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## DAVID BRAINERD'S DYNAMIC THEOLOGY OF MISSION

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*J*onathan Edwards's *Diary of David Brainerd* has probably done more to inspire missionary endeavor and instruct missionaries on the field than any human writing. Brainerd became the model for several generations of evangelists and missionaries. A few examples can illustrate how Christians looked to his life of dedication and sacrifice as a model. When the American Board of Commissioners for Missions established its first Indian mission among the Cherokees in 1817 the missionaries named the post Brainerd. Early biographers of Adoniram Judson, who brought the gospel of Christ to Burma, could think of no higher tribute for him than to style him "The Baptist Brainerd." The Northampton grave of Brainerd became a hallowed spot, where, as the nineteenth-century historian William Sprague reported, pilgrims beat a well-worn path. Joseph Conforti says, "On one occasion at mid-century when the General Association of Massachusetts met at Northampton, the ministers marched en masse to Brainerd's grave."<sup>1</sup>

Although Brainerd (1718-47) is eternally fixed in the shrines of missionary heroes, I believe that not enough attention has been given to Brainerd's theology. It is not uncommon for historians to focus on his personal dedication to God, his humility, his self-denying spirit, and his intense love for the souls of the "savage" Indians. Brainerd richly deserved this homage, and I would not want in any way to disparage the place his godly character has when we

regard him as one of the great believers of church history. But I also believe that we cannot really separate Brainerd the Christian and Brainerd the missionary from Brainerd the theologian.

First let me point out, as one can very easily see by reading his published writings, that he was a man who was very sensitive theologically. No where do we find David Brainerd acting in such a way as to leave the impression that he believed that what a person believes about God, the Bible and conversion is not important. I know that he was primarily an evangelist, and that he did not produce any major theological works, but he believed that correct views of the great themes of the gospel were important in establishing a valid experience in the life of the believer. He expressed, at times, strong disagreement, not only with the Jesuit missionaries, but also the Quakers and the Moravians. He corrected those who were converted under his ministry when they were apparently being misled by what he considered false teachers.

### THE NEW LIGHTS MOVEMENT

We need to understand that Brainerd was a part of a powerful movement that came in the wake of the First Great Awakening known as the "New Lights" movement, or sometimes it is called, when its theological positions are considered, "The New Divinity." It was Puritanism with a certain slant or certain emphasis. A few of the primary leaders in this movement need to be mentioned. They knew each other intimately, fellowshiped and shared pulpits with each other, and for the most part agreed on certain great principles.

We must begin with Jonathan Edwards (1703-58) who is generally regarded as the greatest theological and philosophical mind ever known on the North American Continent. He was pastor of the Congregational Church at

Northampton, Massachusetts, later a missionary to a group of Indians while pastoring in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and finally, for only a few months before his untimely death, president of the College of New Jersey which eventually became Princeton University.

Another figure in this school was a disciple of Edwards, Samuel Hopkins. He studied in Edwards's home and imbibed his thought. He pastored several churches in New England and came finally to Newport, Rhode Island, where he developed his theological system known as "Hopkinsianism." Hopkins was a man of strong conviction and integrity, but his personal presence was so austere and forbidding that he was not a successful pastor.

A third name that needs to be mentioned is Joseph Bellamy. He was probably Edwards's most intimate friend and associate. Bellamy was a brilliant student who graduated from Yale at age 16. For fifty years he was pastor of the Congregational Church in Bethlehem, Connecticut. This church was organized under his ministry and met at first in a barn. Bellamy was a powerful orator and commanded a large following.

We need also to include in this group the evangelist Gilbert Tennent. He was born in Ireland and emigrated with his father to America in 1718. He was educated by his father and was awarded an honorary Master of Arts by Yale. In 1740 George Whitefield asked him along on one of his preaching tours: this was one of the great events of Tennent's life. He became much like the English evangelist. His preaching was very spiritual, arousing and personal. Thousands were converted through his evangelism.

Brainerd was a personal friend of all these men. Edwards stood with Brainerd in his dispute with the authorities at Yale College and mentored him after he was expelled. Brainerd personally led Hopkins to the Lord when they were students at Yale. He shared close fellowship

with Bellamy and preached for him on numerous occasions. Brainerd admired Tennent when he preached at New Haven during the Great Awakening and went to hear him, against the injunction of Yale officials.

