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## EDWARDS ON EVANGELISM

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*T. M. Moore*

To prepare our hearts for revival is to prepare for heaven, so that in a true sense we can say that preparation for revival is revival.

—WILLIAM STILL

You cannot stop a revival any more than you can start it. It is altogether in the hands of God.

—D. MARTYN LLOYD-JONES

The characteristic of a revival is that a profound consciousness of sin is produced in many persons at the same time by an awareness of God.

—IAIN H. MURRAY

In the history of the Christian church, evangelism and revival are often as inextricably linked as thunder and lightning. Where revival occurs evangelism will not be far away. As God's Spirit begins to renew the hearts of His people and to revive His churches, the revitalized people of God respond, like the early believers on the church's first Pentecost, by moving among their contemporaries, "gossiping the gospel," calling their neighbors, friends, and any who will listen to join them in worshipping the risen Lord and Christ. As evangelism brings the saving news of Christ to hearts prepared by the striving of God's Spirit and the sovereign good pleasure of the Father, the fires of revival burn brighter and brighter, often leading to awakening, or, revival on a larger scale, and reformation. Wherever one looks in the history of revival, evangelism seems ever to be one of the first and most consistent of its fruits.

This is not to say, however, that all evangelism leads to revival. The thunder may not always be accompanied by visible lightning. The ministry of the prophet Jeremiah is testimony enough to that fact. There may be many reasons why the church's work of evangelism does not eventuate in renewal and revival, some of which can be attributed only to the inscrutable counsel of God.

Others, however, may well be related to some failure or inadequacy on the part of God's people. Our evangelism may not be sufficiently consistent, clear, or compelling to be

useful as a tool of God's Spirit for the conversion of His elect. Or the testimony of our lives, or the fragmentation of our churches may present stumbling blocks to wary unbelievers. In other cases it may be that some critical aspect of the message of evangelism is missing—such as the warning of God's wrath—or that our motives in the work or our means of prosecuting it may not be such as truly honor God.

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Whenever our labors in evangelism do not appear to be as fruitful as we might expect—whenever we thunder for the Lord without any evidence of lightning splitting the skies—we should take pains to see if we can discover why this is so. At such times it can be useful to review the work of previous generations who saw both revival and evangelism in their ministries. For then we can believe both the powerful moving of God's Spirit and the true and faithful labors of His people were effectively at work.

Ours appears to be a time, when, especially in the American church, in spite of so many and varied evangelistic activities and endeavors, revival seems yet so far away. The blessing of God has not accompanied the works of His people to the extent that we wish. The American church has, over the past three decades, seen more congresses and

conferences, more training seminars and programs, more literature and mediated activity, and the birth of more new organizations dedicated to the work of evangelism than at any other comparable period in all of church history. Yet the American church struggles to be relevant and meaningful and to provide a beacon of hope and a trumpet blast of renewal amid the rising mists of modernism and postmodernism. We hear many stories of great evangelistic undertakings and impressive results; still the culture slides ever more deeply into relativism, narcissism, sensualism, and violence. We see new congregations coming into existence and older churches striving to make themselves more appealing and relevant. Yet the continued erosion of our established values, the breakdown of our institutions, and the proliferation of strange cults and bizarre movements of pseudo-spirituality suggest that our labors are not accomplishing the hoped-for result of a revitalized church and an awakened nation.

It is time, not to draw back from those labors, but to begin a serious assessment of them, in order to determine whether something other than God's simply choosing to withhold His blessing can account for our disappointment. Have we failed in some regard? Is our evangelism something less than what God is pleased to bless? Is ours, in fact, another gospel than the one proclaimed by Paul and the other apostles? Are we omitting something crucial to the work of evangelism? Are we relying more on our own means than on the sovereign working of God?

