

“VIOLENT MOTIONS OF CARNAL AFFECTIONS”: JONATHAN EDWARDS, JOHN OWEN, AND DISTINGUISHING THE WORK OF THE SPIRIT FROM ENTHUSIASM

by
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Evangelical pastors today may very well find the descriptor “enthusiastic” a compliment, but this has not always been the case. As recently as a few centuries ago, few insults could be leveled against ministers greater than the charge of “enthusiasm.” Enthusiasts were the religious “crazies”; sects from Montanists to Anabaptists were branded such. And yet this extreme charge was leveled against America’s most famous bewigged theologian, Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), for his involvement in the “Great Awakening.”² The Great Awakening saw many unusual occurrences, and Edwards’s staid but unwavering defense of the “work” makes him justly considered a moderate supporter of it. As New England saw many strange outbreaks among the awakened, how did Edwards offer support for the Awakening while distancing himself from its more radical aspects? This paper will explore how Edwards defined enthusiasm, responded to the charge of enthusiasm, and admonished those whom he considered enthusiasts. To test the historical precedent of his views, they will be set against those of the English Puritan John Owen (1616–1683), who had his own enthusiasts to deal with. This paper will demonstrate that while Edwards showed some differences with older Puritan perspectives on the “baggage” that accompanied enthusiasts, these differences are the exception; his views largely echo his Reformed forebears.

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²William Sherlock, one of Owen’s chief critics, said Owen emphasized union with Christ over obedience, and was thus of “Amorous and Enthusiastik devotion, which consists in a passionate love to the Person of Christ” (*A Discourse Concerning the Knowledge of Jesus Christ, and Our Union and Communion with Him* [1674], p. 13; also see Kelly M. Kopic, *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007], pp. 199–200). For more on Sherlock, see Carl R. Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 123–28 and Kopic, *Communion with God*, pp. 153–54.

JOHN OWEN AND THE ENTHUSIASM OF THE QUAKERS

In 17th-century England, the Quakers led by George Fox (1624–1691) most often earned the charge “enthusiast.”³ Quakers or “Friends” espoused that God spoke directly to each individual through what they called an “inner light.” This inner light led to a rejection of higher education, the necessity of the Scriptures, ordinances, and even the Trinity. Their prophetic bent resulted in several excesses, including “going naked as a sign.”⁴ When Owen confronted enthusiasts, he had the Quakers in mind.

Enthusiasm and the Word of God

Since enthusiasm was most often connected with the work of the Spirit, this study will major on Owen’s definition and response to enthusiasm in *Pneumatologia*, supplemented with other writings, including *Communion with the Triune God* and *A Defense of Scripture*.

Pneumatologia

Upon commencing his *Pneumatologia*, Owen argued that his study of the Holy Spirit is warranted from the “deceit and abuse” that has often been done in the name of or attributed to the Holy Spirit.⁵ Owen emphasized that false spirits are a real danger in the church; spirits are to be tested, not by their “extraordinary works,” but their accompanying doctrine.

For Owen, the “growing evil amongst us” was the “inner light” some claimed to possess from the Holy Spirit. This doctrine was directly contrary to the real work of the Spirit.⁶ Owen believed it a Christian duty to convince those who ascribed to the Spirit “vain enthusiasms, ecstasical raptures and revelations” that such came from their own imaginations.⁷

³See Charles L. Cherry, “Enthusiasm and Madness: Anti-Quakerism in the Seventeenth Century,” *Quaker History* 74 (Fall 1984): 1–24; Michael Haykin, “John Owen and the Challenge of the Quakers,” in *John Owen, the Man and His Theology*, ed. Robert W. Oliver (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), pp. 131–55; David S. Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm in the New World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 111–34; Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *The Puritan Spirit* (London: Epworth Press, 1967), pp. 170–76; *Dictionary of Christian Biography*, s.v. “George Fox.”

⁴Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm*, pp. 124–26; Peter Toon, *God’s Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen: Pastor, Educator, Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), pp. 75–77; Kopic, *Communion with God*, pp. 198–202.

⁵John Owen, *Πνευματολογία*, vol. 3 of *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William Gould (London: Banner of Truth, 1966), p. 29. References hereafter to Owen’s *Works* will refer to the Banner edition.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 39.

How enthusiasm differed from the ministry of the Spirit is exemplified in prophecy, itself “an extraordinary gift of the Holy Ghost, . . . neither to be confined to the strict notion of prediction and foretelling, nor to be extended to every true declaration of the mind of God, but only to that which is obtained by immediate revelation.”⁸ Therein the Holy Spirit prepared and elevated the intellectual faculties of men, like tuning a stringed instrument. The Spirit did not leave prophets’ faculties to their natural capabilities, but fitted them to receive and remember his message. Satan, on the other hand, strongly impressed false prophets’ imaginations, “by possessing, wresting, distorting the organs of the body and spirits of the body.”⁹

Owen stressed that regeneration is not effected by either baptism or repentance.¹⁰ Nor does it “consist in a *moral reformation*.” On the contrary, regeneration is

the infusion of a *new, real, spiritual* principle into the soul and its faculties, or spiritual life, light, holiness, and righteousness, disposed unto and suited for the destruction or expulsion of a contrary, inbred, habitual principle of sin and enmity against God, enabling unto all acts of holy obedience, and so in order of nature antecedent unto them.¹¹

Owen said regeneration “doth certainly and *infallibly* produce” a reformed life, but that does not properly define it. For Owen, the regenerate did not receive new moral actions as much as “renewed faculties, with *new dispositions, power, or ability* to them and for them.”¹²