In comparing these men, all of whom had their peculiar talents, we can say that Edwards was the theologian, Hopkins was the social reformer (one of the first American pastors to denounce the slave trade), Bellamy the pastor, Tennent the best preacher, and Brainerd the missionary.

For the most part, the New Divinity preachers were frowned upon and denounced by the "standing order" who were the established clergy in New England. Even Whitefield was not welcome in their pulpits, so he had to preach in the fields and marketplaces. The authorities at Yale, such as Thomas Clap, were opposed to evangelists like Gilbert Tennent and forbade the students to attend their meetings. Brainerd defied this directive and went to the prayer meetings and supported the New Lights preachers in New England. Because of a critical remark he made concerning a professor, he was expelled from school.

What was the controversy between the standing order clergy and the New Lights? One difference was that of style. The leaders of the established churches and schools were sophisticated and educated men who had studied at Yale and Harvard. They promoted a calm, intellectual type of Christianity which consisted of faithfulness to the ordinances of the church. But the New Lights preachers such as Bellamy and Tennent had come from a largely rural background. Their preaching was more emotional and forceful. A hearer of a "standing order" preacher might feel very comfortable while faithfully attending the church. But the revivalists preached so as to cause strong conviction. The term "First Great Awakening" was so named for a very good reason. People by the thousands were awakened to their lost condition and sought God with great intensity. They

often fell under deep emotional distress when they confronted their lost condition. All this was disturbing to the standing order. They passed off revivalists as "enthusiasts" who were upsetting people unnecessarily. They were seeking to promote a calmer, more sedate, kind of faith.

But the differences were more than stylistic. There were some underlying theological and philosophical differences. Jonathan Edwards moved to Northampton in 1724 to serve with his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, for five years in the Congregational Church, before assuming the pastorate in 1729. Stoddard earlier had begun the practice, later adopted by other Puritan churches, of permitting people sprinkled in infancy to take communion, even though unconverted. The implication was that communion was a converting ordinance, and that through this means an unsaved person could draw closer to God or actually be forgiven. This was known as the Half-Way Covenant. God, in other words, is in covenant with the visible church, that is, with people who had been baptized in infancy.

This was definitely not the position of the original Puritans in New England. They maintained that communion was only for those who had formally professed their faith and gave evidence of a change of heart. One can easily see how Stoddard's theology would tend, over a period of time, to fill the churches with unsaved people. If multitudes of people are told that by "using the means," or by submitting to the physical ordinances of the church, they are thereby made Christians, then a significant delusion has been introduced into the church. People think they are Christians because they commune at the sacrament.

This false notion was attacked vehemently, not only by pulpiteers such as Bellamy, but more importantly by the astute and brilliant Edwards. While as a loyal Presbyterian he upheld the rite of infant baptism, he denied that it is a converting ordinance. And he refused to serve communion

to any but the openly converted. From the standpoint of the New Lights preachers the churches had been seriously compromised by false teaching on the design of the ordinances. So they looked upon the church not just as a mission agency but also as a mission field. The scandalous lives of the clergy showed, in their viewpoint, that they were dead and worthless as spiritual leaders. Tennent, a fiery Irishman, scathingly denounced the standing order as being caterpillars, "devouring every green thing." His most famous sermon was "The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry." Such preaching was "eaten up" by the young New Lights students at Yale, and of course it was reflected in their attitudes. It is not surprising that those who were defending the status quo wanted to stifle the new revivalism.

#### BRAINERD'S THEOLOGY

I come now to the main focus of this article: the dynamic of Brainerd's missionary vision. The word "missions" comes from the Latin word referring to sending. A missionary is one who is "sent." Historically, missionary enterprises have involved a huge and complex scheme promoted by many denominations, thousands of people and certainly a great amount of money. Missionary work, if done properly, and if it is successful, involves a great deal of hard work, much time and usually great sacrifice. Some people have a rather romantic view of taking the gospel to the world, but they soon learn that missionary work necessitates study, sweat, and suffering.

Missions is driven by some kind of a motive. The missionary and those who send him or her have a vision, a goal to accomplish. In recent years, however, in the modern church scene which has become not only complex and pluralistic, the traditional missionary vision has been clouded a great deal. In many cases it is still driven, but not driven by a strong enough motive to be sustained. The truth is that

in America there has been a decline in investment in the foreign missionary force on the part of what we call the Main Line Church—the traditional Protestant denominations which grew out of the Protestant Reformation, such as the Episcopal Church, the Methodist Church, the Reformed Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Lutheran Church, and the various Baptist groups.