In this article I hope to stimulate some ongoing discussion concerning our work in evangelism today by leading us to consider the views of and work in evangelism of one of America's most effective ministers of the gospel, Jonathan Edwards (1703-58). Noted for his powerful evangelistic preaching, Edwards's ministry was on various occasions accompanied by great outpourings of the Spirit of

God, in which not only were many converted to Christ at his preaching, but many more were saved by the faithful witness of those who were coming to Christ during those times of harvest. Clearly God was pleased to bless the work of evangelism which Edwards and the people under his care undertook for the cause of Christ. Can we learn from them anything that might help us in assessing and perhaps modifying our own approach to this important work?

It is this writer's conviction that we can. In particular, Jonathan Edwards's work of evangelism can be instructive to us in two ways as we begin to assess our own endeavors. First, Edwards reminds us that evangelism is a work of God, to be pursued within the context of His kingdom, in the power of His Spirit, and according to the means which He has appointed. Second, Edwards counsels us to remember that evangelism is a process and that, as such, it requires persistence on our part, together with a willingness to wait on God to work in His way and time in the lives of those whom God will save. These two observations, more fully developed, have implications for us as we consider whether or not we should reform our efforts at reaching the lost in our generation.

#### EVANGELISM THE WORK OF GOD

As Edwards practiced it, evangelism was a work of God, of the Father who had chosen a people for Himself from before the foundation of the world, of the Son who accomplished their redemption, and of the Spirit who strives with lost sinners and applies the saving mercies of the Father and the Son to the elect of God by means of the preaching of the Word of God.

Edwards saw that we are living in the period of history in which the kingdom of God is advancing with power. We should expect that Christ will be building His church throughout this period, and that many nations will stream

up to the mountain of the Lord's house to learn of Him. Edwards expected to see the church grow and prosper as the kingdom of God advanced in the world. He wrote that while the setting up of Christ's kingdom would be a gradual process, nonetheless, it would "be accompanied with an advancement of the church into that state of the glorious prevalence of truth, liberty, peace, and joy, which we so often read of in the prophetic parts of Scripture."<sup>1</sup> This would be the result of the Spirit's regenerating work in the lives of sinners, as they responded to the faithful preaching of the gospel.<sup>2</sup>

This powerful, dramatic work of evangelism is the work of God: "No other sufficient cause can possibly be assigned for this propagation of the gospel, but only God's own power."<sup>3</sup> It is not that the messengers are so attractive or astute, or that the story that they tell is so winsome and agreeable to lost men; rather, it is that God is pleased to use the foolishness of faithful preaching to draw the lost unto Himself.<sup>4</sup>

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*But we must note that it is God's gospel that is to be preached. And it is to be preached, that is, proclaimed boldly, openly, and forthrightly for the good news that it is.*

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Edwards insisted that the work of evangelism is the work of the Holy Spirit. He strives with sinners concerning their desperate condition before God,

... leading them more and more to a sense of their exceeding wickedness and guiltiness in his sight; their pollution, and the insufficiency of their own righteousness; that they can in no wise help themselves, and that God would be wholly just and righteous in rejecting them and all that they do, and in casting them off forever.<sup>5</sup>

The Holy Spirit brings sinners to see their "miserable condition by nature, the danger they are in of perishing eternally, and that it is, of great importance to them that they speedily escape and get into a better state."<sup>6</sup> And He points them to God's solution of their needs in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is the One to whom men must submit as the effective agent in evangelism,

... who of sovereign grace has called them out of darkness into marvelous light; who has by his own immediate and free operation, led them into an understanding of the evil and danger of sin, and brought them off from their own righteousness, and opened their eyes to discover the glory of God, and the wonderful riches of God in Jesus Christ, and has sanctified them, and made them new creatures.<sup>7</sup>

In this great work God's Spirit uses His people as the messengers of His truth. But it is He who stirs and moves them, He who teaches them what to say, who accompanies their faithful preaching with spiritual power, and who disposes the outcome of it all:

God, by pouring out his Holy Spirit, will furnish men to be glorious instruments of carrying on this work; will fill them with knowledge and wisdom, and fervent zeal for the promoting the kingdom of Christ, and the salvation of souls, and propagating the gospel in the world. The gospel shall begin to be preached with abundantly greater clearness and

power than had heretofore been.<sup>8</sup>

But we must note that it is *God's* gospel that is to be preached. And it is to be *preached*, that is, proclaimed boldly, openly, and forthrightly for the good news that it is. Moreover, it is to be preached not only by those ordained for that task, but by all those in whom the quickening work of the Spirit of God has wrought salvation and new life.<sup>9</sup> The gospel that the Spirit has given us, as Edwards preached and taught it, is a gospel that calls men to repent of their sins, to deplore their mundane inclinations and to aspire to a higher kingdom, to confess Christ as Savior and Lord, and to amend their way of life lest they fall into the hands of an angry God. The gospel holds out exceeding great and precious promises to the lost, offering them peace and favor with God, true and lasting happiness, the ability to know God through a vital personal relationship, forgiveness of their sins, abundant provision for all their daily needs, help in every and all circumstances, saving and persevering faith, holiness, and everlasting life.<sup>10</sup> But this gospel requires that people face their sins, that they come "to see their miserable condition as they are in themselves, and to despair of help from themselves, or from an arm of flesh, before he appears for them, and also makes them sensible of their sin, and their unworthiness of God's help."<sup>11</sup>

This is the gospel which we must proclaim if we expect the Spirit of God to honor our labors, as He did those of Edwards, with fruit for Christ's kingdom. This is the gospel which has convicting and converting power. As Edwards wrote:

The gospel stands in no need of external evidences of its truth and divinity. It carries its own light and evidence with it. There is that in its nature that sufficiently distinguishes it

to those who are spiritually enlightened, from all the effects of human invention.<sup>12</sup>

This is the gospel we believe God will honor with an ingathering of His elect. It is His gospel, and it is His work of making that good news known that we participate in as we submit to the leading of the Spirit in the work of evangelism.

### EVANGELISM AS A PROCESS

While regeneration and conversion are events which occur, according to the sovereign good pleasure of God, under the preaching of the gospel, the work of evangelism—of making God's good news known to persons—is a process. As Edwards understood and practiced evangelism, it could involve a range of activities and a variety of people spread out over a considerable time before God's elect began to come to their senses and started seeking Him. The task of God's faithful is to understand the process nature of evangelism and to give themselves to it devotedly.

Edwards identified at least three aspects of evangelism as a process that need to be observed continuously in this work. The first aspect of evangelism as a process is dependence upon the Lord. This is expressed for the work of evangelism in three ways.

The first of these is prayer. Edwards believed that the progress of God's kingdom, which was accomplished by the work of evangelism, could not be realized apart from prayer. He saw in the Scriptures and in the church's experience

... how this future glorious advancement of the church of God should be introduced; viz. By great multitudes in different towns and countries taking up a joint resolution, and coming into an express and visible agreement, that they will, by united and extraordinary prayer, seek to God, that he

would come and manifest himself, and grant the tokens and fruit of his gracious presence.<sup>13</sup>

Such prayers for the reviving work of God's Spirit should be frequent. The "church should be very much in prayer for that glorious outpouring of the Spirit."<sup>14</sup> They should also be fervent, importuning God with great urgings to accomplish this work.<sup>15</sup> They should further be made in faith that God will do what He has promised: "With what confidence may we go before God, and pray for that, of which we have so many exceeding precious and glorious promises to plead!"<sup>16</sup> And they should be directed specifically at God doing good for the souls of men, praying both that God's people might be faithful in their callings and that their labors in the gospel might bring forth the desired fruit.<sup>17</sup> By faithfully and fervently praying for the work of evangelism and the outpouring of God's Spirit, God's people demonstrate their trust in Him to do this work that He has ordained for the progress of His kingdom and the advancement of His church.

