



# The Forgotten Brainerd

John Brainerd Missionary  
to North American Indians,  
1747-1781

## The Early Years

David Brainerd's life and legacy have become a special part of Christian history for Christians worldwide. We were reminded of this in our last issue of this magazine by considering his mission work among the North American Indians. But one quickly forgets that David's entire ministry lasted only three years before his death at the age of twenty-nine. He is well-remembered and rightly so, since his pioneering mission work became a catalyst for missions and gospel zeal in the future. But one wonders how is it that so little is remembered about his brother, John. Especially in light of the amazing fact that John replaced David as a mission-

ary among the Indians shortly before David's death, and that he remained there for the next thirty-four years, exhibiting the same kind of sacrifice, commitment, and zeal that his older brother had shown. How can we not remember John Brainerd as well?

The Brainerd brothers were born to Mr. and Mrs. Hezekiah Brainerd, a family with a godly heritage and strong Puritan convictions. Nine children were born to Hezekiah and his wife, Dorothy, with David and John being the sixth and seventh children. However, when the boys were still young, the family's stability was cut short by the death of their mother, and five years later, the death of their father. Since David was fourteen and John twelve, their care and education were left with their older five siblings, several of which were already married.

David and John lived with their married siblings the next few years until their enrollment in Yale. John entered Yale in 1742 during David's junior year. The same year that David was somewhat unjustly expelled from the school. David, though not without fault, was made the target of overly severe administrative discipline from the school officials. The matter concerned David's critical comment of a professor made in private conversation that was overheard by a student. The entire event was blown out of proportion, especially in light of David's full confession of guilt and a private apology. When the school officials demanded a public apology for the private infraction, David felt it too severe and would not submit to that. Those in authority would not lessen their position and thus David was expelled in his junior year. John Wesley would later ask the following question regarding those who carried out the severe discipline against Brainerd: "Are these people even Christians at all?"

This grievous event not only greatly affected the Brainerd family, but also caused deep sadness and embarrassment for young John, yet in his first year at Yale. Though forced to remain at Yale without his older brother's presence and guidance, he graduated in 1746 at the age of twenty-six. In all this, God's providence was overruling man's sinful limitations in order to bring about a greater good for Christ's kingdom.

There is ample evidence that David and John were very close and shared genuine fellowship in the things of God. Several letters particularly reveal the nature of their relationship. One such letter was written in April of 1743, from David to John:

I should tell you that I long to see you, but my own experience has taught me that there is no happiness and satisfaction to be enjoyed in earthly friends or any other enjoyment that is not God Himself. Therefore, if the God of all grace is pleased graciously to afford each of us His presence and grace, that we may perform the work He calls us to do until we arrive at our journey's end, then the local distance at which we are held from one another at present is of no great importance to either of us. Alas! The presence of God is what I want and need. For my part, I feel the most vile of any creature living. All you can do for me is pray incessantly that God would make me humble, holy, resigned, and heavenly-minded by my trials. Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Let us run, wrestle and fight, that we may win the prize and obtain that complete happiness of being holy, as God

is holy. So wishing and praying that you may advance in learning and grace, and be made fit for special service for God- I remain,

Your affectionate brother, David Brainerd  
INDIAN MISSIONS

## Missions in New England

Early successful labors among the North American Indians had brought about the formation of various Christian organizations known as societies, which did quality and courageous work in North American missions. One such society was formed in Edinburgh, Scotland, called "The Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge." It was this organization that sent John Sergeant from Yale College to Stockbridge, Massachusetts, then called "a howling wilderness," where he labored for fifteen years until his death in 1749.

When Sergeant arrived in Stockbridge, he found fifty Indians who apparently had little or no cooperation with white men. Upon his death fifteen years later, there were no less than 218 Indians in the village, with good dwellings, developed farms, a church of forty-two members, and a school with one hundred students. It was to Stockbridge that Jonathan Edwards would go after Sergeant's death, and Edwards dismissal as pastor from his church in Northampton.

It was this same Scottish society that commissioned David Brainerd to begin a mission among the Indians at Nassau Township, New York, in 1743. Thus began the brief and legendary work of the famous older Brainerd brother. In light of the great work that God did among the Indians under David's preaching, it is easy to forget that his entire ministry lasted only three years. Yet in those three years of lonely and difficult gospel labor, David Brainerd sowed in tears and reaped in joy. He witnessed one of the purest outpourings of the Holy Spirit since the Day of Pentecost.

## John Replaces David

David Brainerd battled with his health from his late teen years until the end of his life. By the summer of 1746, and at the age of twenty-seven, he began to realize that he might not be long for this world. He was suffering from tuberculosis. Soon his thoughts began to turn toward the possibility of his brother John succeeding him in his work among the Indians. The next year in April of 1747, David had strength enough to travel to Newark, New Jersey, where the Presbytery of New York was meeting for its annual business. He spent part of April 9 in the Presbyterian session meetings, then went in the afternoon to Elizabethtown to see his brother John. From David's diary record, it is clear what occurred over the next two or three days between the two brothers.

