The Great Awakening

For several decades beginning in the 1720s a religious revival—the Great Awakening—swept the American colonies. Traveling preachers such as George Whitefield and Gilbert Tennent, as well as some Puritan ministers such as Jonathan Edwards, emphasized the importance of an emotional commitment to Christianity and stirred the religious passions of thousands. Flamboyant preaching, speaking in tongues, lively singing, and dramatic conversions were all part of the religious gatherings of the awakeners. The traveling evangelists often left in their wake divisions between new converts and those who looked upon the emotionalism of the phenomenon with suspicion. This was perhaps especially true in the New England colonies as people debated whether the religious movement helped the colonies live up to their Puritan heritage or represented a dangerous diversion. In the first viewpoint provided here, a convention of New England ministers who met in July 1743 voice their support for the Great Awakening and the people affected by the religious revivals. The ministers do caution against deviations from Puritan orthodoxy, including Antinomianism (the belief that grace and personal revelations from God supersede all divine and human laws), and Arminianism (the belief that, contrary to orthodox Calvinist teachings about predestination, humans can accept or reject salvation independent of God’s will). In general, however, the ministers conclude that the revivals and the somewhat unusual behaviors they have inspired are the work of God.

The Great Awakening often caused many divisions within communities and their churches. Congregations split between factions of the newly converted (the New Lights) and those who looked on the emotional displays of the Great Awakening with suspicion (the Old Lights). Revivalist preacher Gilbert Tennent called most practicing clergy “dead formalists” who were not true Christians. Some ministers responded by barring Tennent and other preachers from speaking in their churches, and accusing them of being charlatans, deceivers, or even workers of the devil. A prominent clerical critic of the Great Awakening was Charles Chauncy, a minister of the First Church in Boston. In the second viewpoint provided here, taken from a sermon published in Boston in 1742, Chauncy describes the harms of religious “enthusiasm” engendered by the Great Awakening. Like many other detractors, Chauncy criticized the emotionalism and mysticism of the movement, which he felt displaced reason and learning.

The Great Awakening Is a Welcome Religious Revival (1743)
An Assembly of Pastors of Churches in New England

If it is the duty of every one capable of observation and reflection, to take a constant religious notice of what occurs in the daily course of common providence; how much more is it expected that those events in the divine, wherein there is a signal display of the power, grace, and mercy of God in behalf of the Church, should be observed with sacred wonder, pleasure, and gratitude! Nor should the people of God content themselves with a silent notice, but publish with the voice of thanks, and tell of all his wondrous works.

A Revival of Religion

More particularly, when Christ is pleased to come into his Church in a plentiful effusion of his Holy Spirit, by whose powerful influences the ministration of the word is attended with uncommon success, salvation-work carried in an eminent manner, and his kingdom which is within men, and consists in righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, is notably advanced. This is an event which above all others invites the notice and bespeaks the praises of the Lord’s people, and should be
declared abroad for a memorial of the divine grace; as it tends to confirm the divinity of a despised Gospel, and manifests the work of the Holy Spirit in the application of redemption, which too many are ready to reproach; as it may have a happy effect, by the divine blessing, for the revival of religion in other places, and the enlargement of the kingdom of Christ in the world; and as it tends to enliven the prayers, strengthen the faith, and raise the hopes of such as are waiting for the kingdom of God, and the coming on of the glory of the latter days.

But if it is justly expected of all who profess themselves the disciples of Christ, that they should openly acknowledge and rejoice in a work of this nature, wherein the honor of their Divine Master is so much concerned; how much more is it to be looked for from those who are employed in the ministry of the Lord Jesus, and so stand in a special relation to him, as servants of his household and officers in his kingdom? These stand as watchmen upon the walls of Jerusalem; and it is their business not only to give the alarm of war when the enemy is approaching, but to sound the trumpet of praise when the king of Zion cometh, in a meek triumph, having salvation.

