

Reformed Theological Seminary

**Revival: A Comparison of the Theology of Jonathan Edwards and the Toronto Airport
Christian Fellowship**

Submitted to
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For HT504 – Church History II
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- Note: The majority of information available to research the views and practices of the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship are online at the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship Website, <http://www.tacf.org>. This website is full of information, and includes many back issues of "Spread the Fire" magazine, which is devoted to spreading the Toronto Blessing revival. I have indicated all information gleaned from the website by giving the appropriate web site link.

In recent years the “Toronto Blessing”, a revival movement centered at the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship (TACF), has sparked a great deal of interest and controversy. The subject of numerous talk shows, newspaper articles, and magazine cover stories, the activities in Toronto have been praised as a great outpouring of God’s Spirit, and reviled as a counterfeit revival. Interestingly, one of the chief figures in this controversy has been Jonathan Edwards, whose writings and example have been used to both defend and condemn the actions occurring in Toronto. In fact, the leaders in Toronto and their supporters have made a conscious effort to link Edwards and the Great Awakening to the events in Toronto.¹ How did Jonathan Edwards view revival? How do his views compare and contrast with the leaders of the Toronto Blessing? In this paper I will discuss these questions and try to ascertain the theology of revival in both the writings and practice of Jonathan Edwards and the leaders of the movement centered at TACF.

The Theology of Revival: Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

The first point to discuss when comparing and contrasting the view of revival espoused by Edwards and those espoused by TACF are related to the question of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility in the advent of revival. Principally, this may be broken down into two essential areas: the basic theology of revival and the use of means to promote revival.

For Jonathan Edwards, any discussion of the theology of revival must begin with the sovereignty of God, which formed the cornerstone of all of Edwards’ theology. A brief perusal of some of Edwards’ sermon titles displays this point plainly: *The Sole Consideration, That God is God, Sufficient to Still All Objections to His Sovereignty; God Glorified in Man’s Dependence;* and *The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners*. On the other hand, Edwards also spoke

¹ For example, see Richard Riss’ article “Revivals, Awakenings, and Misrepresentations” which may be viewed at the official TACF web site, <http://www.tacf.org>. The link for the Riss article is <http://www.tacf.org/DesktopDefault.aspx?tabid=146>. In this article Riss makes a link between the negative reactions to the Great Awakening and similar negative reactions to the Toronto Blessing.

many times of man's inability to save himself in sermons such as: *Man's Natural Blindness in the Things of Religion*; *Justification By Faith Alone*; and *God Makes Men Sensible of Their Guilt*.² Given these sermon titles, it is not surprising to find Edwards stating "It is from diminutive thoughts of God, that you think He is obliged to show mercy to you when you seek it, though you have been for a long time willfully sinning against Him, provoking Him to anger, and presuming that He would show you mercy when you seek it."³ Furthermore, Edwards states that "The nature and contrivance of our redemption is such, that the redeemed are in every thing directly, immediately, and entirely dependent on God: they are dependent on Him for all, and are dependent on Him every way."⁴ For Edwards, the foundation of personal salvation and corporate revival and awakening was the sovereignty of God.

Nor was this focus on the sovereignty of God limited to Edwards' thoughts on revival. Rather, the sovereignty of God expressed in revival and awakening was merely a manifestation of the sovereignty of God over every area of life. For Edwards, all of life had to be viewed through the lens of the sovereign grandeur of God. Mark Noll, professor of church history at Wheaton College, has noted "Jonathan Edwards was a theologian overwhelmed by the majesty and the splendor of the divine. The major themes of his theology are the greatness and glory of God, the utter dependence of sinful humanity on God for salvation, and the ethereal beauty of the life of holiness."⁵ For Edwards, God was the foundation of all life and thought. God was the center of all existence and to know, glorify, and enjoy Him should be the chief pursuit of every human being. There is simply no way to understand Edwards apart from the notion that God is

² All of these sermons may be found in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. The sermon I have entitled "God Makes Men Sensible of their Guilt" is listed as Sermon II, and is found in 2:830-838.

³ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2:108.

⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2:3.

⁵ Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 97.

completely sovereign, that He may do as He pleases with creation in general and men in particular, and that this is as it should be, for God is the center of all existence.

In contrast to this, the official TACF website begins its page on revival with the following assertion: “Revival starts with you. It starts with you becoming hungry for more of God. As you seek His face and rest in His presence He will meet you where you are and take you deeper into His amazing love for you. As you get filled up, healed and refreshed His love can’t help but overflow to those around you.”⁶ This introductory assertion to the topic of revival is clearly anthropocentric, and it is inconceivable that Jonathan Edwards could have ever uttered or agreed with such a statement.

Furthermore, the page continues with suggestions for experiencing revival. These include: “Ask God to meet you with His love” and “Let the Holy Spirit open up your past hurts and bring healing.” Notice that the effects of revival are focused on the needs of man, rather than the glory of God. In marked contrast to this anthropocentric emphasis, Edwards opined that the faith suffered when “religion consists so little in respect to the Divine Being, and almost wholly in benevolence to men.”⁷ It is not that Christianity is not concerned with benevolence to men; it certainly is, for this is our second great commandment. Yet, true Christianity realizes that it is the second commandment, not the first, and that if we wish to see the second commandment realized, it must be built upon the first. Thus, for Edwards, man and his needs (even for the love of God and healing from hurts) can not be the center; this place must be reserved for God and God alone.

This does not mean that the leaders in Toronto necessarily believe that man can concoct a revival on his own. In fact, some of the leaders have directly refuted such ideas. For example,

⁶ <http://www.tacf.org/DesktopDefault.aspx?tabid=118&menuid=31>.

⁷ Quoted in Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1949), 118.

Dr. R.T. Kendall states “How does revival happen? Some advance the idea that you can make revival happen. Charles Finney, though I admire him greatly, sadly promoted the idea that if the church does certain things such as praying fervently enough, revival will surely come. Some servants of God with an unusual anointing have possibly had some success and assume that anybody can do what they also did. In my opinion, however, you cannot ‘make’ revival happen... The ultimate definition of revival, in my opinion, would be this: a sovereign outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the church that leads to the church being revived, conversions of the unsaved and an awakening of the community outside the church. This is what we desire to see most of all. This is what happened on Pentecost, and though it is not the only frame of reference for revival, it is certainly the best definition of revival I know of.”⁸ This is certainly a much more nuanced statement, and is closer to the spirit and theology of Jonathan Edwards. However, it is overwhelmed by the much larger volume and more prominent placement of statements which are anthropocentric in their nature. For Edwards, a theology of revival begins with the assertion that revival comes from God and is focused on God and His glory, while for the leaders at TACF, revival begins when men cry out to God and is focused on the needs of man.

This basic dichotomy is also seen when considering the use of means to encourage revival. Despite his theocentric view of revival, Edwards does not negate the use of means to promote and sustain revival. Edwards urged his hearers to avail themselves of the means God had provided to seek Him. In his sermon *The Manner in Which the Salvation of the Soul is to be Sought*, Edwards sought to prove the statement “We should be willing to engage in and go

⁸ Spread the Fire, Issue 5, 2001, <http://www.tacf.org/portals/57ad7180-c5e7-49f5-b282-c6475cdb7ee7/stf%207-5.pdf>.

through great undertakings, in order to our own salvation.”⁹ Furthermore, in this sermon he laid out the proposition “There is a work or business which men must enter upon and accomplish, in order to their salvation. Men have no reason to expect to be saved in idleness, or to go to heaven in a way of doing nothing.”¹⁰ Although salvation is the work of God alone, and only He can sovereignly dispense His grace and regenerate the human soul, yet this gives no excuse for idleness on the part of men. On the contrary, men must be faithful in hearing the word, crying out to God in prayer, and gathering with believers if they desire for God to save them. Those who ignore these means of grace have no reason to believe or expect that God’s Spirit will change their hearts. Thus, the work depends entirely upon God, yet men must earnestly seek God and entreat Him to do this work.