April 10-found my brother John there and spent time in conversation with him. April 11-assisted in examining my brother for [ministerial] licensure by the New York Presbytery. April 14-this day my brother went to my people.

Thomas Brainerd, John's biographer, gives some further insight as to how to interpret this brief entry in David's diary:

We doubt whether an interview stirring such thoughts and involving such heart yearnings, ever had a record more brief. Its brevity is suggestive. To these two brothers, duty was everything and their own lives personally were nothing. They met as soldiers on the battlefield. One [David] who had fought in the front rank bravely was now fallen wounded and would return home to die. The other [John], still fresh, strong and hopeful, stood ready to take his dying brother's sword and fight in the same conflict, as God should ordain.

The words and prayers that were shared between them in those few days together would have been very moving to hear. Both of them realized that once John rode off to the Indians, it could likely be the last time they would ever see each other upon earth. The following is an excerpt from David's final letter to John:

Dear brother, I am now just on the verge of eternity, expecting very speedily to appear in the unseen world. I feel myself no more an inhabitant of earth, and sometimes earnestly long to depart and be with Christ. I bless God that He has for some years given me an abiding conviction that it is impossible for any rational creature to enjoy true happiness without being entirely devoted to Him. Under the influence of this conviction, I have in some measure acted and lived. O, that I had done so more! I saw both the excellency and necessity of holiness of life, but never in such a manner as now, when I am just brought to the sides of the grave. . . . yet, blessed be God, I find I have really had, for the most part, such a concern for His glory and the advancement of His kingdom in the world, that it is a satisfaction to me to reflect upon these years. And now, my dear brother, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace . . . may you enjoy the Divine Presence both in private and in public and may the arms of your hands be made strong by the right hand of the mighty God of Jacob. These are the passionate desires and prayers of Your affectionate and dying brother, David Brainerd.

John journeyed alone on horseback toward Albany County, New York. He was twenty-seven years old, had no prior experience as a missionary or as a pastor, and was ignorant of the Indian language. According to human judgment, he was an unlikely candidate for the difficult work ahead of him, but God's ways are not man's ways. God was sending the young Brainerd to continue the heavenly work his brother had begun. At least a day's ride to Kaunawmeek, in Albany County, New York, brought John to the small cabin which David had built with the help of the Indians. In light of who he was, the Indians gave John a warm and joyful welcome. As his biographer writes, "with open arms" they welcomed

him as their new spiritual under-shepherd.

The welcome was real, but John was faced with the reality of leaving all his friends, the intellectual setting of Yale and New England, and all the civilized benefits he had ever known. He was living in a wilderness cabin with only Indians around him. This must have required all the faith and courage he could muster. It must be remembered that only twenty-four months had passed since the elder brother David had found the Indians running wild in drunkenness and darkness. Yet, they had been transformed by a

power not of this world in a genuine outpouring of the Spirit of God. They were humble, teachable, and earnest Christians. In the previous two years, they had received serious and solid preaching, and their progress in Christian growth proved to be genuine. Mr. McKnight, a minister in New York, made this simple remark about the Indian converts: "They put to shame their white brethren in other churches."

It was this group that John had come to live among, but he did not know the language and was yet inexperienced in their culture. David's recently published journal, which John would have just obtained, reveals the difficult circumstances John would have to face:

I have often been obliged to preach in their houses in cold and windy weather, full of smoke, as well as being unspeakably filthy, which has thrown me many times in violent headaches . . . while I have been

preaching, their children cry to such a degree that I could scarcely be heard and their mothers would take no care to quieten them; at the same time, some men would be laughing during the sermon or mocking divine truths, with others playing with their dogs, all this, not out of spite or prejudice, but for lack of better manners.

John began his labors on or near April 15, 1747. By the time he arrived, the revival which had occurred within the previous year had begun to gradually decrease, but was certainly not extinguished. This testimony actually proves the original purity and power of the work of the Holy Spirit from two years earlier. The Indians were now living out their Christian lives, which had begun with their clear conversion during a time of God-sent revival. Now, two years later, John could say that "the work of divine grace still went on among the Indians."

Of his first labors from April until September, few details are available. He seems to have entered into the work in the same pattern and heart which David had exhibited. Nevertheless, in July, John received news of his brother's growing weakness. He left Bethel (the new name of the Indian settlement) to be at David's side in the home of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards in Northampton, Massachusetts. John stayed only a week and then returned to his work, but by October, he had a strong desire to see David again, and made another trip to Northampton. He arrived on October 7, a few days before his brother's death on October 19. After the funeral, John returned to Bethel and his Indian flock. Before David's



death, there had been some hope for his recovery, but now, John was returning as the permanent pastor among David's beloved Indians. What he must have felt in that return journey God only knows. But God was with him and that would prove to be sufficient.

