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THE GREAT AWAKENING—CALVINISM, ARMINIANISM AND REVIVALISTIC PREACHING: HOMILETICAL LESSONS FOR TODAY

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INTRODUCTION

The *Great Awakening* is a term first used by Joseph Tracy, among others, to describe the revival that occurred during the 18th century in the American colonies reaching its peak in New England in the 1740's.¹ However, the term *Great Awakening* has been challenged by scholars such as Jon Butler who contends that the term cannot be accurately applied to the revivals of the 18th century and is an invention of 19th century historians. Butler argues that the revival of the 18th century was neither great nor widespread, but was localized affecting primarily the Northern colonies.² Determining whether the 18th century revival in the American colonies was great and general or localized and scattered is beyond the scope of this paper. Whether generalized or localized both Tracy and Butler agree that the revival was driven primarily by the preaching of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. Concurrent with the revival in the Northern American colonies was a revival that was taking place in England also associated with the preaching of Whitefield and additionally John Wesley.³

Church historians acknowledge that Edwards, Whitefield and Wesley were powerful and effective preachers. Edwards was recognized as "the most powerful and most effective preacher ever heard on the America continent."⁴ The praise for Whitefield is even grander: "We may accept the almost universal verdict that for dramatic and declamatory power he had no rival in his own age, and no superior in any age."⁵ The praise for Wesley is more tempered recognizing that he was not "the most exciting or eloquent speaker of his time."⁶ However, while people were not excited by his eloquence they were "moved by his vision of the Christian life and gospel of universal redemption."⁷

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the preaching of Edwards, Whitefield, and Wesley in the context of the revival in both the Northern American Colonies and England between 1737 and 1743. In order to accomplish this task, ten sermons of each preacher written and delivered between 1737 and 1743 were randomly selected and examined. Analysis

focused on sermon structure, content, and evangelistic appeal. However, their sermons could not be analyzed solely within the context of 18th century revivalism. The sermons were also analyzed recognizing the context of the 18th century debate between Calvinism and Arminianism. Additionally, consideration was given to the spiritual journey of each preacher, in particular to his conversion experience since to some degree all theology is autobiographical.

The analysis of their sermons sought to respond to two primary questions:

1. What impact if any did the preacher's Calvinistic or Arminian theology have on his preaching style, sermonic content, and evangelistic appeal?
2. Why did the preacher's preaching spark a revival?

The paper will then conclude with some suggested homiletical lessons for today.

CALVINISM, ARMINIANISM AND THE "GREAT AWAKENING"

In 18th century England and her colonies all Calvinists were high Calvinists reflecting five point Calvinism. Following the Synod of Dort, a high Calvinist embraced the 5 points of: (1) total depravity, (2) Unconditional election, (3) limited atonement, (4) the irresistibility of grace, and (5) the final perseverance of the Saints. The majority of high Calvinists were also infralapsarians or sublapsarians.⁸ In the American colonies during the 18th century high Calvinism was represented by Jonathan Edwards.⁹ However, though he was a five-point Calvinist his own words challenge any assumption that he embraced everything Calvinistic:

However the term "Calvinist" is in these days, among most, a term of greater reproach than the term "Arminian;" yet I should not take it at all amiss, to be called a Calvinist, for distinctions sake: though I utterly disclaim a dependence on Calvin, or believing the doctrines which I hold, because he believed and taught them; and cannot justly be charged with believing in everything just as he taught.¹⁰

In his own self-assessment, Edwards reveals three telling considerations: (1) the tone of the debate in the 18th century between Calvinists and Arminians, (2) he clearly sees himself as a Calvinist, and (3) though willing to embrace the term Calvinist as a matter of distinction, he makes it clear that he did not necessarily embrace everything Calvinistic.

A closer examination of Edwards reveals that there were at least four areas in which Edwards went outside traditional Calvinistic confines.

Scholars would agree that Calvin's references to missionary/evangelistic endeavors are at best "scanty and vague."¹¹ Yet Edwards not only showed a missionary/evangelistic spirit in his own preaching, but he also was a supporter of Whitefield's intenerate preaching in the American colonies.¹²

Edwards' emphasis on a conversion or a "new birth" experience also went beyond Calvin. The same can be said of his advocacy of experiential religion and his use of emotional appeal in his sermons.¹³