For these and other reasons, we whose names are hereunto annexed, pastors of Churches in New England, met together in Boston, July 7th, 1743, think it our indispensable duty, (without judging or censuring such of our brethren as cannot at present see things in the same light with us) in this open and conjunct manner to declare, to the glory of sovereign grace, our full persuasion, either from what we have seen ourselves, or received upon credible testimony, that there has been a happy and remarkable revival of religion in many parts of this land, through an uncommon divine influence; after a long time of great decay and deadness, and a sensible and very awful withdrawal of the Holy Spirit from his sanctuary among us.

Though the work of grace wrought on the hearts of men by the word and Spirit of God, and which has been more or less carried on in the Church from the beginning, is always the same for substance, and agrees, at one time and another, in one place or person and another, as to the main strokes and lineaments of it, yet the present work appears to be remarkable and extraordinary,

Proof of God’s Work

On account of the numbers wrought upon. We never before saw so many brought under soul-concern, and with distress making the inquiry, “What must we do to be saved?” and these persons of all characters and ages. With regard to the suddenness and quick progress of it. Many persons and places were surprised with the gracious visit together, or near about the same time; and the heavenly influence diffused itself far and wide like the light of the morning. Also in respect of the degree of operation, both in a way of terror and in a way of consolation: attended in many with unusually bodily effects.

Not that all who are accounted the subjects of the present work, have had these extraordinary degrees of previous distress and subsequent joy. But many, and we suppose the greater number have been wrought on in a more gentle and silent way, and without any other appearances than are common and usual at other times, when persons have been awakened to a solemn concern about salvation, and have been thought to have passed out of a state of nature into a state of grace.

As to those whose inward concern has occasioned extraordinary outward distress, the most of them, when we came to converse with them, were able to give, what appeared to us a rational account of what so affected their minds, viz., a quick sense of their guilt, misery, and danger; and they would often mention the passages in the sermons they heard, or particular texts of Scripture, which were sent home upon them with such a powerful impression. And as to such whose joys have carried them in transports and extasies, they in like manner have accounted for them, from a lively sense of the danger they hoped they were freed from, and the happiness they were now possessed of: such clear views of divine and heavenly things, and particularly of the excellencies and loveliness of Jesus Christ, and such sweet tastes of redeeming love, as they never had before. The instances were very few in which we had reason to think these affections were produced by visionary or sensible representations, or by any other images than such as the Scripture itself presents unto us.

And here we think it not amiss to declare that in dealing with these persons, we have been careful to inform them, that the
nature of conversion does not consist in these passionate feelings; and to warn them not to look upon their state as safe, because they have passed out of deep distress into high joys, unless they experience a renovation of nature, followed with a change of life, and a course of vital holiness. Nor have we gone into such an opinion of the bodily effects with which this work has been attended in some of its subjects, as to judge them any signs that persons who have been so affected, were then under a saving work of the Spirit of God. No; we never so much as called these bodily seizures, convictions; or spake of them as the immediate work of the Holy Spirit. Yet we do not think them inconsistent with a work of God upon the soul at that very time; but judge that those inward impressions which come from the Spirit of God, those terrors and consolations of which he is the author, may, according to the natural frame and constitution which some persons are of, occasion such bodily effects. And therefore that those extraordinary outward symptoms are not an argument that the work is delusive, or from the influence and agency of the evil spirit.

With respect to numbers of those who have been under the impressions of the present day, we must declare there is good ground to conclude they are become real Christians; the account they give of their consolation and conviction agreeing with the standard of the Holy Scriptures, corresponding with the experiences of the saints, and evidenced by the external fruits of holiness in their lives; so that they appear to those who have the nearest access to them, as so many epistles of Christ, written, not with ink, but by the spirit of the living God, attesting to the genuineness of the present operation, and representing the excellency of it.

Indeed, many who appeared to be under convictions, and were much altered in their external behavior, when this work began, and while it was most flourishing, have lost their impressions, and are relapsing into their former manner of life; yet of those who were judged hopefully converted, and made a public profession of religion, there have been fewer instances of scandal and apostasy [sic] than might be expected. So that, as far as we are able to form a judgment, the face of religion is lately changed much for the better in many of our towns and congregations; and together with a reformation observable in divers instances, appears to be more experimental godliness, and lively Christianity, than the most of us can remember we have ever seen before.