Owen further explained that regeneration “doth not consist in *enthusiastical raptures, ecstasies, voices*, or any thing of the like kind.”¹³ Those who emphasized “inspirations” usually neglect holiness, and are probably not truly converted. Instead, Owen said, the Holy Spirit works by means: “He worketh also on men suitably unto their natures, even as the faculties of their souls, their minds, wills, and affections, are meet to be affected and wrought upon. He doth not come upon them with involuntary raptures, using their faculties and powers as the evil spirit wrests the bodies of them whom he possesseth.” The Spirit only worked with those means revealed in Scripture, and he never coerced the faculties, working “in them and by them suitably to their natures.” Owen was adamant: “This great work, therefore, neither in part, nor whole consists in raptures, visions, enthusiastic inspirations, but in the effect of the power of the Spirit of God on the souls of men.”¹⁴ Behind these remarks lay the enthusiastic abuses of the

⁸Ibid., p. 130.

⁹Ibid., p. 133.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 216.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 218–19.

¹²Ibid., pp. 219–21.

¹³Ibid., p. 224.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 225. Also see Owen’s discussion on illumination later in

Quakers.

Those who reduced regeneration to enthusiasm show “their hatred...of the work itself.”¹⁵ When an individual supposed himself to have received inspired messages from God, the person must be taught to resist these fanatical urges. Owen explained,

Where, by reason of distempers of mind, disorder of fancy, or long continuance of distressing fears and sorrows, in and under such preparatory works of the Spirit, which sometimes cut men to their hearts in the sense of their sin, and sinful, lost condition, any do fall into apprehensions or imaginations of any thing extraordinary in the ways before mentioned, if it be not quickly and strictly brought unto the rule, and discarded thereby, it may be of great danger unto their souls, and is never of any...solid use or advantage.¹⁶

As far as Owen was concerned, this problem can be traced to either “distempered minds” or Satan himself. He reiterated this point later, adding that the bodily shakings of the Quakers were also inconsistent with the Spirit’s work. The Spirit, Owen said,

doth not, in our regeneration, possess the mind with any enthusiastical impressions, nor act absolutely upon us as he did in extraordinary prophetic inspirations of old, where the minds and organs of the bodies of men were merely passive instruments, moved by him above their own natural capacity and activity, not only as to the principle of working, but as to the manner of operation; but he works on the minds of men in and by their own natural actings, through an immediate influence and impression of his power.¹⁷

Other Works

In *Communion with the Triune God*, Owen articulated similar themes to those in *Pneumatologia*. The Roman church had shown contempt for the Spirit’s work in its “outside pompous worship” instead of the “power and simplicity of the gospel.”¹⁸ In Owen’s day, this error had been reversed: “Then, he would have a *ministry* without the *Spirit*; now, a *Spirit* without a *ministry*. Then, the *reading* of the word might suffice, without either preaching or praying by the Spirit;—now, the *Spirit* is enough, without reading or studying the word at all.”¹⁹ The Spirit’s ministry emphasized to the saint the words of Christ as revealed in the Bible. The spirit of the world steered men away from these words through “*new revelations*.”²⁰

Πνευματολογία, pp. 333–34.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 225.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 225–26.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 319.

¹⁸*Communion with the Triune God*, vol. 2 of *Works*, p. 255.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 257.

²⁰Ibid.

[T]he Holy Ghost sheds abroad the love of God in our hearts, as was declared, and thence fills them with joy, peace, and hope; quieting and refreshing the hearts of them in whom he dwells; giving them liberty and rest, confidence, and the boldness of children. This spirit whereof men now boast is a spirit of bondage, whose utmost work is to make men quake and tremble; casting them into an un-son-like frame of spirit, driving them up and down with horror and bondage, and drinking up their *very natural spirits*, and making their whole man wither away.²¹

Owen used *A Defense of Scripture* to address enthusiasm again. Here he stressed that the “inner light” of the “fanatics” undermined the Scripture. This “inner light” in an unregenerate man could never be saving, since it would only reveal his depravity and condemnation. Nor could the “inner light” be a means of salvation—that would render the gospel needless. Nor did the “inner light” grant knowledge of things necessary to know, “as our enthusiasts say”: it had never revealed anything true about God.²²

Again, in his *Συνεσις Πνευματικη*, Owen identified enthusiasm with “immediate inspiration.” “There is no safety,” he wrote, “in depending on *enthusiasms*, or immediate pretended infallible inspirations.”²³ This work insisted on two carefully articulated planks: that the work of Holy Spirit on the mind was necessary to understand Scripture rightly, and that this work was a “true exercise” of the mind distinct from all “*enthusiastical inspirations*.”²⁴ If an immediate inspiration was necessary to understand the Bible, reason would be superfluous. Owen argued that the Holy Spirit enables the believer to use his own understanding through appropriate means to know the mind of God as revealed in Scripture.

Summary

For Owen, the Spirit did not impose himself through impressions and inspiration, but ordered men’s souls and faculties. Though not a point of emphasis for Owen, he did deny that great outward manifestations, like quaking, were wrought of the Spirit of God, likely in opposition to the Quaker doctrine. The inevitable result of the enthusiasts’ emphasis on an “inner light” was the neglect and

²¹Ibid., p. 258. In *Pneumatologia* Owen said, “True sanctification reacheth the body also.” He continued, “But consider these things morally, and as the whole person is a principle of spiritual and moral operations, and so it doth work such change and alteration on the whole person as to cure morally sinful distempers, as of passion, elation of mind, and intemperances, which men were before more than ordinarily inclined unto by their tempers and constitutions; yea, from the efficacy of it upon our whole persons, in the curing of such habitual inordinate and sinful distempers, lies the principal discovery of its truth and reality” (ibid., p. 422).