The same pattern also held true in Edwards’ view of corporate revival and awakening. Although revival and awakening were the work of God and not man, Edwards did recognize that God often used means to produce this corporate effect. For example, in the outpouring of the Spirit in 1734-1735, Edwards noted that God used the gathering of the young people into small group meetings on Sunday evening and the unusual death of an elderly person to spark the flames of revival.¹¹ Furthermore, when people embraced false doctrines or grieved the Spirit in some other way, Edwards noticed that the work of God abated.¹² Thus, although no means could produce a revival, not attending them could lessen the likelihood of revival or cause it to subside.

Furthermore, for Edwards, the means used to promote revival were the same means used to grow in the Christian life: the Word of God, prayer, fellowship, and attention to the means of grace given in Scripture. Nowhere in his writings on revival does Edwards advocate the use of

⁹ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2:51.

¹⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2:52.

¹¹ *Jonathan Edwards on Revival*, 11.

¹² *Jonathan Edwards on Revival*, 70-71.

extra-biblical means to promote and produce revival. This was utterly inconceivable to a man with Edwards' view on the sovereignty of God. One simply could not manipulate God into sending revival, and the only proper means were those God Himself had specifically outlined in the Scripture.¹³

The leaders at TACF certainly stress traditional means of revival such as the Word, prayer, and fellowship. However, they also give a significant place to the use of extra-biblical practices which are often attached or appended to biblical means of grace. For example, they encourage the use of what they refer to as a “fire tunnel”, which TACF defines in the following manner: “A ‘fire tunnel’ is a great way to pray for people who want to receive the Father’s Blessing especially in a large crowd. Two lines of prayer team members line up facing each other forming a ‘tunnel.’ Those receiving prayer pass through the tunnel to receive prayer by the laying on of hands by members of the prayer team. Although laying on of hands is definitely in the Bible, a fire tunnel is one of those non-biblical customs which has evolved both out of revelation and need. The idea actually came to John Arnott one night at a renewal meeting. Millions have been blessed through this method of spreading the blessing. Hope you have as much fun as we do with fire tunnels!”¹⁴ Though Edwards would heartily agree with the use of prayer, it is inconceivable that Edwards would have employed a “fire tunnel” to implement the practice of prayer. There is simply no biblical precedent for such a practice, and it is very likely

¹³ For a good look at Edward’s writings related to revival, see *Jonathan Edwards on Revival*, which contains Edwards’ most pertinent works on the subject: *A Narrative of Surprising Conversions*; *The Distinguishing Marks of A Work of the Spirit of God*; and *An Account of the Revival of Religion in Northampton 1740-1742*. For a good overview of Edwards’ views on the responsibility of men to seek God, see Lectures XVIII and XIX in John Gerstner, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards (taped audio series distributed by the Institute for Theological Studies, Grand Rapids: Outreach, Inc., 1986)*. For the best overview of Edwards’ practice and a promoter and pastor of revival, which shows the means he used and encouraged in the Great Awakening, see George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

¹⁴ This statement was a written reply in “Spread the Fire” magazine to a question sent in by a reader to ask for a definition of a tunnel of fire. The question and reply may be located at <http://www.tacf.org/portals/57ad7180-c5e7-49f5-b282-c6475cdb7ee7/stf%207-5.pdf>.

that Edwards would have viewed such practices as frivolous and inappropriate for servants of God, and that they would hinder rather than promote true revival. In distinction from the leaders at TACF, Edwards would say that if one looked for means to encourage revival, the means employed should be those specifically given by the sovereign God, not those created by humans.

The Place of Manifestations Within A Revival

Clearly, one of the most controversial aspects of both the Great Awakening and the Toronto Blessing is the presence of unusual physical manifestations. In fact, this has prompted much of the discussion of the relationship between Jonathan Edwards and the Toronto revival. How do each of them view manifestations? How do they think manifestations should be handled and how are they judged?

