some are willing to own [admit]. . . .

The Subjects [persons] also of these *Terrors* may lead us to make the like Judgment about them, and these are *Children*, *Women*, and *youngerly* Persons. Not that others han't been wrought upon. Instances there have been of *Men*, and these both *middle-aged* and *advanced in Years*, who have both *cried out* and *fallen down*. But 'tis among *Children*, *young People* and *Women* whose Passions are soft and tender and more easily thrown into a Commotion that these Things *chiefly* prevail. . . It certainly looks as though the Weakness of their [women's] Nerves and from hence their greater Liableness to be surpris'd [overtaken with emotion] and overcome

with Fear was the true

Account [cause] to be given of this Matter. . . .

I am clearly in the Sentiment that the great Stress that has been laid upon such Terrors as have evidently been produced by the mechanical influence of awful Words and frightful Gestures has been a great Disservice to the interest of Religion.

. . . And to speak freely,
I am clearly in the Sentiment

[opinion] that the great Stress that has been laid upon *such Terrors* as have evidently been produced by the *mechanical influence of awful Words* and *frightful Gestures* has been a great Disservice to the interest of Religion. . . I am not against the *Preaching of Terror*, but whenever this is done, it ought to be in a Way that may enlighten the Mind as well as to alarm the Passions: And I am greatly mistaken if this has been the Practice among some Sort of Preachers, so much as it ought to be. And to this it may be owing that Religion, of late, has been *more a Commotion in the Passions* than a *Change* in the *Temper* of the *Mind*. . . .

. . . 'tis generally believed *Satan* has been very busy in these Times. He has, no Doubt, had a great hand in fomenting the Divisions and promoting the Extravagancies which have, of late, been so detrimental to the Interest of Religion. And if, instead of contriving *Excuses* for these Things, we had been more *vigilant*, because *our Adversary the Devil, as a roaring Lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour*; and had *resisted him* more courageously, as those who are *steadfast in the Faith*, it might have been as much for the Honour of CHRIST and the Service of his Cause and Kingdom. — If 'tis no Wonder the *Devil* is now active and busy, and has had an Influence in the Production of *bad Things* among us, it ought not to be wondered at, when these are so *many* and of such *dangerous Tendency* (as has been largely represented [in this treatise]), if there are those who think they shall serve CHRIST while they oppose the Devil in doing what they can to give Check to such *Disorders*, and in opening the *Obligations* all are under to do so, which is the *next* Part of the Work I have undertaken. [End of Part I]