²²*A Defense of Sacred Scripture from Modern Fanaticism in Biblical Theology*, trans. Stephen P. Wescott (Pittsburgh: Soli Deo Gloria, 1994), p. 848.

²³*Συνεσις Πνευματικη*, vol. 4 of *Works*, p. 127.

²⁴Ibid.

disparagement of Scripture.

JONATHAN EDWARDS AND THE CHARGE OF ENTHUSIASM

The problem of enthusiasm for Edwards was two-fold in that he was both arguing against the enthusiasts in the awakening and defending himself against the charge of enthusiasm. This forced Edwards to attempt some distinctions between true and false works of the Spirit. This section will focus on how he addressed this problem in his awakening writings.²⁵

The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God

The work of God Edwards saw in the middle of the 1730s had all but dried up by the late 1730s.²⁶ Everything changed in September 1740 when George Whitefield (1714–1771) began his wildly successful itinerant ministry in New England. Soon after, Whitefield teamed up with another itinerant, Gilbert Tennent (1703–1764), and preached throughout New England; other ministers began itinerant ministries. Edwards preached *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* in July 1741, and was himself noting increased conversions, but along with them came fainting, shouts during the preaching, and visions.

²⁵For a history of the Great Awakening, see C. C. Goen, “Editor’s Introduction” in *The Great Awakening*, vol. 4 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 32–89. Also see Edwin Scott Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957); Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), pp. 153–76; Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (1949 reprint; Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005) pp. 133–63; Edwin S. Gaustad and Mark A. Noll, eds., *A Documentary History of Religion in America to 1877* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 160–76; and Frank Lambert, *Inventing the “Great Awakening”* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999). For enthusiasm and the Great Awakening, see Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm*, pp. 178–94. References hereafter to Edwards’s *Works* will reference the Yale *Works of Jonathan Edwards*.

²⁶Edwards saw an initial work of God in the mid-1730s, but this would nearly fade out by the time the greater awakening of the early 1740s. A 1735 letter of Edwards recording this earlier awakening was published and later dubbed *A Faithful Narrative*. Therein Edwards articulates points on certain themes that he would repeat over a decade later (with development) (*Faithful Narrative*, vol. 4 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. C. C. Goen [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972], pp. 144–211). According to *Faithful Narrative*, when God’s Spirit works in sinners, they are convicted of the Gospel’s certainty and have “that sight and taste of the divinity, or divine excellency, that there is in the things of the Gospel” (ibid., p. 179). Sometimes this delight had a bodily effect, but it always and more importantly resulted in holiness. The present work was accompanied by irregularities, but Edwards “corrected” them, and “it will not be wondered at, that a congregation should need a guide in such cases, to assist them in distinguishing wheat from chaff” (ibid., p. 188). Edwards concedes in *Faithful Narrative* that there had been some instances of “strange enthusiastic delusions” in the awakenings—one man believed he had been “divinely instructed” to tell a discouraged man to pray a certain Psalm. “But he since exceedingly laments the dishonor he has done to God” (ibid., p. 207). Enthusiasm should be curbed immediately by the minister through careful teaching.

Over time, the awakening began to see strange events that troubled observers. John Davenport (1716–1757) was another “friend” of the revival who by mid-1741 began making his own dubious mark on the awakening. Traveling throughout Connecticut, Davenport preached in church after church, calling certain persons unconverted—including ministers. The established clergy recoiled at such uncontrolled charges and actions. Soon, among other concerns, the charge of enthusiasm was being leveled by critics against the awakening and its defenders, and Davenport would soon be those critics’ poster-boy.

It was in September of that year that Edwards was asked to give the Yale College Commencement address. There he attempted, in the midst of revival’s heat, to define a way of sorting out the good of the awakening from the bad. This address was printed that same year as *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*.²⁷ Yale never asked Edwards back.

Edwards’s stated goal in *Distinguishing Marks* is “to shew what are the true, certain, and distinguishing evidences of a work of the Spirit of God.”²⁸ Edwards argued that one cannot dismiss the awakening simply because the work is unusual; the Bible showed that the Spirit often worked in unusual ways and foretells future unusual workings. Nor was it a sign for or against the Spirit’s work that there were accompanying bodily effects. When weak men taste the glory of divine things, given “the laws of the union between soul and body,” men might be very much affected in their body.²⁹ “That the Quakers used to tremble, was no argument that Saul, afterwards Paul, and the jailor, did not tremble from real convictions of conscience.”³⁰ One should evaluate a work by looking at the nature of the affections people are under, not its effect on the body. The simple presence of strong bodily effects did not validate the charge of enthusiasm.³¹ “Great imprudences and irregularities” often accompanied a genuine work of God.³²

²⁷The full title was *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God, Applied to That Uncommon Operation That Has Lately Appeared on the Minds of Many of the People of This Land: With a Particular Consideration of the Extraordinary Circumstances with Which This Work is Attended*.

²⁸*The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*, vol. 4 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, p. 227.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 231.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 234.

³¹Neither should the awakening’s critics point to the great effects on men’s minds, though Edwards concedes that many make too much of what they have experienced in their imaginations. Even when people’s imaginations are affected so that they experience ecstasy or see visions, Edwards does not think Satan or the Spirit should be immediately cited—such is the natural response of men. Edwards writes, “Human nature, under these vehement and intense exercises and affections of mind, which some persons are the subjects of, is all that need be brought into the account” (*ibid.*, p. 237).