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*But this work does not fall exclusively to ministers. Rather, as we have seen, those who come under the influence of the gospel and enter into the grace of the Lord can be expected to talk excitedly and often about His goodness and mercy to them.*



Second, they show their dependence upon Him by employing the means of preaching as the way of making God's good news known. That preaching is first of all the work of God's called and ordained servants. In the light of Christ God "has sent forth his messengers, and appointed ministers in his churches to be subordinate lights, and to shine with the communications of his light, and to reflect the beams of his glory on the souls of men."<sup>18</sup>

The work and business of ministers of the gospel is as it were that of servants, to wash and cleanse the souls of men: for this is done by the preaching of the word, which is their main business, Eph. v.26. "That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word."<sup>19</sup>

But this work does not fall exclusively to ministers. Rather, as we have seen, those who come under the influence of the gospel and enter into the grace of the Lord can be expected to talk excitedly and often about His goodness and mercy to them. They take the work of preaching, albeit greatly simplified, into the everyday contexts of their lives, calling their families, friends, neighbors, and associates to turn to Christ and away from their sins. By relying on the foolishness of preaching the people of God further demonstrate their trust in Him in the work of evangelism.

Third, God's people show their dependence on the Lord in the process of evangelism by employing the message which He has determined to use, rather than one that conforms either to their own convenience or what they have concluded the world around them might be willing to hear. As Edwards put it, "Let us make use of the means which God hath instituted. They are the best and only means by which we may expect to obtain salvation. We shall be most inexcusable therefore if we neglect them."<sup>20</sup>

This means, as we have seen, that the gospel we preach

must be bold and forthright about the matter of sin. It must emphasize the hopelessness, the helplessness, and the desperation of lost sinners apart from the grace of God. It must warn of the terrors of divine judgment even as it holds out the sweet promises of salvation. It must insist on the saving grace and mercy of God alone for salvation and call the sinner to seek that grace with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. Only this gospel, in all its glory, will satisfy the requirements of God's Spirit and break through to the hearts of God's elect. Only this gospel

... reaches the bottom of the heart, and changes the nature, so it will effectively dispose to an universal obedience. It shows God as worthy to be obeyed and served. It draws forth the heart in a sincere love to God, which is the only principle of a true, gracious, and universal obedience; and it convinces of the reality of those glorious rewards that God has promised to them that obey him.<sup>21</sup>

By relying on the message of the gospel as God is pleased to have it proclaimed, His people further show their dependence upon Him and their utter contempt for any lesser means in making His good news known.

The second aspect of evangelism as a process is that it must occur as an expression of the indwelling presence of Christ in His people. They cannot evangelize effectively who do not know and love Christ and whose evangelism does not flow out of a heart of love for God and for the lost. What Edwards wrote concerning ministers he would also aver for all who know the Lord:

... divine love or charity is the sum of all true grace, which is an holy flame enkindled in the soul; it is by this therefore especially, that a minister of the gospel is a burning light; a minister that is so has his soul enkindled with the heavenly



flame; his heart burns with love to Christ, and fervently desires of the advancement of his kingdom and glory; and also with ardent love to the souls of men, and desires for their salvation . . . Ministers should be animated in this work by a great love to the souls of men, and should be ready to spend and be spent for them; for Christ loved them and gave himself for them; he loved them with a love stronger than death.<sup>22</sup>

Further in this vein, our evangelism should be done with a consciousness of the kingdom context in which we now live. As we contemplate, prepare for, and undertake the work of evangelism, we should nurture high expectations of what we hope to accomplish:

It is natural and reasonable to suppose, that the whole world should finally be given to Christ, as one whose right it is to reign, as the proper heir of him who is originally the King of all nations, and the possessor of heaven and earth. And the Scripture teaches us, that God the Father hath constituted his Son, as God-man, in his kingdom of grace, or mediatorial kingdom, to be the heir of the world, that he might in his kingdom have "the heathen for his inheritance, and the utmost ends of the earth for his possession."<sup>23</sup>

Our evangelism should thus be done with confidence in the Lord's victory, rule, and power; with fervor, as befitting those who know the desperate condition of the lost and the terror of God; with joyous expectation of plenteous harvest; and with heartfelt thanks to God for His goodness to wretched sinners. When our lives are filled with Christ and our minds are set on the things above, we can expect that our witness for Him will be motivated by love and driven by our citizenship in His kingdom. Such witness, being pleasing to God, cannot fail, in His time, to accom-

plish the results we seek and which He has promised.