It is certain that Jonathan Edwards was not against the appearance of manifestations within a revival. He wrote at length on the fact that the appearance of unusual and even disturbing manifestations could not be used to discount a particular revival.¹⁵ For Edwards, manifestations were a physical response in the human being to the work of God's Spirit and the penetration of His truth. Edwards did not teach that people should seek these manifestations, but he also did not counsel that these manifestations should be silenced. He stated "Not but that I think the persons thus extraordinarily moved should endeavor to refrain from such outward manifestations, what they well can, and should refrain to their utmost, at the time of their solemn worship. But if God is pleased to convince the consciences of persons, so that they can not avoid great outward manifestations, even to interrupting and breaking off those public means they were attending, I do not think this is confusion or an unhappy interruption, any more than if a company should meet on the field to pray for rain, and should be broken off from their exercise

¹⁵ See *The Distinguishing Marks of the Spirit of God* where Edwards deals with this (and other questions related to the Great Awakening) at length.

by a plentiful shower. Would to God that all the public assemblies in the land were broken off from their public exercises with such confusion as this the next Sabbath day!”¹⁶ The physical manifestations experienced by people during the Great Awakening could be quite dramatic, and even Edwards’ own wife Sarah became enraptured by spiritual ecstasy for a period of almost two weeks. During this period of time she was “repeatedly... physically overwhelmed by her spiritual raptures, sometimes leaping involuntarily to praise God and more often so overcome by joys and transports that she collapsed physically.”¹⁷ Sarah was able to keep her wits during these episodes, but some town people even began to fear that she would die due to the intensity of the ecstasies.¹⁸ Edwards did not disagree with these manifestations and this ecstatic experience; on the contrary he included it (albeit in an incognito fashion) as an example of God’s great works in *An Account of the Revival of Religion in Northampton 1740-1742*. Thus, those who wish to imply that Edwards discount a revival movement simply because of unusual phenomena accompanying the movement of the Spirit are incorrect.

Edwards did not simply accept all manifestations as being from God, however. He recognized that many people could follow the example of others and display great external manifestations without a corresponding inner work by the Spirit of God. How then can one judge if a work is truly wrought by the Spirit, or if it merely a work of man? In *Distinguishing Marks*, Edwards used the tests listed in 1 John 4, where the apostle discusses this very question. From this chapter Edwards stated that a work was from the Spirit of God if 1) it increases the esteem and honor of Jesus Christ; 2) it operates against the interest of Satan and His kingdom, especially by producing holiness; 3) it increases men’s regard for Scripture; 4) it produces a love

¹⁶ *Jonathan Edwards on Revival*, 126-127.

¹⁷ Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 240.

¹⁸ For a full discussion of this episode, see Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 239-252.

for and discernment of truth in the people; and 5) it produces love for God and man. Edwards affirmed that “when there is an extraordinary influence or operation appearing on the minds of a people, if these things are found in it we are safe in determining that it is the work of God, whatever other circumstances it may be attended with... and whatever motion there may be of the animal spirits, whatever effects may be wrought on men’s bodies.”¹⁹ The test of true revival and awakening is not in the external results produced on the body, nor in any temporary alteration of the individuals habits, but rather in a lasting esteem for Christ and His kingdom, and in a consequent change in lifestyle. In *The Revival of Religion in Northampton in 1740-1742* Edwards stated that “the good estate of individuals is not chiefly to be judged of by any exactness of steps, and method of experiences, in what is supposed to be the first conversion; but we must judge by the spirit that breathes, the effect wrought upon the temper of the soul in the time of the work and remaining afterwards.”²⁰ Thus, Edwards is essentially an agnostic towards outward manifestations: in and of themselves they are neither evidence of the work of the Spirit or proof of His absence. The test of true regeneration in the individual, and of true revival and awakening in the corporate body, is not any outward effect on the body, but a true change in lifestyle and conduct, a new longing for God and His ways. Where these are evident over a long period of time, the Spirit of God has been at work, and where they are absent, the work is by some force other than the Spirit of God.

The leaders at TACF also seem to declare that manifestations must be judged by their fruit rather than simply the manifestation itself. In responding to an article in *Christianity Today* entitled “Toronto’s Mixed Blessing”,²¹ Richard Riss notes “as Jonathan Edwards pointed out, it

¹⁹ *Jonathan Edwards on Revival*, 118.