³²*Ibid.*, p. 241.

Edwards also offered positive “Scripture evidences” for testing the work. First John 4, Edwards’s passage for *Distinguishing Marks*, showed that confessing Christ was one such mark.³³ The conviction of sin, increased regard for the Word, and sound doctrine are further evidence. The Devil hated the Bible, and will not influence men to love it: “Accordingly we see it to be common in enthusiasts, that they depreciate this written rule [the Bible], and set up the light within, or some other rule above it.”³⁴ True love for God and man was another result of the Spirit never seen among enthusiasts. Enthusiasts loved because of “self-love”; their love was rooted in “those peculiarities that make them the objects of others’ contempt.”³⁵ Indeed, those works of the Spirit of God would not be done by the Devil, even if he could. Edwards stressed that the Spirit alone worked thus, for it was impossible for the Devil to counterfeit the gracious fruits done in true believers.³⁶ And by contrasting the work with the Quakers on these points, Edwards was showing his distance from the historic enthusiasts.

Edwards also addressed the “extraordinary things many...stumbled at” in the awakening: the shrieks and fainting. He believed that the revival could be defended despite these aspects. Many of these displays, he explained, were the result of either the conviction of sin or the “excellency of divine things.” Edwards admitted that at times the outcries and outward manifestations had occurred in the midst of public worship, but he did not fault the subjects.³⁷ One should expect new revivals to have “imprudences.” And if this was indeed a genuine work of God, the stakes were high in not thanking God for it.³⁸

Edwards directed a final word of application to the “friends” of the awakening to guard against excess and misbehavior. Their danger was “spiritual pride,” and making too much of their “impulses and strong impressions,” as if they were directly from God.³⁹ “[I]nspiration, such as the prophets and apostles and others had of old” was no longer a gracious work of the Spirit.⁴⁰ Sign gifts might be possible, some

³³Edwards emphasized that the Christ confessed is the one who appeared in the flesh, not “any mystical, fantastical Christ” of the Quakers (ibid., p. 250).

³⁴Ibid., p. 254.

³⁵Ibid., p. 257.

³⁶Ibid., p. 258.

³⁷Edwards wrote that, though persons should try to restrain themselves, “if God is pleased to convince the consciences of persons, so that they can’t avoid great outward manifestations, even to the interrupting and breaking off those public means they were attending, I don’t think this is confusion, or any unhappy interruption, any more than if a company should meet on the field to pray for rain, and should be broken off by a plentiful shower” (ibid., p. 267).

³⁸Edwards said, “If...any...will still resolutely go on to speak contemptibly of these things, I would beg of them to take heed that they ben’t guilty of the unpardonable sin against the Holy Ghost” (ibid., p. 275).

³⁹Ibid., p. 277.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 278. Compare *Religious Affections*, vol. 2 of *Works of Jonathan Edwards*,

thought, if the eschaton had begun, but Edwards disagreed. The best gifts are “charity or divine love,” not miraculous gifts. Sign gifts were marks of the church’s immaturity, given to the early church until “the ordinary means of grace should be settled.” Edwards did not “expect a restoration of these miraculous gifts in the approaching glorious times of the church”; indeed, he added, “nor do I desire it.”⁴¹ The Spirit’s work, and the one Edwards desired, was not vain revelations, but enabling men to relish the divine glory of Christ. Here was a direct rebuke to all the enthusiasts.

Opposition

Yale and its constituency were not impressed. More abuses by the friends of the awakening made matters worse. The spring of 1742 saw Davenport arrested in and deported from Connecticut for itinerant preaching, a practice the colony had recently condemned to curb awakening abuses. A few weeks following he showed up in Boston, whose ministers issued a “Declaration” against him. He was arrested, tried, and found not guilty on “*non compos mentis*” grounds. As Goen puts it, Davenport “furnished the anti-revival arsenal with more ammunition than even Jonathan Edwards could repulse.”⁴²

Meanwhile Charles Chauncy (1592–1672), a Boston minister known as “Old Brick,” was zealously arguing against the work.⁴³ A Chauncy sermon in the fall of 1742 described an enthusiast as anyone purporting in “mere pretense” to have the Spirit.⁴⁴ He traced the word’s history, noting that it at one time referred to divine inspiration, but today spoke of “an *imaginary*, not a *real* inspiration.”⁴⁵ Chauncy went further: “the *Enthusiast* is one, who has a conceit of himself as a person favoured with the extraordinary presence of the *Deity*. He mistakes the workings of his own passions for divine communications, and fancies himself immediately inspired by the SPIRIT of GOD, when all

ed. John E. Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), pp. 285–87. For an explanation of Edwards a “cessationist,” see Michael A. G. Haykin, *Jonathan Edwards: The Holy Spirit in Revival: The Lasting Influence of the Holy Spirit in the Heart of Man* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2005), pp. 59–73.

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 280–81.

⁴²“Editor’s Introduction” in *Works* 4:61.

⁴³For more on Chauncy, see Williston Walker, *Ten New England Leaders* (New York: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1969), pp. 267–310; on Chauncy’s relation to the conflict, see C. C. Goen, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *Works* 4:62–65; E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 93–101; George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 268–90. Chauncy would eventually become a universalist and high Arian.