A final aspect of our work of evangelism as a process must be that of waiting on the Lord, of being patient and persistent in the work until God's Spirit begins to honor our labors and revival comes.

Edwards insisted that we be patient and resist the temptation to turn to human expedients rather than the preaching of the gospel. We must decline to adapt the glorious message of God's grace in order to make it palatable to sinful ears. Let it be hurtful until it brings forth tears of repentance. Let it sound foolish until that foolish message brings light to dead souls. But let us forsake neither the message nor the means that God has appointed for the ingathering of His elect; rather, let us with patience and perseverance wait upon the Lord to bring the latter rains in His own time.

He further insisted that we, at the same time, persist in our own sanctification, lest the imperfections of our lives become a stumbling stone for those who seek the salvation of God. Once again, what Edwards wrote of ministers he would certainly have affirmed for everyone who bears God's good news to the world:

. . . if we are unfaithful in this office, and do not imitate our Master, our offence will be heinous in proportion to the dignity of our office, and our final and everlasting disgrace and ignominy proportionably great; and we, who in honour are exalted up to heaven, shall be cast down proportionably low in hell.<sup>24</sup>

The work of evangelism, as Jonathan Edwards practiced it, was a process of depending on the Lord, of showing the love of Christ by deed and word, and of waiting on the Lord to fulfill His promises. It remains now to consider some applications of these observations for our own work of evangelism today.

### APPLICATIONS

Four applications derive from this study of the philosophy and practice of evangelism on the part of Jonathan Edwards. The first is that we must, in our churches, insist on the work of evangelism as the logical outgrowth of our kingdom vision and the highest expression of our love for lost sinners.

This suggests a twofold application of its own. First, we must nurture a clearer, more powerful vision of the kingdom of Christ as the ultimate context within which we live and move and have our being. Too often in our day the faith of Christ is reduced to a form of personal therapy designed to accomplish nothing more than to soothe and succor troubled souls as they seek to cope with the trials of being human at the end of the twentieth century. Such a vision—atomistic, reductionistic, therapeutic, and self-serving—will never inspire the work of evangelism the way that a clearer understanding of the kingdom of Christ can. Preachers must proclaim not only the atoning death and justifying resurrection of Christ, but also His victorious ascension, His overpowering reign, and His imminent return. Believers must see Him exalted to the right hand of the Father, putting all His enemies under His feet, claiming His inheritance to the ends of the earth, and sending them forth as His ambassadors to implore all men to be reconciled to God through Him. Only such a vision will instill the confidence and commitment essential to the ongoing work of making God's good news known.

The second application of this is that ministers must not hesitate to call the people of God to evangelistic endeavor in the name of the king and as the highest expression of His and their love for the lost. It is not enough merely to pray for others, to do good to them, to surround them with our fellowship and encouragement. Nor is it enough to invest our precious resources of time and money

in political platforms, programs, and promises. We must call the lost to repentance and faith, after the example of our Lord Himself, if they would know the full and abundant life that we have come to know. And this is a task, as we have seen, not only for ministers but for all those who have come to know the saving mercies of the Lord.

A second application suggests that we must prepare our churches to participate in the work of evangelism at every point in the process of that great work. Ministers must lead their congregations into greater dependence upon the Lord in prayer; to more consistent and varied expressions of love for the lost; to faithful proclamation of the good news of Christ; and to faithful persevering in these tasks until the Lord of the harvest begins to bring the hoped-for increase. Let ministers insist that everyone under their care find their place in this great endeavor, at some point in the process, all the congregation joining together in faith and obedience to see the Lord's great work accomplished in their community. And let them provide the encouragement, vision, and equipping that their congregations will need in order to take up this important calling.