John Wesley was an Arminian. In the early stages of the revival in England Wesley did not make Arminianism or Calvinism a focus of his preaching. However, in his letters he describes an experience that would ultimately cause a breach between himself and Whitefield. He notes on April 15, 1739¹⁴ that he had written all morning on the subject of "free grace," and is vexed with uncertainty over whether he should go public with his thoughts. Finally Wesley resorted to casting lots and the message was clear, "preach and print." On April 26, 1739 Wesley penned the sermon "Free Grace" based on Romans 8. He delivered the sermon and subsequently published it. However, there is no record that he ever preached the sermon again even though some scholars such as Dallimore argue that this was the "most powerful and impassioned of Wesley's sermons."¹⁵ In spite of the clear differences between his Arminian beliefs and the Calvinistic theology supported by Whitefield, Wesley would argue throughout his lifetime that on the issues of original sin and justification by faith there is not a "hair's breadth" difference between Wesleyans and Calvinists.¹⁶

In "Free Grace" Wesley emphasized two primary issues that led him to make a public stand against Calvinism. First, for Wesley, Calvinism makes preaching in vain. Wesley articulates, "It is needless to them that are elected. For they, whether with preaching or without, will infallibly be saved. Therefore the end of preaching, 'to save souls,' is void with regard to them. And it is useless to them that are not elected. For they cannot possibly be saved."¹⁷ Second, Wesley argued that Calvinism destroys a zeal for good works.

George Whitefield was an Anglican minister and a former member of the "Holy Club" at Oxford with Charles and John Wesley. However, in contrast to both of the Wesleys, Whitefield was a Calvinist. Some historians have described Whitefield as a moderate Calvinist. Moderate Calvinism focused primarily on total depravity and the belief that all of salvation is a gift from God including the gift of faith.¹⁸ During the heated debate with Wesley following Wesley's publication of "Free Grace," Whitefield temporarily aligned himself more closely with high Calvinism. The primary influence in moving him at least temporarily towards high Calvinism seems to be the writings of John Edwards of Cambridge. On the voyage from England to the American colonies in 1739 Whitefield read his works extensively.¹⁹

CONVERSION EXPERIENCES

Edwards, Wesley, and Whitefield all record emotional conversion experiences. Edwards describes his conversion to have begun with numerous encounters that caused a “sweet burning” in his heart.²⁰ The critical moment of conversion for Wesley came when in a time of contemplation his mind was overtaken by “a sweet sense of the glorious majesty and grace of God.” Wesley describes his conversion in his journal:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while the leader was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt *my heart strangely warmed*. I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.²¹

George Whitefield depicts his conversion in the following words, “O! with what joy—joy unspeakable—even joy that was full of and big with glory, was my soul filled, when the weight of sin went off, and an abiding sense of the pardoning love of God, and a full assurance of faith, broke upon my desolate soul!”²²

ANALYSIS OF SERMONS PREACHED

The ten sermons of each preacher were written and delivered between 1737 and 1743 were randomly selected and analyzed. Analysis focused on sermon structure, content, and evangelistic appeal, discussed below.

Sermon Structure

All ten of Edwards’s, Wesley’s and Whitefield’s sermons analyzed were deductive sermons structured along a series of three movements:²³

1. A scripture passage is read followed by a detailed explication of the text.
2. A doctrine or theological axiom is drawn from the text.
3. An application is made.

The similarity in sermon structure is not surprising since the structure reflects the model of Puritan preaching in the British pulpit which was exported to the American colonies. Arthur Hoyt describes the structure of 18th century Puritan preaching in the following way:

The method of sermonizing was first to unfold the text historically and critically; then to raise from it a doctrine; then bring forward the proofs, either inferential or direct; then illustrate it or justify it to the understanding by the reasons drawn from the philosophy of the subject, or the nature of things; and finally conclude with an improvement by the ways of uses of inferences and timely admonitions and exhortations. These application, or uses and exhortations often formed the greater part of the discourse.²⁴

Sermon Content

At a quick glance any differentiation in sermon content can be overlooked. Outside of Wesley's sermon on "Free Grace" and a few sermons by Whitefield delivered after 1739 while embroiled in the controversy with Wesley there seems to be little indication of the distinctive doctrines of Calvinism or Arminianism in their sermons. The focus of Edwards', Whitefield's, and Wesley's sermons are centered on ruin through sin, redemption through Jesus, and regeneration through the Holy Spirit. However, there are clear differences in how they express their messages of ruin, redemption, and restoration. Both Edwards and Whitefield expressed redemption and regeneration in the language of the elect. Whitefield's sermons focused on redemption and regeneration as exclusive gifts given to the elect. He notes, "God, as a reward of Christ's sufferings, promised to give to the elect faith and repentance."²⁵ Edwards' sermons included similar language. He writes, "But the effect will be exceeding different with different persons: to the elect their eternal salvation, [to] reprobates, everlasting condemnation."²⁶

In contrast the term elect was not found in any of the sermons of Wesley that were analyzed. Wesley understood the implication of the word and what it implied to the audience and seemingly avoided its use to articulate that God's grace was free to anyone.