If you were to ask the average person in an American Main Line Church why we go to the trouble and expense to finance missions abroad and at home you would get different answers, again depending on the vision or motive. If we start at the extreme left we immediately see that for some, missions is a form of cultural exchange. For many traditional Protestants, any thought has long ago vanished that the so-called "heathen" or pagan peoples of the world, who have different forms of religion than ours, are lost, condemned and in danger of eternal destruction. We face tremendous pressures today both within and without the church in the direction of tolerance and acceptance of all religions. This is reflected in the way religion is studied today in most schools, including schools with a religious background. The thought is that all religions have a core of values that are fundamentally the same. Although the rituals and forms and shrines of Buddhists, Muslims, Confucianists, Jews and Christians may be different, at heart they are all the same. They are concerned about loving our neighbors and being kind to each other. The business of the missionary is not to change people from one religion to another, but rather to understand and relate to others. We occasionally we hear of groups of leaders of the great world religions getting together at some prominent place and passing joint resolutions about the need for world peace and understanding, and how they are seeking to cooperate to bring this about.

There is a great push for unity today among the peoples

of the world. The United Nations was established so that various national communities could get together and talk about mutual problems and avoid war. No doubt there is some good in that. It is better to talk than to drop bombs. In this century we have witnessed the rise of ecumenism. Many religious leaders are convinced that the great problem of the denominations of Christianity are their differences. They are working hard to unite all religions under one umbrella, so that the sectarian distinctions are blurred.

This ecumenism extends not merely to so-called Christian groups, such as Protestant and Catholic, but to non-Christian groups as well. The ecumenical gurus pontificate loudly from press and platform about how we need to "reach out to" and cooperate with people of all religious faiths. An ecumenical gathering might see a local Buddhist monk as a "guest" or even as a participant.

Needless to say David Brainerd belonged to a distinctly Puritan and evangelical tradition which saw the situation very differently. When Brainerd beheld the pagan tribes of Indians in New England, New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, he saw them as hopelessly and miserably lost. He, Bellamy, Edwards and others who labored among the Indians referred to them as the "poor heathen" and "pagan." They had great concerns for them and compassion to be sure, but their stated and undisguised intention was to "convert" them, not just to learn about them and relate to them.

There are others in Main Line religion who would not go so far as to say that Christianity is just another of the great religions of the world. They put it like this: The teachings of Jesus Christ are by far the highest moral and ethical system ever devised by the mind of man. Jesus was the great reformer, teacher and prophet who came to lift the nations of the world by his ethical system. In a world of cruelty and hate Jesus came to teach the truth of one loving God who is

the Father of mankind, and that all men are brothers. He urged people to cease their strife and armed warfare and live together in peace. He established a system of teaching, which when truly understood, will change the world by education, psychological enlightenment, and moral reform. Christianity, in other words, is the best of all religions, because it does the most for people. The social gospel, rooted in the thinking of the Baptist pastor and educator, Walter Rauschenbusch, illustrated this approach.

This view of Christianity, though better than the first one I mentioned, was certainly not the one that David Brainerd held. For Brainerd the only way to know God is to be savingly changed by the power of the Holy Spirit. This experience of regeneration leads people to trust in Jesus alone for salvation, for He alone is the way, the truth and the life. Christ is not a better way, or even the best way; He is the only way to heaven. And of course the primary purpose of the gospel is not to change the world and make it a better place but to prepare people for heaven. There may be secondary results from gospel preaching, such as education, medical advance, or such things, but these are only secondary.

There is a third form of motivation or driving force behind missions which I believe is better than the other two, because it has at the core of it an evangelical truth, though it falls short of the full-orbed robust gospel motive. Some Bible-believing churches understand that missions is not just cultural exchange. It is not merely social reform. For them, soul-saving is a rescue operation. The reason missionaries are sent to foreign countries where the gospel has never been preached is to deliver men and women, boys and girls, from the clutches of Satan. They understand that they are in a pitiable and dangerous situation. They are sinking down, down, down to hell unless we reach down with the gospel net and pull them out.

This outlook is captured quite well in a gospel song:

Rescue the perishing, care for the dying,  
Snatch them in pity from sin and the grave:  
Weep o'er the erring ones, lift up the fallen,  
Tell them of Jesus the mighty to save.