⁴⁴*Enthusiasm Described and Caution’d Against*, in *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences*, ed. Alan Heimert and Perry Miller (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), p. 230.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 231.

the while, he is under no other influence than that of an over-heated imagination."⁴⁶ Enthusiasm manifested itself in several ways, Chauncy warned. For example, the bodies of Quakers shook because of it. Enthusiasm is chiefly seen in the loss of reason;⁴⁷ it is "a kind of religious Phrenzy."⁴⁸

For Chauncy, the logic went like this: Quakers believed in an "inner light," and were justifiably called enthusiasts for it. But Quakers also had bodily manifestations, and therefore these effects were also a mark of enthusiasm. A month later Chauncy wrote that the entire work was under "the effect of enthusiastic heat."⁴⁹ *The Wonderful Narrative*, another 1742 publication by Chauncy (whose title was a not-so-subtle jab at Edwards) identified the revival with the enthusiastic French Prophets.⁵⁰

Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival

Though dissension and excess had nearly extinguished the revival, Edwards argued again for its legitimacy in his *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*. For Edwards, the "vain, carnal, worldly spirit" in some ministers was worse than "all the imprudence and intemperate heats, wildness and distraction (as some call it)" of the young revival preachers. Those critics of high affections in believers were too "philosophical." The Bible endorsed high affections. "It is a stumbling to some that religious affections should seem to be so powerful, so that they should be so violent (as they express it) in some persons."⁵¹ The Spirit

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 232.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 234.

⁴⁹*A Letter from a Gentleman in Boston, to Mr. George Wishart*, cited in Goen, "Editor's Introduction," p. 63. The charge of enthusiasm against Edwards continues today. For example, see Maurice W. Armstrong, "Religious Enthusiasm and Separatism in Colonial New England," *Harvard Theological Review* 38 (April 1945): 111–40; Douglas L. Winiarski, "Jonathan Edwards, Enthusiast? Radical Revivalism and the Great Awakening in the Connecticut Valley," *Church History* 74 (December 2005): 683–739; Michael McClymond, *Encounters with God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 107–12; and (to a somewhat lesser extent) Frank Lambert, *Inventing the "Great Awakening."* Compare Conrad Cherry, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal* (1966 reprint; Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1990), pp. 164–76; John D. Hannah, "Jonathan Edwards, the Toronto Blessing, and the Spiritual Gifts: Are the Extraordinary Ones Actually Ordinary Ones?" *Trinity Journal* 17 (Fall 1996): 167–89.

⁵⁰The work bore the pseudonym "Antienthusiasticus" (or "Anti-enthusiasticus"). *The Wonderful Narrative: Or a Faithful Account of the French Prophets, their Agitations, Extasies, and Inspirations* (1742). For more on the "French Prophets" or Camisards, see *Religious Encyclopedia or Dictionary of Biblical, Historical, Doctrinal, and Practical Theology* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1891), s.vv. "Camisards," "French Prophets." On the connection between the "Old Lights" of the awakening and the charge of Quakerism, see Haykin, *Holy Spirit in Revival*, pp. 98–101.

⁵¹*Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*, in *Works* 4:299.

is powerful, and one should expect him to act accordingly. God placed ministers over men's souls, not bodies; he has made them "divines, and not physicians," and therefore they should not dictate how men may physically respond.⁵² The Scriptures revealed that the Holy Spirit's work resulted in bodily effects, and one may not invent extra-biblical rules for how they *must* look. As for the comparisons to the Quakers or French Prophets, Edwards says the awakening is "totally and essentially different in its nature," built on different principles.⁵³

Edwards stressed to his readers that the awakening should be neither approved nor dismissed in its entirety. Edwards explained, "The weakness of human nature has always appeared in times of great revival of religion, by a disposition to run to extremes and get into confusion; and especially in these three things—enthusiasm, superstition, and intemperate zeal."⁵⁴ The mixture of error with the true work of God was present even during the days of the Apostles. Edwards pointed out that the present day church had been in "a strange stupor"; the Spirit's work had been "but little felt." He continued,

And is it any wonder that they that never before had experience of the supernatural influence of the divine Spirit upon their souls, and never were instructed in the nature of these influences, don't so well know how to distinguish one extraordinary new impression from another, and so (to themselves insensibly) run into enthusiasm, taking every strong impulse or impression to be divine?⁵⁵

The awakening had many genuine conversions evidenced in holy living. Even if the work contained "error, imprudences, darkness and sin," the ministers should thank God for it.⁵⁶

At this point Edwards famously turned to his own wife's experience, though she was not identified. Her "transports" began without any "enthusiastical season," nor from the preaching of Whitefield or Tennent, but on her own. Sarah's own "great view of God's excellency" resulted in "great agitations of body" such as "leaping for joy." "These transporting views and rapturous affections," Edwards added, "are not attended with any enthusiastic disposition to follow impulses, or any supposed prophetic revelations."⁵⁷ For Edwards, Sarah was the primary proof of God's work in the awakening—all of the holiness, none of the enthusiasm. He for several pages listed many gracious actions and dispositions of his bride, ultimately concluding, "Now if

⁵²Ibid., p. 300.

⁵³Ibid., p. 313.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 319.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 321. Edwards says "errors and irregularities" accompanied the present work of God, but they arose from mankind's "infirmity and weakness and common corruption" (ibid., p. 323).