Thus we have freely declared our thoughts as to the work of God so remarkably revived in many parts of this land. And now, we desire to bow the knee in thanksgiving to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that our eyes have seen and our ears heard such things. And whilst these are our sentiments, we must necessarily be grieved at any accounts sent abroad, representing this work as all enthusiasm, delusion, and disorder.

**Warnings of Satan's Devices**

Indeed it is not to be denied, that in some places many irregularities and extravagances have been permitted to accompany it, which we would deeply lament and bewail before God, and look upon ourselves obliged, for the honor of the Holy Spirit, and of his blessed operations on the souls of men, to bear a public and faithful testimony against; though at the same time it is to be acknowledged with much thankfulness, that in other places, where the work has greatly flourished, there have been few if any of these disorders and excesses. But who can wonder, if at such a time as this, Satan should intermingle himself, to hinder and blemish a work so directly contrary to the interests of his own kingdom? Or if, while so much good seed is sowing, the enemy should be busy to sow tares? We would, therefore, in the bowels of Jesus, beseech men as have been partakers of this work, or are zealous to promote it, that they be not ignorant of Satan's devices; that they watch and pray against errors and misconduct of every kind, lest they blemish and hinder that which they desire to honor and advance.

Particularly, that they do not make secret impulses on their minds, without a due regard to the written word, the rule of their duty: a very dangerous mistake which we apprehend some in these times have gone into. That laymen do not invade the ministerial office, and under a pretense of exhorting, set up preaching; which is very contrary to Gospel order, and tends to introduce errors and confusion into the Church. That Ministers do not invade the province of others, and in ordinary cases preach in another's parish, without his knowledge, and against his consent; nor
encourage raw and indiscreet young candidates, in rushing into particular places, and preaching publicly or privately, as some have done to the no small disrepute and damage of the work in places where it once promised to flourish. Though at the same time we would have Ministers show their regard to the spiritual welfare of their people, by suffering them to partake of the gifts and graces of able, sound, and zealous preachers of the word, as God in his providence may give opportunity therefore; being persuaded that God has in this day remarkably blest [sic] the labors of his servants who have travelled [sic] in preaching the Gospel of Christ. That people beware of entertaining prejudices against their own pastors, and do not run into unscriptural separations. That they do not indulge a disputatious spirit, which has been attended with mischievous effects; nor discover a spirit of censoriousness, uncharitableness, and rash judging the state of others; than which scarce any thing has more blemished the work of God amongst us. And while we would meekly exhort both Ministers and Christians, so far as is consistent with truth and holiness, to follow the things that make for peace; we would most earnestly warn all sorts of persons not to despise these outpourings of the Spirit, lest a holy God be provoked to withhold them, and instead thereof to pour out upon this people the vials of his wrath, in temporal judgments and spiritual plagues; and would call upon every one to improve the remarkable season of grace, and put in for a share of the heavenly blessings so liberally dispensed.

Finally, we exhort the children of God to continue instant in prayer, that He, with whom is the residue of the Spirit, would grant us fresh, more plentiful and extensive effusions, that so this wilderness, in all the parts of it, may become a fruitful field; that the present appearances may be an earnest of the glorious things promised to the Church in the latter days; when she shall shine with the glory of the Lord arisen upon her, so as to dazzle the eyes of beholders, confound and put to shame all her enemies, rejoice the hearts of her solicitous and now saddened friends, and have a strong influence and resplendency throughout the earth. Amen!—Even so, come Lord Jesus; come quickly!"

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The Great Awakening Has Led to Harmful Religious Zealotry (1742)
Charles Chauncy (1705-1787)

1 CORINTHIANS 14:37
If any man among you think himself to be a PROPHET or SPIRITUAL, let him acknowledge that the Things that I write unto you are the Commandments of the LORD.

Many Things were amiss in the Church of Corinth, when Paul wrote this Epistle to them. There were envyings, strife and divisions among them, on account of their ministers. Some cried up one, others another: one said, I am of Paul, another I am of APPOLLOS. They had formed themselves into parties, and each party so admired the teacher they followed, as to reflect unjust contempt on the other.

