

Consequence 2: Three Testimonies

Things could only get worse in New England. And they did. Let us move on a couple of generations.

The testimony of Jonathan Edwards

In passing, I have referred to Edwards' difficulties at Northampton, New England, in the 1740s. He tried to bring the church away from the unscriptural position it had adopted down the years over its procedures for taking in members and administering the Lord's supper. Members were received without evidence of personal, saving faith; baptism when an infant, lack of scandal, and a measure of head knowledge of the Christian religion was considered sufficient. Thus the inevitable 'church within a Church' was established.

It was no new problem. By 1707, the aforementioned 'venerable Stoddard' had published his view that the non-sanctified could take the Lord's supper; two years later he declared that the table is open to those who 'be destitute of a saving work of God's Spirit on their hearts'.²¹ These downward steps, of course, ruined church life. From then on, the unconverted would have the say in the discipline of the church, including that of the converted members! Not only was this a spiritual impossibility, it confirmed many in their carnal ways, and contributed directly to their damnation. Naturally – as night follows day – the next step was to allow unconverted men into the ministry. Indeed, Stoddard argued that unconverted ministers could perform certain duties lawfully. As a result of all this:

The difference between the church and the world was vanishing away. Church discipline was neglected, and the growing laxness of morals was invading the churches. And yet never, perhaps, had the expectation of reaching heaven at last been more general, or more confident... The hold

started out all for purity but had to compromise. His son, Increase Mather, was against his father's change, but he too had to accept the compromise. And Cotton Mather criticised his father's (Increase's) resistance to his grandfather's (Richards's) change. For more on this history, see Perry Miller pp68-104; Morgan pp113-138; Middlekauff pp35-57,113-161,191-368; Cotton Mather pp276-315.

²¹ Stoddard and the Mathers (Increase and Cotton) were at daggers drawn over these matters, although a kind of peace was patched up. See Middlekauff pp115-138; Perry Miller pp226-289,467.

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of truth on the consciences of men was sadly diminished. The young were abandoning themselves to frivolity, and to amusements of dangerous tendency.²²

Reader, that was written of the churches of New England in the early 18th century; could the same not be written about not a few churches of Old England in this generation?²³ And, let me remind you, even though ‘occasional revivals... and the preaching of sound doctrine’ had slowed the pace of decline in New England, they did not stop it. Those today who admit the problem exists in our churches, but cling to the hope that revival or sound preaching will sort it all out for us, are grievously mistaken. We need sound preaching and revival, yes, but nothing will replace the proper ordering of our churches, proper – biblical – discipline. Nothing! And while we cannot organise a revival, we can and must put our house in order. I do not appeal for one or the other – we need both. Let us do our duty before it is too late.

It is a sad catalogue I have put before you, is it not? I do not say that those who hold to infant baptism must inevitably come to such a pitiful state, and I have admitted that many so-called Baptist churches are rotten at the core, and are no churches at all.²⁴ But I do say – it is undeniable! – that the unscriptural doctrine and practice of infant baptism was at or near the root of the troubles in New England. Nor can it be gainsaid that infant baptism *per se* did nothing to put a stop to the wicked fandango.

And so to Edwards. Coming to see that the church was in a shocking condition, Edwards deplored that ‘a considerable number... have woefully deceived themselves’. And they had not been unaided in this self-deception. Their theologians had given them the tools with which to destroy themselves. Edwards recognised it and admitted he was responsible. But he had now woken up! By 1744, he was convinced that something had to be done; the Northampton church must return to the New Testament order. Mere sincerity and

²² Tracy pp3-8.

²³ In this comment, and the ones like it which follow, I am speaking of evangelical churches whatever their practice on baptism.

²⁴ Increasingly, such churches are becoming little more than social clubs. I challenge all such: get rid of the extra-scriptural social activities you have introduced to boost attendance, to ‘evangelise’ and produce ‘fellowship’, and return to Acts 2:42, and see how many attenders remain.