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 331.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 333.

such things are enthusiasm, and the fruits of a distempered brain, let my brain be evermore possessed of that happy distemper!"⁵⁸

After warning against opposing the work,⁵⁹ Edwards took up the management of the awakening. Herein he addresses some of the chief complaints against the work. Some objected that the New Light ministers overly emphasized bodily effects such as "outcries" and "faintings." While Edwards does not consider these certain evidence of the Spirit's work, they were still "probable tokens of God's presence."⁶⁰ Such manifestations, Edwards believed, would come in the time of God's work before the Millennium.⁶¹

Edwards also reproved the awakening's supporters. That excesses had crept into the awakening is unsurprising; the Devil had throughout history sought "to improve the indiscreet zeal of Christians" to either enthusiasm, superstition, or uncharitable behavior to the work's detractors.⁶² After warning against spiritual pride,⁶³ Edwards confronted those who believe that God guides believers through "inspiration, or immediate revelation."⁶⁴ In words that echo Owen, Edwards said that this doctrine (the tendency toward which Edwards finds "strange") inevitably diminishes the Bible's importance. Edwards rejected impressions, even when they came in the form of a text of Scripture. The Spirit's guidance should instead be understood as his giving believers "eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to understand; he causes them to understand the fear of the Lord."⁶⁵ Nor does the Spirit speak to the believer while he preaches or prays. Such beliefs were grounded

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 341.

⁵⁹Ibid., pp. 348–83. Compare similar warnings in *Distinguishing Marks*, in *Works* 4:275.

⁶⁰*Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*, in *Works* 4:399. Some complained that preachers addressed affections rather than understanding. Edwards insists that preaching should have doctrinal content accompanied by "very great affection," provided that appearance of affection is "agreeable to the nature of the subject, and ben't beyond a proportion to its importance and worthiness of affection, and there be no appearance of its being feigned or forced" (ibid., p. 387). Preaching in this manner further communicates the truthfulness of the subject matter: "Our people don't so much need to have their heads stored, as to have their hearts touched" (ibid., p. 388).

⁶¹Ibid., p. 401. To be sure, Edwards's postmillennial eschatology was intricately tied to his defense of the Awakening. Other shared this view, like Watts (see *Works of Jonathan Edwards* 4:137) and other New England ministers (ibid., pp. 140–44). This might be why Edwards wept while listening to Whitefield in Northampton (Gaustad and Noll, *Documentary History*, p. 162). Also see *Faithful Narrative*, in *Works* 4:140–44.

⁶²*Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*, in *Works* 4:410.

⁶³Edwards returns to this theme in *Religious Affections*, particularly in the sixth sign: "Gracious affections are attended with evangelical humiliation" (*Religious Affections*, in *Works* 2:311–40).

⁶⁴*Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*, in *Works* 4:432.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 437.

in spiritual pride, and “nothing in the world exposes so much to enthusiasm as spiritual pride and self-righteousness.”⁶⁶

Edwards warned that Satan corrupts God’s work by exploiting indwelling sin and the mixture of gracious and natural affections in believers. “In what true Christians feel of affections towards God, all is not always purely holy and divine; everything that is felt in the affections don’t arise from spiritual principles, but common and natural principles have a very great hand; an improper self-love may have a great share in the effect.”⁶⁷ Sometimes affections in believers were distorted by over-emphasizing one of two complimentary attributes of God (like love and “awful majesty”).⁶⁸ The best spiritual experiences are those

1. That have the least mixture, or are the most purely spiritual. 2. That are the least deficient and partial, in which the diverse things that appertain to Christian experience are proportionable one to another. And 3. That are raised to the highest degree: ’tis no matter how high they are raised if they are qualified as before mentioned the higher the better. Experiences thus qualified will be attended with the most amiable behavior, and will bring forth the most solid and sweet fruits, and will be the most durable, and will have the greatest effect on the abiding temper of the soul.⁶⁹

In other words, while Edwards did not eliminate outward manifestations, he is not oblivious to accompanying dangers. Believers must guard their affections, lest they “come to but little else but violent motions of carnal affections, with great heats of the imagination, and a great degree of enthusiasm, and swelling of spiritual pride.”⁷⁰

In sum, Edwards insisted that the awakening is truly the work of the Spirit. He refused to dismiss bodily effects as enthusiasm, but defended that such can be a natural result of high affections (whether gracious or not). If the entire awakening had been mere enthusiasm, as Chauncy espoused, then what did one do with the true conversions and resulting holy lives? Edwards nearly always used “enthusiasm” narrowly as false inspirations, and rejected it outright. In his view, enthusiasm was limited to spurious revelatory works of the Spirit; high affections for the Lord or their resulting effects on the body could be genuine works of the Spirit and thus could not always be defined as enthusiasm. Though the Christian religion required high affections, the remaining corruption of indwelling sin and the intermingling natural affections had a tendency to corrupt truly gracious affections.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 441.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 460.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 465.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 466.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 467.

“The Great Decay”

But the canyon was too wide at this point. Nothing would convince the Old Lights, and even some supporters thought Edwards had gone too far in exposing the awakening's errors. For Chauncy, he immediately launched a direct response in his *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England*,⁷¹ to which was prefixed a list of subscribers that could double, in the words of Perry Miller, as “a social registry for New England in 1743.”⁷² In his personal correspondence, Edwards blamed the work's “great decay” on the divisive spirit.⁷³

Two more post-awakening works are of interest to a discussion of Edwards and enthusiasm. The first Edwards began as a series of sermons in the awakening's twilight, his best powers' offering as to what constituted the true work of the Spirit: *Religious Affections*.⁷⁴ Published in 1746, Edwards likely did not view *Religious Affections* as a direct response to Chauncy's *Seasonable Thoughts* or furthering a debate. Therein Edwards navigated piety through the passions of enthusiasm and the Old Light's overemphasis on reason in religion.