This is a realistic and correct approach to evangelism and missions as far as it goes. We find missions in the Scriptures presented in just this light. Jesus called His first disciples to become fishers of men. On one occasion Jesus looked on the multitudes and felt compassion for them, "because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt. 9:36). He then gave this powerful exhortation to the disciples, "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest" (Matt. 9:37-38). Jesus was a perfect model here for compassion and sympathy for lost men in their natural condition. The Hebrew prophet Jeremiah and the apostle Paul expressed their deep concern for their lost countrymen. Jeremiah lamented, "Oh, that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!" (Jer. 9:1). Paul exhibited great emotional trauma when he said, "Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation" (Rom. 10:1), and he claimed to be doing everything in his power to "save some" by the gospel message (1 Cor. 9:22).

But if we understand that the only purpose of the gospel is to meet the needs of men, we are falling far short of comprehending what it is to be a herald of the cross. Yes, one of our motives, a very important one, in doing missions is to save souls, to rescue people from sin and hell. Yes, we are to be moved by sympathy for the lost, and we are to feel their profound needs. But in the diary of David

Brainerd we find that this was not the primary thing that drove him to missions. He was induced by a higher, more profound, goal than simply to do something beneficial for the lost Indians.

Let me explain to you now the vision of this marvelous man who spent and was spent to preach the gospel. For him the goal of missions was not only to relate to or to understand the pagan religions, or to promote a better way of life for them by improving their social conditions, or even to deliver them from the spiritual dangers they were in. The great driving force behind Brainerd's missionary work was to enlarge the visible kingdom of Jesus Christ. He saw missionary work as warfare in which he was a foot soldier who had invaded the enemy territory and had come to stake out a claim for the sovereign Son of God. One of the most significant statements he made in his diary (and it is one which is often repeated in one form or another) was on August 22, 1743, when he was laboring at the first Indian settlement assigned to him. He wrote, "My soul was concerned, not so much for souls as such, but rather for Christ's kingdom, that it might appear in the world, that God might be known as God, in the whole earth."<sup>2</sup> In June 1745, when he was ministering to the Indians at Crossweeksung in New Jersey, he said, "To an eye of reason, every thing that respects the conversion of the Heathen is as dark as midnight; and yet I cannot but hope in God for the accomplishment of something glorious among them. My soul longed much for the advancement of the Redeemer's kingdom on earth."<sup>3</sup>

When Brainerd went into an Indian village where the worship of the earth, or the heavenly bodies, or even demon spirits, prevailed, and where the natives behaved weirdly in their ritual dances and sacrifices, he saw a situation where Satan had set up his own authority. "Satan reigns here," he said to himself. But as he opened the Bible

and preached the great truths of the faith, such as the holiness of God, the sinfulness of man, the claims of God's law and the hopes of the gospel, he was invading the enemy territory in the name of the Lord. When a community of converted Indians was gathered in a town, to Brainerd this was the setting up of the kingdom of God. The Devil was being driven out and deprived of at least some of his space. In other words, evangelism is a form of warfare, a battle not for land or gold or buildings, but for the hearts of men.

This is a biblical vision. Jesus clearly portrayed conversion as an invasion of the sovereign power of God into the area of Satan's dominion. After He had cast out a demon from a man who was mute, He said, "But if I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Luke 11:20). Then He gave this illustration or parable. "A strong man, fully armed, guards his own homestead." But one "stronger than he" comes and overcomes him, takes from him his armor and divides his plunder. Clearly Jesus is saying that this is a picture of conversion. Satan is the strong man who guards his territory, his property. Satan's territory is the heart of man, which is being protected against any outside invader. But Jesus is the One "stronger than he" who comes into the life of a sinner and challenges the Devil's domain. He overcomes the Evil One, casting him out and dividing his plunder.

A somewhat similar picture is given by Paul in 2 Corinthians 10:4 where he portrays the gospel ministry as a kind of warfare. He says, "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses." What are these fortresses? He explains: "We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God" (v. 5). The strongholds are in the realm of the thought, or the mind. He seeks to take "every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (v. 5). This is a powerful description of the "battle

for the mind." The sinner is in rebellion against the rightful sovereign, Jesus Christ. With his heart and mind he defends himself against the claims of Christ by arguments and thoughts that are contrary to the gospel. But Paul says that we are to bring these thoughts into subjection to Christ.