Pride and Disorder

Nor was this their only fault. A spirit of pride prevailed exceedingly among them. They were conceited of their gifts, and too generally disposed to make an ostentatious shew of them. From this vain glorious temper...to the disturbance, rather than edification of the church...they spoke not by turns, but several at once, in the same place of worship, to the introducing such confusion, that they were in danger of being thought mad.

Nor were they without some pretense to justify these disorders. Their great plea was, that in these things they were guided by the Spirit, acted under his immediate influence and direction. This seems plainly insinuated in the words I have read to you. If any man think himself to be a prophet, or Spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord. As if the apostle had said, you may imagine yourselves to be spiritual men, to be under a divine afflatus in what you do; but 'tis all imagination, mere pretense,

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3 From Enthusiasm Described and Caution’d Against by Charles Chauncy (Boston, 1742).
unless you pay a due regard to the commandments I have here wrote to you; receiving them not as the word of man, but of GOD. Make trial of your spiritual pretenses by this rule: If you can submit to it, and will order your conduct by it well; otherwise you only cheat yourselves, while you think yourselves to be spiritual men, or prophets: You are nothing better than Enthusiasts; your being acted by the SPIRIT, immediately guided and influenced by him, is mere pretense; you have no good reason to believe any such thing.

From the words thus explained, I shall take occasion to discourse to you upon the following Particulars.

I. I shall give you some account of Enthusiasm, in its nature and influence.

II. Point you to a rule by which you may judge of persons, whether they are under the influence of Enthusiasm.

III. Say what may be proper to guard you against this unhappy turn of mind.

The whole will then be followed with some suitable Application.

I am in the first place, to give you some account of Enthusiasm. And as this a thing much talked of at present, more perhaps than at any other time that has passed over us, it will not be thought unseasonable, if I take some pains to let you into a true understanding of it.

The word, from its Etymology, carries in it a good meaning, as signifying inspiration from GOD: in which sense, the prophets under the old testament, and the apostles under the new, might properly be called Enthusiasts. For they were under a divine influence, spoke as moved by the HOLY GHOST, and did such things as can be accounted for in no way, but by recurring to an immediate extraordinary power, present with them.

The Bad Side of Enthusiasm

But the word is more commonly used in a bad sense, as intending an imaginary, not a real inspiration: according to which sense, the Enthusiast is one, who has a conceit of himself as a person favored 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 the while, he is under no other influence than that of an over-heated imagination.

The cause of this enthusiasm is a bad temperament of the blood and spirits: 'tis properly a disease, a sort of madness: And there are few; perhaps none at all, but are subject to it, though none are so much in danger of it as those, in whom melancholy is the prevailing ingredient in their constitution. In these it often reigns: and sometimes to so great a degree, that they are really beside themselves, acting as truly by the blind impetus of a wild fancy, as though they had neither reason nor understanding.

And various are the ways in which their enthusiasm discovers itself.

Sometimes, it may be seen in their countenance. A certain wildness is discernable in their general look and air; especially when their imaginations are moved and fired.

Sometimes, it strangely loosens their tongues, and gives them such an energy, as well as fluency and volubility in speaking, as they themselves, by their utmost efforts, can't so much as imitate, when they are not under the enthusiastic influence.

Sometimes, it will unaccountably mix itself with their conduct, and give it such a tincture of that which is freakish or furious, as none can have an idea of, but those who have seen the behavior, of a person in a frenzy.

Sometimes, it appears in their imaginary peculiar intimacy with heaven. They are, in their own opinion, the special favorites of GOD, have more familiar converse with him than other good men, and receive immediate, extraordinary communications from him. The thoughts which suddenly rise up in their minds, they take for suggestions of the SPIRIT: their very fancies are divine illuminations; nor are they strongly inclined to any thing, but 'tis an impulse from GOD, a plain revelation of his will.
And what extravagances, I this temper of mind are they not capable of, and under the specious pretext too of paying obedience to the authority of GOD? Many have fancied themselves acting by immediate warrant from heaven, while they have been committing the most undoubted wickedness. There is indeed scarce any thing so wild, either in speculation or practice, but they have given into it: They have, in many instances, been blasphemers of GOD, and open disturbers of the peace of this world.