His most lengthy discussion of enthusiasm in *Religious Affections* is in the fourth sign, where he compares the Spirit's enlightenment of the mind to enthusiasm.⁷⁵ Edwards had been emphasizing that the work of the Spirit results in heightened understanding, not in the sense that speculative knowledge increases, but in “a new understanding of the excellent nature of God, and his wonderful perfections, some new view of Christ in his spiritual excellencies and fullness.”⁷⁶ Echoing his earlier *Distinguishing Marks*, he argued that this gracious work far excels “all kinds and forms of enthusiasm, all imaginary sights of God and Christ and heaven, all supposed witnessing of the Spirit, and testimonies of the love of God by immediate inward suggestion; and all impressions of future events, and immediate revelations of any secret facts whatsoever.”⁷⁷ Inspirations were inferior because they lack the “relish” of Christ. Thus Edwards again echoed the thought of Owen against enthusiasm.⁷⁸ Edwards continued, “Such sort of experiences and

⁷¹*Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England, a Treatise in Five Parts* (1743).

⁷²Miller, *Edwards*, p. 175.

⁷³Edwards to James Robe, Kilsyth, Scotland, May 12, 1743, in *Works* 4:536.

⁷⁴Miller dates the initial sermons that Edwards later reworked in the winter of 1742/43 (*Edwards*, p. 177).

⁷⁵Edwards's fourth (of twelve) sign is, “Gracious affections do arise from the mind's being enlightened, rightly and spiritually to understand or apprehend divine things” (*Religious Affections*, in *Works* 2:266).

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, p. 268.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 285–86.

⁷⁸This should come as no surprise, since Owen's *Pneumatologia* is cited twice in *Religious Affections* (*ibid.*, pp. 250–51, n. 7 and pp. 372–73, n. 3). Edwards owned both *Συνεσις Πνευματικη* and *Πνευματολογία* (*Catalogue of Books*, vol. 26 of *The Works*

discoveries as these commonly raise the affections of such as are deluded by them, to a great height, and make a mighty uproar in both soul and body.”⁷⁹ On this point Edwards listed examples of enthusiast groups from the Pythagoreans to the Anabaptists and the French Prophets. His words are not minced:

And in these things seems to lie the religious of many kinds of enthusiasts of the present day. ’Tis by such sort of religion as this chiefly, that Satan transforms himself into an angel of light: and it is that which he has ever more successfully made use of to confound hopeful and happy revivals of religion, from the beginning of the Christian church to this day.⁸⁰

Edwards added a preface to his 1749 publication of the diary of *David Brainerd* that put well his intent: “There are two ways of representing and recommending true religion and virtue to the world, which God hath made use of; the one is by doctrine and precept; the other is by instance and example.”⁸¹ Brainerd was, in Edwards’s mind, a superb proof that the awakening was the genuine work of God and not enthusiasm.

[Brainerd] greatly abhorred such a sort of religion, and was abundant in bearing testimony against it, living and dying; and was quick to discern when any thing of that nature arose, though in its first buddings, and appearing under the most fair and plausible disguises; and had that talent at describing the various workings of this imaginary enthusiastical religion, evincing the falseness and vanity of it, and demonstrating the great difference between it and true spiritual devotion, which I scarcely ever knew equalled in any other person.⁸²

There was a difference between strong affections for God and enthusiasm. On his deathbed Brainerd had related to Edwards that he “never in his life had a strong impression on his imagination, of any visage, outward form, external glory, or any other thing of that nature; which kind of impressions abound among the wild enthusiastic people

of *Jonathan Edwards* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008], pp. 128, 228). Edwards wrote in his catalogue, “Dr. Owen’s works recommended by Mr. Halyburton to the young students of divinity in the University of St. Andrews above all human writings for a true view of the mystery of the Gospel” (*ibid.*, pp. 189). See also Smith, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *Works* 2:68–69.

⁷⁹*Religious Affections*, in *Works* 2:286.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, p. 287. Edwards adds what could be a personal confession: “The pernicious consequence of it is not easily imagined or conceived of, till we see and are amazed with the awful effects of it, and the dismal desolation it has made.”

⁸¹*The Life of David Brainerd*, vol. 7 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Norman Pettit (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 89. Perry Miller says that Edwards interpreted Brainerd to be “a rebuke both to enthusiasts and to Arminians” (*Edwards*, p. 246). Norman Pettit observed, “Had Edwards deliberately sought out an epilogue to his revival writings, he could not have done better” (“Editor’s Introduction,” in *Works* 7:10).

⁸²*Life of David Brainerd*, in *Works* 7:92.

of the late and present day.”⁸³ Edwards continues,

As Mr. Brainerd’s religious impressions, views and affection in their nature were vastly different from enthusiasm, so were their effects in him as contrary as possible to the ordinary effect of that. Nothing so puffs men up, as enthusiasm, with a high conceit of their own wisdom, holiness, eminency and sufficiency, and makes them so bold, forward, assuming, and arrogant.⁸⁴

As he evaluated Brainerd’s life, Edwards noted that the high affections with which Brainerd began were centered on Christ’s glory, and only increased over time.⁸⁵ He saw no visions or had “strong impression on his imagination,” nor was marked by spiritual pride.⁸⁶

Brainerd’s life also suggested a distinction between “high religious affections” and vain “impressions.” The revival’s opponents only saw one general spurious work, but Edwards insisted that the genuine and spurious works of God had “a vast difference, both in essence and fruits.”⁸⁷ Brainerd proved that aspects of the work were genuine.