²⁰ *Jonathan Edwards on Revival*, 160.

²¹ September 11, 1995 issue of *Christianity Today*.

is impossible to determine whether any given manifestation is inspired by God or by demonic powers. The issue, therefore, is not the manifestations and whether they should be allowed. The issue is whether people are turning from evil, demonstrating holy Christian character, and manifesting the fruit of the Spirit.”²² Riss’ statement does appear to be in line with Jonathan Edwards’ thought. Furthermore, TACF provides copies of a sociological study entitled “By Their Fruits.... A Sociological Assessment of the "Toronto Blessing", written by Margaret M. Poloma, a professor within the Department of Sociology at the University of Akron in Ohio.²³ In a letter Poloma outlines her findings by saying “religious experiences should be judged by their fruits. That is precisely what my survey is designed to do. Preliminary findings indicate that the fruits you call for are there. Eighty-nine (89%) percent of the respondents indicated agreement with the statement: ‘I am more in love with Jesus now than I have ever been in my life’ and 91% said they had come to ‘know the Father's love in a new way.’ Approximately one in two persons claimed to come to the TAV ‘experiencing dryness and great discouragement’ and left feeling spiritually refreshed. This refreshing had implications for their lives. For example, 82% agreed with the statement that ‘talking about Jesus to my family and friends is more important to me now than it has ever been before.’ Almost 70% reported that ‘friends and family have commented on changes they have observed in me’ since the visit(s) to TAV. Of those who are married, 87% claim to be ‘more in love with my spouse than ever before.’ Thirty three (33) percent said they had become more involved in works of mercy as a result of their visit to TAV...People appear to be satisfied with TAV, but I would say that it is for good reason. Many lives have been changed. Although only 1% of the respondents were ‘first time’

²² <http://www.tacf.org/DesktopDefault.aspx?tabid=149>. The TACF website offers similar statement on a page entitled “What about the Manifestations?”, located at <http://www.tacf.org/DesktopDefault.aspx?tabid=153>.

²³ <http://www.tacf.org/DesktopDefault.aspx?tabid=150#text1>.

conversions, 28% indicated they ‘recommitted’ their lives to Jesus at TAV and 46% said they were more involved with their churches as a result of their visit to TAV. Five (5) percent reported being healed from a medically diagnosed mental health problem; 18% reported a physical healing; and 76% claimed to have received inner/spiritual healing as a result of visits to TAV. Can these changes be the reason that 92% of the respondents have encouraged others to visit TAV?”²⁴ The attempt to provide sociological data for the effects of the revival, rather than focusing merely on the manifestations of the revival, seems to be fully in accord with Edwards’ thoughts on the issue, and follows his practices in *A Narrative of Surprising Conversions*.

Despite these positive similarities, however, there has clearly been a great focus on the manifestations present within the Toronto revival. In part this is likely due to the easily observable nature of the manifestations, and in part it is likely due to the general theological shallowness of the present day evangelical church. The leadership at TACF can hardly be blamed for these problems and tendencies. However, it also appears that the leaders at TACF have encouraged a focus on the laughing manifestations in particular by their own actions. For example, in *Spread the Fire* magazine there is a consistent focus on the “party” that is occurring in Toronto and other places that have received the revival.²⁵ Such talk is certain to create a focus on the laughter manifestations rather than on other aspects of the revival.

Furthermore, the leaders have tended to focus on subjective experience rather than objective doctrinal exposition. John Arnott, the pastor of TACF and leader of the revival there stated “I believe that many have missed the Holy Spirit’s main emphasis. In this revival He

²⁴ <http://www.tacf.org/DesktopDefault.aspx?tabid=155>.