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acknowledgement of general Christian principles were not enough; he wanted a credible profession of saving faith, and he proposed that the church should stop the knowing admission of the unregenerate. He acknowledged, of course, that some unconverted people would get in – they did in New Testament days – but not knowingly (Jude 4).²⁵

Even so, Edwards' view still fell short of the New Testament. He continued to allow baptised infants 'to be in some sort members of the Christian church', and he continued to divide the church into those members who are 'in complete standing', as opposed to those who are not. This unscriptural notion of 'full' membership had not yet died; indeed, it is alive and kicking today. Edwards also failed to comprehend how infant baptism impinges upon church life, and he side-stepped it when he wrote on the qualifications for membership and participation in the Lord's supper. He did not seem to appreciate that infant baptism was an integral part of the problem he was dealing with. He ought to have done. After all, he had admitted that baptised infants might easily grow up destitute of grace, but even so he thought it was 'generally allowed' that they should 'not be cast out of the church'.²⁶ It may be that Edwards was correct in speaking for the general view of infant baptisers, but he was most decidedly out of step with the New Testament, which knows nothing of infant membership.

Despite the compromises, Edwards still failed in his attempt to reform the Northampton church. It is hard to imagine how the result could have been different; at least a majority of the members were unconverted. To ask them to vote for the introduction of New Testament principles was like asking turkeys to vote for Christmas (or, rather, Thanksgiving)! Edwards was forced to admit defeat, painfully confessing in his farewell sermon: 'I have reason to fear I leave multitudes in this large congregation [it was more than seven hundred] in a Christless state'.²⁷ Edwards' biographer made a terrible but true comment when he remarked: To expect the unregenerate to return to the New Testament was asking them 'to relinquish the only resting place which human ingenuity had discovered, in which an unconverted person might – for a time at least – remain unconverted, both securely

²⁵ Edwards lxi, p453; Iain Murray: *Edwards* pp274-275,335-336.

²⁶ Edwards p434.

²⁷ Edwards ccv; Iain Murray: *Edwards* p338.

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and lawfully'.²⁸ I have only one quarrel with that last statement. I object to the word 'had'. I am writing this book because, sadly – horrifically – this sort of thing is no quirk of history. Human ingenuity continues to devise and use these methods to find resting places for unconverted men and women. The appalling truth is, these resting places are churches so-called, and the human ingenuity is being used by the leaders of those churches.

Edwards belatedly came to the view that when churches knowingly admit the unconverted to membership and the Lord's supper, the church is exposed to the gravest danger. But it is far worse than that. When churches move away from the New Testament, eventually the gospel testimony is ruined, and this will lead to the damnation of sinners. Above all, the glory of God is tarnished. Credit is to be given to Edwards for the stand he made, and for the price he was willing to pay. Oh! that all who read these pages were willing to face the issues squarely and answer the questions which they pose – answer them now as they will one day have to answer before God. I agree with Edwards when he said that the devil knows how important this matter is: 'I believe the devil is greatly alarmed by the opposition made to the lax doctrine of admission to the Christian church'.²⁹ He is indeed. My readers, let us arise and greatly alarm the devil in our generation!

So much for the 17th and 18th centuries. Now for the 20th.

The testimony of Martyn Lloyd-Jones

When Lloyd-Jones became a minister in Aberavon in the 1920s, the Presbyterian Church Secretary was E.T.Rees. Although Mr Rees was a member of the church and a church officer, he was unconverted. He knew absolutely nothing of regeneration, nothing at all – neither in theory nor in practice. It is said that he 'believed in a type of evangelical religion, but he was later to feel that he had been as ignorant of the doctrine of regeneration as Nicodemus'.³⁰

I say this is an example of the inevitable outcome of the practice of infant baptisers. I fully acknowledge that Baptist churches can have unregenerate members and officers. I unreservedly accept that. I

²⁸ Iain Murray: *Edwards* p339

²⁹ Edwards cxxxiii; Iain Murray: *Edwards* p347.

³⁰ Iain Murray: *Lloyd-Jones* Vol.1 p164.