Five months after David's death, Jonathan Edwards wrote a letter to Mr. James Robe in Scotland, regarding the Brainerds' work among the Indians:

We have had accounts from time to time of religion being in a flourishing state in the Indian congregation of New Jersey, under the care of Mr. John Brainerd; of the congregation's increasing by the access of Indians from distant places; of a work of awakening being carried on among the unconverted, and of additions made to the number of the hopefully converted. Mr. Brainerd was at my house a little while ago, and represented this to be the present state of things in that congregation.

After two years of ministry among the Indians, John had proved, by God's grace, the certainty and reality of his own calling. He went about his work with what his biographer calls "eminent success". Though his older brother was a difficult man to follow, John proved himself to be his equal in fidelity and faithfulness. One later biographer records:

Mr. John Brainerd traveled to the Forks of Delaware and to Wyoming several times, to induce the Indians to leave their unsettled life and dwell near him. Numbers came, from time to time, but he succeeded in doing little more than civilizing them. In 1751 he had some special success, and in October, 1752, he had forty families near him, and thirty-seven communicants. There were fifty children in the school. In the same year, with only one attendant, he spent a fortnight on the Susquehanna. Their horses were stolen, the guide was too lame to go on foot, and they remained three days where there was no house. That year, also, the General Court of Connecticut, on the petition of the Correspondents, granted a brief for a general collection to aid him in his school.

In commenting about his own work among the Indians, John Brainerd wrote the following:

As to the success that has attended my labors, I can say but little. It is a time wherein the influences of the Divine Spirit are mournfully withheld. I think, however, I have ground to hope that some good has been done among both Indians and white people, and the prospects of further usefulness are very considerable, if proper means could be used.

When John reached his forty-ninth year of age, David had been dead twenty-two years. After so many years of hard labor, John was himself now facing increasing health problems. He was going out less and less on extended mission travels among the Indians, and he began to establish preaching points among the scattered white people. Yet, even in ill health, he preached more than 500 sermons in the following ten years.

In the latter half of his life, John preached the Gospel with

zeal and self-denial over a vast neglected area of New Jersey. The astounding fact is that he established at least seven white churches in addition to his full-time labors among the Indian tribes. Seven other places were also regularly and frequently visited by him. At the age of thirty-four, he had been elected a trustee of the College of Princeton and served faithfully in this capacity for twenty-six years until the end of his life. In his final years, he was zealous, faithful, and unceasing in his preaching of the Gospel of God's grace. He battled through personal discouragements, spiritual depression, and regular physical infirmities. Nevertheless, he remained faithful to the end. He gave himself to the Indians for the sake of the Gospel for more than thirty years.

## John's Death and Legacy

John Brainerd would have died among the Indians he loved if war had not broken out. A British army captured the area and caused him to be removed to Deerfield, Connecticut. He preached there until his death, though he was never officially installed as their pastor. The people loved him to such a degree that they buried him under their meeting place with a marble slab bearing the words: "Beneath here moldereth the dust of the Rev. John Brainerd-died March, 1781." He was sixty-one years old. His will began with these words:

I, John Brainerd, minister of the gospel of Christ, at present laboring under some bodily indisposition, but through the grace of God, blest with the fullest use of reason, think it my indispensable duty to Christ and my family, to signify my will in writing. First of all, I give and recommend my soul into the hands of God in and through Jesus Christ, firmly relying on His name, merits and righteousness for pardon, justification, and eternal life.

It is not surprising that different sources would later compare the Brainerd brothers. Dr. Field, who was the minister of the congregation in which the Brainerds' parents resided, was to say of John, "The tradition in Haddam is that he was as pious a man as his brother David, but not equal to him in ability." There is no evidence that the Indian believers made any comparison between the two men. Certainly in both men there was biblical orthodoxy, humility, spiritual passion, self-denial, and prayerfulness.

The heritage that David and John left behind did not end with their deaths. In the history of Haddam, Connecticut, their birthplace and first home, it is recorded that the following Brainerds became Gospel ministers: David, John, Elijah, Eleazar, Chilliab, Nehemiah, Israel, Israel II, James, and David S. Brainerd. (quoted in the *Contributions to Ecclesiastical History of Connecticut*, New Haven: 1861).

We will close with a quote from Thomas Brainerd about John. It is the best commendation that a man can receive:

He was a lover of all good men and seems to have hated nothing but sin; he was a holy man of God, to which his whole life bore witness.

Two brothers- John and David. Of whom the world was not worthy. May God raise up such brothers once again in our day, who live not for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again to give life to the peoples of all nations.