²⁵ In fact, one recent issue was entitled “Brooklyn’s havin’ A Party” (Volume 9, Issue 4, 2003). In addition, one entire issue was devoted to “The Party” (Volume 7, issue 4, 2001). Two of the articles in this issue were entitled “The Father’s Party”, and “A Soldier in a Party Hat”. This volume of the magazine is located at <http://www.tacf.org/portals/57ad7180-c5e7-49f5-b282-c6475cdb7ee7/stf%207-4.pdf>.

wants us rooted and grounded in the love of God. This means understanding the foundational truth that God really loves him or her, not for what they can do but simply for who they are, and it also means experiencing this truth. I am, more than ever, convinced that this knowledge comes not to the head but to the heart by revelation of the Holy Spirit as we encounter the nearness and dearness of God through being touched with His Presence.”²⁶ Although Edwards certainly longed for personal experience of God, and thus made a place for manifestations, he believed that the experience of God went through the head to the heart. In his sermon, *Christian Knowledge, or The Importance and Advantage of A Thorough Knowledge of Divine Truth*,²⁷ Edwards argues that while the goal of Christian faith lies in reaching the heart, or what he calls spiritual knowledge, it must gain access through the head, or what he calls speculative knowledge. Edwards says that “speculative knowledge is also of infinite importance in this respect, that without it we can have no spiritual or practical knowledge.”²⁸ Thus, before one can truly and lastingly experience some part of the faith, they must normally read, study and think about it. For Edwards, deep thought was invaluable because it led to deep experience. For Arnott, however, the mind appears to be an impediment rather than an aid to spiritual experience. I believe this has had the unfortunate side effect of an increased focus on manifestations, rather than a focus on God and doctrinal truths of the faith.

Conclusion

I must admit that I approached my research of the Toronto blessing with a skeptical attitude. The reports I had received of the “revival” in Toronto seemed to indicate that it was wholly focused on the manifestation of laughing, and that it was one more instance of an entirely

²⁶ *Spread the Fire*, Volume 9, Issue 5, 2003, <http://www.tacf.org/Portals/57ad7180-e5e7-49f5-b282-c6475cdb7ee7/stf%209-5.pdf>.

²⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2:157-163.

²⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2:158.

mechanistically produced revival that had much more in common with Charles Finney than Jonathan Edwards. I was therefore pleasantly surprised to find some of the affinities with Edwards discussed above. The renunciation of Finney's theology of "mechanistic revival", the desire for lasting fruit, and the attempt to read and understand Edwards by some of the leaders was encouraging.

However, I still see some clear differences between Edwards' view of revival and that found among the leaders of the Toronto revival. Whereas Edwards' view of revival was consistently theocentric (revival comes from God and is focused on the glory of God rather than the needs of man), that of the leaders of the Toronto revival is much more man centered (revival begins when men cry out to God for revival and is focused on the needs of man). Furthermore, although the leaders at Toronto claim to not focus on manifestations, some of their practices, especially their lack of doctrinal focus, has the practical effect of encouraging a focus on the manifestations themselves.

Unfortunately, these faults are not limited to the leaders at Toronto, but are rather endemic within the wider body of evangelicalism. Evangelicalism as a whole has lost the God-centered focus of Edwards, preferring to center on the subjective needs of man. Evangelicalism as a whole has come to disdain doctrine, leaving it open to the latest fads and manifestations supposedly guaranteed to bring one an experience of God. Evangelicalism as a whole has spurned the use of the mind, desiring to bypass the head and have a direct experience of God in the heart. In this sense, Toronto is probably simply a indicator of the current state of the church.

Consequently, I think it is imperative for the modern evangelical church, including TACF, to "rediscover" Jonathan Edwards. In an age when many speak of longing for personal and corporate revival and awakening, it is critical that we understand how God's Spirit works to

bring these about, how a work in an individual or group can be biblically judged, and the proper place of experience and manifestation in the Christian life. Edwards is a great guide in all of these areas.

This does not mean that such a rediscovery will be without its difficulties. Edwards is not always easy to read, both because of his style of writing and the depth of his thought. Yet, the treasure to be uncovered is worth the effort. If the modern evangelical church, and especially her leaders, would apply themselves to the writings of Edwards, we would undoubtedly be strengthened in our walks and have our vision of God greatly expanded. If the truths and the balance found in his writings were learned and applied, perhaps God in his grace would be pleased to come down and visit the heirs of Edwards with another great awakening.