Third, we must encourage all the faithful of God in proclaiming the message of the gospel as God is pleased to use it, and not as we might suppose men might be pleased to hear it in our day. It is true that God can and often does use all kinds of inadequate, inept, and ill-conceived approaches to evangelism to bring in His harvest. But, as Edwards wrote:

... it appears to me that the great God has wrought like himself, in the manner of his carrying on this work; so as very much to show his own glory, exalt his own sovereignty, power, and all-sufficiency. He has poured contempt on all that human strength, wisdom, prudence, and sufficiency which men have been wont to trust, and to glory in; so as greatly to

cross, rebuke, and chastise the pride and other corruptions of men.<sup>25</sup>

Let us resist the temptation to redefine or reinvent preaching in terms more amenable to the entertainment mindset of our contemporaries, or to recast the gospel in the therapeutic or self-help language of the day. Rather, let us believe that God is still pleased to use the foolishness of preaching the glorious good news of a bloody Savior to call His elect unto Himself, and let us strive, with all our might, to preserve this God-given institution in the work of our churches and the lives of God's people.

Finally, Edwards teaches us to encourage the saints of God to expect that He will bring in the harvest of His elect in His way and time, just as He has promised. Therefore, let us exhort them to lavish sowing of God's Word in the belief that only as we sow abundantly can we expect to reap in due proportion. This generation is no more beyond the reach of the preaching of God's Word than any generation which has preceded it. His Word is alive and powerful; His fields are ripe unto the harvest; His desire is that His house should be made full; and He has commanded us, as fishers of men, to go and make all the nations disciples. We must not settle for a vision smaller than the promises and expectations of the Lord Himself as we lead our people into the work of evangelism.

In a time such as ours, when our fervent efforts in evangelism have produced so little in the way of revival or awakening, we need to reassess our labors in the light of God's Word and the works of our forebears in Christ. In Jonathan Edwards we find an example to remind us of God's role in the work of evangelism and our responsibility in carrying out that great work to His glory.

### Author

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### Notes

1. Jonathan Edwards, "A History of the Work of Redemption," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 1:584-85 (hereinafter *Works*).
2. *Ibid.*, 589.
3. *Ibid.*, 593.
4. *Ibid.*, 593-94.
5. Jonathan Edwards, "A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God," in *Works*, 1:351.
6. *Ibid.*, 350.
7. Jonathan Edwards, Sermon on Romans 9:18, in *Works*, 2: 854.
8. Edwards, "A History of the Work of Redemption," in *Works*, 1: 605.
9. Cf. esp. the many accounts of conversions as a result of the witness of awakened believers in Jonathan Edwards, *A Narrative of Surprising Conversions* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 12 ff.
10. Jonathan Edwards, "The Wisdom of God Displayed in the Way of Salvation," in *Works*, 2: 145-47.
11. Jonathan Edwards, Sermon on Hosea 5:15, in *Works*, 2: 830.
12. Edwards, "The Wisdom of God Displayed in the Way of Salvation," in *Works*, 2: 153.
13. Jonathan Edwards, "An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People, in Extraordinary Prayer, for the Revival of Religion and the Advancement of Christ's Kingdom on Earth," in *Works*, 2: 281.
14. *Ibid.*, 290.
15. *Ibid.*,

16. Ibid., 291.
17. Jonathan Edwards, "The True Excellency of a Gospel Minister," in *Works*, 2: 962.
18. Ibid., 956.
19. Ibid., 961
20. Jonathan Edwards, "The Warnings of Scripture Are in the Best Manner Adapted to the Awakening and Conversion of Sinners," in *Works*, 2: 71.
21. Jonathan Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light, Immediately Imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God, Shown to Be Both a Scriptural and a Rational Doctrine," in *Works*, 2: 17.
22. Jonathan Edwards, "The True Excellency of a Gospel Minister" and "Christ the Example of Ministers," in *Works*, 2: 957, 963.
23. Edwards "An Humble Attempt, etc.," in *Works*, 2: 285.
24. Edwards, "Christ the Example of Ministers," in *Works*, 2: 964.
25. Jonathan Edwards, "Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England, etc." in *Works*, 1: 366.