David Brainerd, taught as he was by the Spirit of God, and saturated as he was by the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, went forth among the "savage" Indians, whose minds were the citadel of Satan's control. But he challenged these fortresses with the power of God's Word. He called on the Indians to submit to Jesus and accept His proffered mercy. In many instances, especially at Crossweeksung, he was successful. He saw the Devil driven out, as it were, and Jesus establishing His own rule in the darkened hearts of these people formerly in bondage to demons.

#### BRAINERD'S DOCTRINE OF CONVERSION

There is another aspect to Brainerd's theology which deserves some attention, one which is seldom noticed. The New Divinity ministers, Edwards being the most brilliant thinker in the group, were convinced that any religion that arises from nothing more than self interest is spurious. Edwards taught that regeneration is a divine light within the soul whereby the sinner, whose mind was once darkened by sin and ignorance, sees the glory of God and dedicates himself to that end. Brainerd's own experience of conversion demonstrated this ideal. When Brainerd came to the Lord he was preoccupied with God's glory, God's kingdom and God's attributes. Here is how he put it:

My soul rejoiced with joy unspeakable, to see such a God, such a glorious Being; and I was inwardly pleased and satisfied, that he should be God over all and for ever and ever. My soul was so captivated and delighted with God, that I was

even swallowed up in him; at least to that degree that I had no thought (as I remember) at first, about my own salvation, and scarcely reflected that there was such a creature as myself.<sup>4</sup>

When Edwards read this account of Brainerd's conversion, he saw a perfect illustration or model of what he had been teaching about the nature of "true grace." Any person with a conscience or any person who believes in heaven or hell can set about to gain salvation or eternal life for personal profit, much as a person would pursue any selfish interest such as making a profit in business or killing game on a hunt. There is nothing, said Edwards, religious or righteous about such endeavors. But true grace or true conversion is when a soul, lost in spiritual darkness and in love with the flesh and the world, is turned from selfish interests to devoting itself to the glory of God. But to do this, one must first see God as He is and worship Him for who He is.

Now one might ask, "Well, since the unconverted sinner is dead in sin, and cannot have any holy aspirations, and since all his interests are obviously self-directed, on what basis can we appeal to him? How can we motivate the sinner to seek God when he has no relish for spiritual things?" Edwards and Brainerd would answer that this is exactly the point that the sinner needs to see. He needs to be convicted of his sin of self-will and recognize that the very crux of his lostness and rebellion is his blindness to the glory of God. He should seek from God a revelation of the beauty and loveliness of Christ from God. He is to know and feel that he is undone without God's direct intervention in his life.

Perhaps we might quarrel with the New Divinity ministers about their extremely zealous opposition to "selfish religion." We might argue that Jesus and the apostles did

appeal to selfish interests when they went forth calling on men to "strive for the meat that does not perish" and "flee from the wrath to come." Did not Jesus seek to induce people to come to the Lord from the motive of avoiding "losing one's soul." Yes, this is true. And yet when we come right down to it, whatever motive a lost soul might have in seeking God, and no matter how much we may legitimately appeal to man's own personal interests, we cannot deny that the essence of a regeneration experience consists in having the divine image planted in the soul. And that image is the reflection of God's own devotion to His own glory. As Edwards and Brainerd would say, God is supremely devoted to His own honor and glory. That was the reason He created the world and devised the scheme of redemption. So logically, God would seek to bring His own children, His own redeemed people, into conformity with His own purposes.

In short, if we are regenerated, if we are truly saved, then our dominant motive is to bring praise, honor and glory to the Redeemer. If our religion rises no higher than securing an escape from hell and a ticket to heaven, we have missed the boat. A purely selfish religion can do much for a person. It can cause him to strive, work, and give. It can cause him to sacrifice much, even his very life. But without *agape*—divine love—working in the heart, it is all in vain. It profits nothing.

In many places there is today a revival of interest in Puritan theology, particularly the teachings of Jonathan Edwards. Since Edwards thought that David Brainerd epitomized the qualities he extolled in *Religious Affections* we ought to reinvestigate Brainerd's life and ministry. And since Brainerd was totally in agreement with Edwards's view of the kingdom of God and conversion, and since he implemented this in his evangelistic labors, Brainerd's life and teachings should be carefully studied and evaluated.

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*Notes*

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1. "Jonathan Edwards' Most Popular Work: 'The Life of David Brainerd' and Nineteenth-Century Evangelical Culture," *Church History*, 201.
2. John Thornbury, *David Brainerd, Pioneer Missionary to the American Indians* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1996), 104.
3. *Ibid.*, 123.
4. *Ibid.*, 55.