Against All Reason

But in nothing does the enthusiasm of these persons discover itself more, than in the disregard they express to the Dictates of reason. They are above the force of argument, beyond conviction from a calm and sober address to their understandings. As for them, they are distinguished persons; GOD himself speaks inwardly and immediately to their souls. "They see the light infused into their understandings, and cannot be mistaken: 'tis clear and visible there, like the light of bright sunshine; shews it self and needs no other proof but its own evidence. They feel the hand of GOD moving them within, and the impulses of his SPIRIT; and cannot be mistaken in what they feel. Thus they support themselves, and are sure reason hath nothing to do with what they see and feel. What they have a sensible experience of, admits no doubt, needs no probation." And in vain will you endeavor to convince such persons of any mistakes they are fallen into. They are certainly in the right; and know themselves to be so. They have the SPIRIT opening their understandings and revealing the truth to them. They believe only as he has taught them; and to suspect they are in the wrong is to do dishonor to the SPIRIT; 'tis to oppose his dictates, to set up their own wisdom in opposition to his, and shut their eyes against that light with which he has shined into their souls. They are not therefore capable of being argued with; you had as good reason with the wind....

This is the nature of Enthusiasm, and this its operation, in a less or greater degree, in all who are under the influence of it. 'Tis a kind of Frenzy, and evidently discovers itself to be so, whenever it rises to any great height.

And much to be pitied are the persons who are seized with it. Our compassion commonly works towards those, who, while under distraction, fondly imagine themselves to be Kings and Emperors: And the like pity is really due to those, who, under the power of enthusiasm, fancy themselves to be prophets: inspired of GOD, and immediately called and commissioned by him to deliver his messages to the world: And though they should run in disorders, and act in a manner that cannot be condemned, they should notwithstanding be treated with tenderness and lenity; and the rather, because they don't commonly act so much under the influence of a bad mind, as a deluded imagination. And who more worthy of Christian pity than those, who, under the notion of serving God and the interest of religion, are filled with seal, and exert themselves to the utmost, while all the time they are hurting and wounding the very cause they take so much pains to advance. 'Tis really a pitiable case: And though the honesty of their intentions won't legitimate their bad actions, yet it very alleviates their guilt: We should think as favorably of them as may be, and be disposed to judge with mercy, as we would hope to obtain mercy....

Guarding Against Enthusiasm

But as the most suitable guard against the first tendencies towards enthusiasm, let me recommend to you the following words of counsel.

1. Get a true understanding of the proper work of the SPIRIT; and don't place it in those things wherein the gospel does not make it to consist. The work of the SPIRIT is different now from what it was in the first days of Christianity. Men were then favored with the extraordinary presence of the SPIRIT. He came upon them in miraculous gifts and powers; as a spirit of prophecy, of knowledge, of revelation, of tongues, of miracles: But the SPIRIT is not now to be expected in these ways. His grand business lies in preparing men's minds for the grace of GOD, by true humiliation, from an apprehension of sin, and the necessity of a Savior; then in working in them faith and repentance, and such a change as shall turn them from the power of sin and Satan unto GOD: and in fine, by carrying on the good work he has begun in them; assisting them in
duty, strengthening them against temptation, and in a word, preserving them blameless through faith unto salvation: And all this he does by the word and prayer, as the great mean in the accomplishment of these purposes of mercy.

Herein, in general, consists the work of the SPIRIT. It does not lie in giving men private revelations, but in opening their minds to understand the public ones contained in the scripture. It does not lie in sudden impulses and impressions, in immediate calls and extraordinary missions. Men mistake the business of the SPIRIT, if they understand by it such things as these. And 'tis, probably, from such unhappy mistakes, that they are at first betrayed into enthusiasm. Having a wrong notion of the work of the SPIRIT, 'tis no wonder if they take the uncommon sallies of their own minds for his influences.

You cannot, my brethren, be too well acquainted with what the Bible make the work of the HOLY GHOST, in the affair of salvation: And if you have upon your minds a clear and distinct understanding of this, it will be a powerful guard to you against all enthusiastic impressions.

