

Jonathan Edwards, Infant Baptism and Church Membership: A Warning

Introduction

In a previous article,¹ I showed that when the original settlers reached New England in the 1630s they were determined to set up infant-baptising churches which consisted of regenerate members only, and which would sustain this principle in the future. Nevertheless, they knew that this would not be easy. They would have to be vigilant, and remove any members that showed they were unregenerate. Their preachers, Thomas Shepard in particular, warned them from the pulpit and with his pen that they would have to carry out this painful discipline if they were to maintain the original purity of their churches.

It did not take long, however, before their hopes lay in ruins. Why? Because, with the passing of time, the New England churches came up against the inevitable problem which all infant baptisers have to face with their view of ‘the covenant’;² namely, how to cope with the fall out of infant baptism. Even if they took the painful step of removing from membership those adults who remained unregenerate – despite the fact that they had been baptised (sprinkled) as infants, and who, therefore, were in some way or another ‘in or under the covenant’ – what were they to do with *their* children? Were *those* infants in the covenant? Could *they* be baptised? Could *they* be church members? And, with the passing of a few more years, what about *their* children? And so on. Who was ‘in the covenant’ and who was not? And what did this mean for church life?

After a protracted series of tortuous arguments and counter arguments, by the end of the 17th century these New England churches were baptising in a virtually promiscuous way under

¹ For this present article, I have lightly edited my *Infant Baptism Tested* pp267-268,286-289.

² I say ‘view’ but the fact is there is a spectrum of views of what ‘the covenant’ is and what ‘being in the covenant’ means.

the terms of the fudge known as ‘the half-way covenant’, and, more or less, keeping all and sundry as church members in some form or another. As a result, those churches, which the founders had hoped would be maintained as entirely regenerate, now comprised a mixture of regenerate and unregenerate members, some infant, some adult, some of whom could take communion, and some not. It was a shambles. And worse.³

Solomon Stoddard at Northampton

In 1670, Solomon Stoddard (1643-1729) became the minister at Northampton, Massachusetts, in a church that was thoroughly enmeshed in the New England way. In fact, Stoddard was to play a major role in the way things developed in the 18th century. And develop they did!

Stoddard, along with ‘many other great divines’, trying to grapple with the consequences of infant baptism and ‘the covenant’, came to the remarkable conclusion that ‘even excommunicated persons are still members of the church of God; and some suppose, the worshippers of Baal in Israel, even those who were bred up such from their infancy, remained still members of the church of God’. So wrote Jonathan Edwards, commenting on the New England way. Edwards added that some even held that Papists who continue to practise their idolatry and superstitions ‘still are in the visible church of Christ’.⁴ It takes one’s breath away! Excommunicated members, Baal worshippers and practicing Papists still members of ‘the visible church’. And all depending on the unscriptural principles of infant baptism and ‘the visible church’.⁵

³ See my ‘Glass Eyes and Wooden Legs in 17th Century New England’.

⁴ Jonathan Edwards: *An Humble Inquiry into the Rules of the Word of God Concerning the Qualifications Requisite to a Complete Standing and Full Communion in the Visible Christian Church* in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol.1, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, reprinted 1976, p434. Edwards’ title says it all! See below.

⁵ The visible church? The Westminster Confession, Chapter XXV, puts it this way: ‘The visible church... consists of all those throughout the

By 1707, the ‘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’.⁶ He distorted the supper into ‘a saving ordinance’, hoping that as the unregenerate broke bread they might be converted! When all the time, Scripture pronounces a severe condemnation on unworthy partakers (1 Cor. 11:27-33). The New England ministers were giving the people the tools to break Scripture and bring themselves under the condemnation of God!

These downward steps, of course, ruined church life, and ruined many of the men and women caught up in it. From then on, the unconverted would have their 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 of truth on the consciences of men was sadly diminished. The young were

world that profess the true religion; and of their children’ (*The Confession of Faith* and other documents of the Westminster Assembly, The Publication Committee of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1967, p107).

⁶ Stoddard and the Mathers (Increase and Cotton) were at daggers drawn over these matters, although a kind of peace was patched up. See Robert Middlekauff: *The Mathers: Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals, 1596-1728*, Oxford University Press, London, 1971, pp115-138; Perry Miller: *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1961, pp226-289,467.

abandoning themselves to frivolity, and to amusements of dangerous tendency.⁷

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 (and elsewhere?) in this generation?⁸ And, let me remind you, even though the founders had started out with such high ideals, and their preachers had preached with vehemence for vigilant purity, and ‘occasional revivals... and the preaching of sound doctrine’ had slowed the pace of decline in New England, none of this – nor any Confession of faith – stopped the grievous decline. Those today who admit that the problem of tolerated carnality 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, the proper – biblical – discipline of ourselves. 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 admit that many so-called Baptist churches are rotten at the core, and are no churches at all.⁹ 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*

⁷ Joseph Tracy: *The Great Awakening*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1976, pp3-8.

⁸ In this comment, and the ones like it which follow, I am speaking of evangelical churches whatever their practice on baptism.

⁹ 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 the spirit of discipline required by the apostle in 1 Cor. 5, and see how many attenders remain.

se did nothing to put a stop to the wicked fandango. Nor will it today.

And so to Edwards himself.

Enter Jonathan Edwards

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), Stoddard's grandson, was born into this system, and in 1727 he became assistant minister to his grandfather. In due course, Edwards followed his grandfather as the full minister at Northampton. And he carried on where his grandfather had left off.

But...

The main details of what happened during the next few years can be summarised thus:

In the 1740s, Edwards was having a difficult time at Northampton, as he was trying to face up to the legacy of the previous hundred years. He wanted to bring the church away from the unscriptural position it had adopted down the years in the way it took in and kept members, and administered the Lord's supper. Members were received without evidence of personal, saving faith; baptism (sprinkling) 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.¹⁰ Communion – which Christ clearly intended as a memorial for participation by true believers only – had been turned into a disgraceful farce.

Edwards had had more than enough of the sorry business. He wanted reformation. 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 their self-deception: their theologians had given them the tools with which to destroy themselves! Edwards

¹⁰ For more on this, see *Battle for the Church:1517-1644* (second edition) pp170-173. I always have difficulty over church and Church. In general, I try to keep the lower case to its biblical use, *ekklēsia*, while the upper case refers to its man-made, Christendom corruption.

recognised it, and admitted his responsibility. But now he had 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 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).¹¹

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. Thus the unscriptural notion of 'full' membership did not die at Northampton, even under the ministry of Jonathan Edwards. Indeed, it is alive and kicking in contemporary churches, many churches of whom have 'a church within a Church'. Furthermore, Edwards, failing to comprehend how infant baptism impinges upon – dominates – church life, side-stepped the issue 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'.¹² It may be that Edwards was correct in speaking for the general view of infant baptisers, both then and now, 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

¹¹ Edwards lxi, p453; Iain H. Murray: *Jonathan Edwards*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, reprinted 1992, pp274-275,335-336.

¹² Edwards p434.

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’.¹³ Edwards’ biographer made a terrible but true comment when he remarked that 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 and lawfully’.¹⁴

I have only one quarrel with that last statement. I object to the word ‘had’. I am writing this article because, sadly – horrifically – this sort of thing is no quirk of history. Human ingenuity continues to devise and use 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 in question 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 – even though it was too little, too late – and for the price he was willing to pay. Oh! that all who read this 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

¹³ Edwards ccv; Murray p338.

¹⁴ Murray p339.

admission to the Christian church'.¹⁵ He is indeed. My readers,
let us arise and greatly alarm the devil in our generation!

¹⁵ Edwards cxxxiii; Murray p347.