Evangelistic Appeal

All three preachers emphasized something that was new to preaching in the 18th century, namely the role of emotional appeal as an agent of conversion. The emotional conversion experience of Edwards, Wesley, and Whitefield may have influenced their belief in this area. However, it was also clearly theologically driven. Edwards believed that because of total depravity no degree of logic could ever reach man's inclination to sin. People needed to have their hearts touched in the sermon in order to open the door to conversion.²⁷ Convinced of the power of words to move affections, he carefully chose his words as he developed his sermon manuscripts. *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* is a classic example of his rhetorical genius in using verbal imagery through metaphor and descriptive adjectives to

stir the emotions of his hearers through a description of God's wrath and hell's torment. It also is an example of his belief that because of humanity's total depravity they could only be emotionally moved through terror or humiliation.²⁸

Like Edwards, Whitefield believed that logic could not reach man's inclination to sin. However, Whitefield who favored an extemporaneous form of preaching as opposed to Edwards' preference for manuscript preaching centered his emotional appeal not on logos but on pathos expressed through a creative form of delivery. Whitefield was known to weep, shout, and be overcome with emotion in the delivery of his sermons. The response of the audience was just as dramatic as he made them both laugh and cry.²⁹

Like Whitefield, Wesley favored an extemporaneous preaching style. However, unlike Whitefield who was noted for his emotional preaching, Wesley was known for his calm dignity. Like Edwards his emotional appeal was found in his words. However unlike Edwards who focused on painting a picture of terror and condemnation in order to move the hearts of his hearers, Wesley sought to move his hearers by painting a picture of the grace and mercy of God. The difference is clearly a theological one. Edwards focused on stirring the emotions through fear or terror because his high Calvinism taught him, "Natural man cannot see anything of God's loveliness, his amiable and glorious grace, or anything which could attract their love; but they may see his terrible greatness to excite their terror."³⁰ In contrast, Wesley's Arminian understanding of prevenient grace led him to believe that human beings were capable of responding to and being moved by the grace of God.

Preaching and Revival

All three men had different preaching styles. Edwards tended to be a manuscript preacher and although Whitefield and Wesley were both extemporaneous preachers Whitefield was an emotional preacher while Wesley preached with calm dignity.

Edwards was a high Calvinist. Whitefield was a moderate Calvinist. Wesley was an Arminian. Yet, the preaching of these three men with their stylistic and theological diversity spawned a religious awakening. How could men with such diversity accomplish the same thing? I would suggest that *The Great Awakening* was a result of their commonalities and not their differences that sparked a revival.

The content of their preaching though Calvinistic or Arminian focused on the basics—ruin through sin, redemption through Jesus, regeneration through the Holy Spirit. Such focus on the basics was a key to sparking the *Great Awakening* through leading people to a conversion or "new birth" experience.

Another commonality was the role of emotional appeal in their sermons. From their own conversion experiences and their theological

understanding of the nature of man each preacher had come to understand that logic alone could not reach the human heart. The revival that was sparked by their preaching bears fruit to their premise.

A final commonality was their belief in the central role of preaching to conversion. However, their theological basis for its centrality differed among the preachers. For Wesley the centrality of preaching to conversion or “new birth” only made sense in an Arminian context. Preaching was a vehicle through which God initiates his grace that enables men or women to respond to him.³¹ For Wesley Calvinism made the centrality of preaching null and void.

In contrast Edwards and Whitefield still saw the centrality of preaching within the context of their Calvinistic theology. They argued that God had appointed both those who would be saved and preaching as an instrument of salvation. Further they argued that since they did not know whom the elect or the reprobate were they by necessity must preach to both.³²

THE SUBSIDING OF THE AWAKENING

One other possible insight emerged in studying the contribution the preaching of Edwards, Whitefield and Wesley made to the *Great Awakening*. Organization was not the strength of Whitefield. Thus he largely failed to provide follow up for new converts. In contrast, Wesley argued that a lack of spiritual oversight brought about the decline of the Great Awakening. Wesley insisted that converts be organized and built up in the faith. In fact if there were no societies in place for this purpose Wesley felt very strongly that no preaching should be done.³³ Was this contrast between Whitefield and Wesley solely a matter of personality and talents or did it also have a theological basis? Could it be that Whitefield’s belief in the perseverance of the saints contributed to his lack of follow up? In fairness, it should be pointed out that Edwards did see some value in follow up and put some infrastructure in place for this, though clearly the infrastructure of Wesley was much more extensive.