2. Keep close to the Scripture, and admit of nothing for an impression of the SPIRIT, but what agrees with that unerring rule. Fix it in your minds as a truth you will invariably abide by, that the Bible is the grand test, by which every thing in religion is to be tried: and that you can, at no time, nor in any instance, be under the guidance of the SPIRIT OF GOD, much less his extraordinary guidance, if what you are led to, is inconsistent with the things there revealed, either in point of faith or practice. And let it be your care to compare the motions of your minds, and the workings of your imaginations and passions, with the rule of GOD's word. And see to it, that you be impartial in this matter: Don't make the rule bend to your conceived notions and inclinations: but repair to the Bible, with a mind disposed, as much as may be, to know the truth as it lies nakedly and plainly in the scripture itself. And whatever you are moved to, reject the motion, esteem it as nothing more than a vain fancy, if it puts you upon any method of thinking, or acting, that can't be evidently reconciled with the revelations of GOD in his word.

This adherence to the Bible, my brethren is one of the best preservatives against enthusiasm. If you will but express a due reverence to this book of GOD, making it the great rule of judgment, even in respect of the SPIRIT's influences and operations, you will not be in much danger of being led into delusion. Let that be your inquiry under all supposed impulses from the SPIRIT, What says the scripture? To the law, and to the testimony: If your impressions, and imagined spiritual notions agree not therewith, 'tis because there is no hand of the SPIRIT of GOD in them: They are only the workings of your own imaginations, or something worse: and must at once, without any more ado, be rejected as such.

Make Use of Reason

3. Make use of the Reason and Understanding GOD has given you. This may be thought an ill-advised direction, but 'tis as necessary as either of the former. Next to the Scripture, there is no greater enemy to enthusiasm, than reason. 'Tis indeed impossible a man should be an enthusiast, who is in the just exercise of his understanding: and 'tis because men don't pay a due regard to the sober dictates of a well-informed mind, that they are led aside by the delusions of a vain imagination. Be advised then to shew yourselves men, to make use of your reasonable powers: and not act as the horse or mule, as though you had no understanding.

'Tis true, you must not go about to set up your own reason in opposition to revelation: Nor may you entertain a thought of making reason your rule instead of Scripture. The bible, as I said before, is the great rule of religion, the grand test in matters of salvation: But then, you must use your reason in order to understand the bible: Nor is there any other possible way, in which, as a reasonable creature, you should come to an understanding of it....

4. You must not lay too great stress upon the workings of your passions and affections. These will be excited in a less or greater degree, in the business of religion: And 'tis proper they should. The passions, when suitably moved, tend mightily to awaken the reasonable powers, and put them upon a lively and vigorous exercise. And this is their proper use: And when addressed to, and excited to this purpose, they may be of good service: whereas we shall mistake the right use of the passions, if
we place our religion only or chiefly, in the heat and fervor of them. The soul is the man: And unless the reasonable nature is suitably wrought upon, the understanding enlightened, the judgment convinced, the will persuaded, and the mind entirely changed, it will avail but to little purpose; though the passions should be set all in a blaze. This therefore you should be most concerned about. And if while you are solicitous that you may be in transports of affection, you neglect your more noble part, your reason and judgment, you will be in great danger of being carried away by your imaginations. This indeed leads directly to Enthusiasm: And you will in vain, endeavor to preserve yourselves from the influence of it, if you aren't duly careful to keep your passions in their proper place under the government of a well-informed understanding. While the passions are uppermost, and bear the chief sway over a man, he is in an unsafe state: None knows what he may be brought to. You can't therefore be too careful to keep your passions under the regimen of a sober judgment. 'Tis indeed a matter of necessity, as you would not be led aside by delusion and fancy....

Real, Sober Religion

There is such a thing as real religion, let the conduct of men be what it will: and 'tis, in its nature, a sober, calm, reasonable thing: Nor is it an objection of any weight against the sobriety or reasonableness of it, that there have been enthusiasts, who have acted as though it was a wild, imaginary business. We should not make our estimate of religion as exhibited in the behavior of men of a fanciful mind: to be sure, we should not take up an ill opinion of it, because in the example they give of it, it don't appear so amiable as we might expect. This is unfair. We should rather judge of it from the conduct of men of a sound judgment: whose lives have been such a uniform, beautiful transcript of that which is just and good, that we can't but think well of religion, as displayed in their example....