Some may read the account of Brainerd’s life “without much understanding or careful observation” and mistake him for a fanatic. “Many honest good people also, and true Christians, don’t very well know how to make a difference.”⁸⁸ Nay, Brainerd demonstrated that genuine religion is possible without enthusiasm. For any who “insist that Mr. Brainerd’s religion was enthusiasm, and nothing but a strange heat and blind fervor of mind, arising from the strong fancies and dreams of a notional, whimsical brain,” Edwards offered Brainerd’s honesty, simplicity, sincere pursuit of truth, love for and delight in God, belief in Christ, and many other virtues.⁸⁹ Brainerd is anything but an enthusiast; but, even if he was, why would anyone dream of objecting to this kind of enthusiasm?

⁸³Ibid., p. 93.

⁸⁴Ibid. When he was younger, Edwards confessed, Brainerd did observe the “dispositions and behaviors” of some enthusiasts, but never found himself experiencing the enthusiasm. Brainerd had also been influenced by some characters of “a fierce and imprudent zeal”; Brainerd, Edwards assures his readers, “exceedingly...lamented” this, and “abhorred himself for his imprudent zeal and misconduct at that time, even to the breaking of his heart” (ibid., p. 94).

⁸⁵Brainerd’s affections were distinct from “the great pretenders to religion who are frequently actuated by vehement emotions of the mind, and are carried in a course of sudden and strong impressions and supposed high illuminations and immediate discoveries, and at the same time are persons of a virulent ‘zeal, not according to knowledge’” (ibid., p. 502).

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 503.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 517. Edwards here makes a profound concession: “A considerable part of the religious operations that were six or seven years ago, especially towards the latter part of that extraordinary season,” was that of “the Separatists” (ibid., pp. 517–18).

⁸⁸Ibid., p. 518.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 520.

I say, if all these things are the fruits of enthusiasm, why should not enthusiasm be thought a desirable and excellent thing?... If vapors and whimsy will bring men to the most thorough virtue, to the most benign and fruitful morality; and will maintain it through a course of life (attended with many trials) without affectation or self-exaltation, and with an earnest, constant, bearing testimony against the wildness, the extravagances, the bitter zeal, assuming behavior, and separating spirit of enthusiasts; and will do all this more effectually than anything else has ever done in any plain known instance that can be produced; if it be so, I say, what cause then has the world to prize and pray for this blessed whimsicalness, and these benign sort of vapors?⁹⁰

CONCLUSION

Owen and Edwards shared a great deal of continuity in thought. Edwards often limited enthusiasm to any claim of divine inspiration, and strictly condemned it. In fact, Edwards's theological justification for rejecting enthusiasm may have come from Owen when he said enthusiasm is an immature work of the Spirit when compared to spiritual enlightenment. A natural man did not need additional messages from God, but rather to have his understanding spiritually changed so that he could apprehend the glory of God revealed in the Word already given. Edwards believed with Owen that the enthusiasts and their "inner light" minimize Scripture.

At the same time, Edwards believed that one should not regard a bodily effect as a mark of enthusiasm. Much more could be said about Edwards's understanding of bodily effects and conversion, but here it may be summarized in two statements: bodily effects neither prove or disprove that the Spirit has graciously acted, and bodily effects should not be dismissed as enthusiasm. The test of enthusiasm was not in the presence or absence of great effects of the individual's affections on the body, but in the holiness of the lives that followed. Such holiness could not be counterfeited by the Devil and was a sure mark of the Spirit's work.

Edwards and Owen did seem to differ on the question of bodily effects, perhaps from slightly different anthropologies. Edwards emphasized gracious affections; Owen, ordered faculties. Owen held a largely negative perspective on great bodily displays, arguing that they should be immediately curbed in new converts. Edwards made allowance for them, but in an ambivalent way—effects were neither positive nor negative proofs of the Spirit's work.

In conclusion, this study suggests some points of application. The fervor and severity of outward bodily manifestations should not be the grounds of either accepting or rejecting a work of God. I believe Edwards is right on this point. Outward manifestations can often not be trusted, but are not evidence for or against the work of the Spirit in an individual. Genuine affection for Christ, holiness of life, love for the

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 521.

brothers, evangelical humility, and other biblical tests provide better external evidence (see *Religious Affections*). We should not assume that new converts necessarily know the difference between the internal workings of the Spirit and their own complex natural affections still residing from indwelling sin. Edwards and Owen are both correct when they say that those believers who begin to receive “impressions” or “leadings” of the Spirit should be counseled to cultivate the better signs of God’s grace.

Today, it is more commonplace to see among evangelicals an openness to the doctrine that revelatory gifts are still present in the church. That is, some evangelicals, including those whose theology runs in the Reformed stream, believe that revelatory and sign gifts did not necessarily cease with the primitive church.⁹¹ It should be noted that such views would have been denounced as enthusiasm by both Edwards and Owen; both would have argued that such views minimize Scripture and patently misplace the real and vital work of the Spirit in believers. Far more important for the saints of God than receiving new revelation is to recognize by the gracious work of the Holy Spirit the true spiritual significance they have received in the Holy Bible and to obey the written revelation found therein.

⁹¹For example, see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 1016–48; Graham Cole, *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), pp. 248–58; Daniel B. Wallace and M. James Sawyer, *Who’s Afraid of the Holy Spirit? An Investigation into the Ministry of the Spirit of God Today* (Dallas: Biblical Studies Press, 2005).