SUGGESTED HOMILETICAL LESSONS

From this brief analysis of the preaching of Edwards, Whitefield, and Wesley in the context of 18th century revivalism, some potential homiletical lessons emerge for revivalistic preaching in the 21st century. Preaching that ignites revival:

1. Is driven by a theology of preaching that sees the centrality of preaching to be the experience of conversion or “new birth.”
2. Emphasizes the basics: ruin through sin, redemption through Jesus, and regeneration through the Holy Spirit.
3. Understands that logic alone will not reach the human heart

and thus the need to recognize the role of emotional appeal in preaching.

CONCLUSION

The preaching styles of Edwards, Whitefield, and Wesley may not have been primarily influenced by their Calvinist or Arminian beliefs. Each preacher seems to have utilized his own individual preaching style to accomplish a similar purpose. Yet, in spite of their differences all three preachers had strikingly similar content. However, there appears to be a possible connection between the preachers' Calvinist or Arminian beliefs and the way they followed up with those who had a "new birth" experience as a result of their preaching.

This study has also shown that while preaching can spark revival, long-term care of new converts is needed. New believers require an organized system of discipleship that moves from new convert to maturing disciple.

NOTES

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3. Justo L. Gonzalez, *From the Protestant Reformation to the Twentieth Century, A History of Christian Thought* 3(Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1975), 316.
4. News for Christians: Library of Classic Sermons, "Jonathan Edwards (1701-1758)," <http://www.newsforchristians.com/classics.html> (accessed October 1, 2010).
5. Charles Horne, *The Romance of Preaching*. (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1914), 249.
6. Arnold A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield: God's Anointed Servant in the Great Revival of the Eighteenth Century*. (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 27.
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8. The doctrine advocates that God decreed both election and reprobation before the fall.
9. Allan Coppedge, *John Wesley in Theological Debate*. (Whitmore, KY: Wesley Heritage Press, 1987), 36.
10. Paul Ramsey, ed., *Freedom of the Will. The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957), 131.
11. Charles Chaney, *Reformed Review* XVII (1964): 25.
12. George C. Claghorn, ed., *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 16 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 80. "You are one that had the blessing of

- heaven attending you wherever you go.”
13. Michael J. Crawford, *Seasons of Grace: Colonial New England's Rival Tradition in its British Context*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 81.
 14. John Telford, ed., *The Letters of the Reverend John Wesley*, vol. 1 (London: The Epworth Press, 1931). 302-303.
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 16. John Telford, ed., *The Letters of the Reverend John Wesley*, vol. 4 (London: The Epworth Press, 1931). 298. He utilized this analogy in a Letter to John Newton, 14 May, 1765.
 17. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Eds.), *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 52.
 18. Coppedge, 38.
 19. *Ibid*, 53.
 20. Jonathan Edwards, “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” In the *Works of President Edwards*, vol. 4 (Leavitt and Allan, n.d.), 4:443
 21. E. C. Barton, *The Journal of the Reverend John Wesley*, vol. 1 (Lodon: Epworth Press, 1938), 475-476.
 22. Arnold A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the 18th Century*, vol. 1 (London: Billing and Sons Limited, 1970), 77.
 23. Edwards' sermons: The Sorrows Of The Bereaved Spread Before Jesus; The Means And Ends of Communication; God's Grace Carried On In Other Places; Youth Is Like A Flower That Is Cut Down; Mary's Remarkable Act; Sinners In The Hands Of An Angry God; Seeking After Christ; The Importance And Advantage Of A Thorough Knowledge Of Divine Truth; Gospel Ministers A Savor Of Life Or Of Death; Mercy And Not Sacrifice.
 Wesley's sermons: The First-Fruits Of The Spirit; The Spirit Of Bondage And Adoption; The Righteousness Of Faith; Free Grace; The Almost Christian; Scriptural Christianity; Christian Perfection; Awake Thou That sleepest; Salvation By Faith; The Way To The Kingdom.
 Whitefield's sermons: Walking With God; Christ the Believer's Husband; Thankfulness For Mercies Received, A Necessary Duty; The Great Duty of Family Religion; Christ the Best Husband: Or An Earnest Invitation To Young Women To Come And See Christ; The Potter And The Clay; Abraham's Offering Up His Son Isaac; The Temptation Of Christ; The Folly And Danger Of Not Being Righteous Enough; The Seed Of The Woman, And The Seed Of The Serpent.
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27. Crawford, 86.
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 32. Coppedge, 90.
 33. Dallimore, 27.