

Viewpoint 7A  
*The Great Awakening Is a Welcome  
 Religious Revival (1743)*

An Assembly of Pastors of Churches in New England

INTRODUCTION *For several decades beginning in the 1720s, a religious revival, later called the Great Awakening, swept the American colonies. Traveling preachers such as George Whitefield and Gilbert Tennent, as well as some Puritan ministers such as Jonathan Edwards, emphasized the importance of an emotional commitment to Christianity and stirred the religious passions of thousands. Flamboyant preaching, speaking in tongues, lively singing, and dramatic conversions were all part of these religious gatherings. The traveling evangelists often left in their wake divisions between new converts and those who looked at the emotionalism of the phenomenon with suspicion. In New England, the Great Awakening stirred debate over whether this religious movement helped the colonies live up to their Puritan heritage or represented a dangerous diversion. The following viewpoint is taken from a statement of New England ministers who convened in July 1743 and who decided to support the Great Awakening and those affected by the religious revival. The ministers do caution against deviations from Puritan orthodoxy, including Antinomianism (the belief that personal revelations from God supersede human laws and church teachings), and Arminianism (the belief that humans can accept or reject salvation independent of God's will). In general, however, the ministers conclude that the revival and the behaviors it has inspired are the work of God.*

*What positive aspects of the Great Awakening do the ministers describe? Judging from their listings of possible religious errors people might fall into, how do you think their views may have been affected by concern over their position in the community as ministers?*

When Christ is pleased to come into his church in a plentiful effusion of his Holy Spirit, by whose powerful influences the ministration of the word is attended with

From *The Testimony and Advice of an Assembly of Pastors of Churches in New England, at a Meeting in Boston, July 7, 1743, Occasioned by the Late Happy Revival of Religion in Many parts of the Land.*

uncommon success, salvation-work carried on in an eminent manner, and his kingdom, which is within men, and consists in righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, is notably advanced, this is an event which, above all others, invites the notice and bespeaks the praises of the Lord's people, and should be declared abroad for a memorial of the divine grace; as it tends to confirm the divinity of a despised gospel, and manifests the work of the Holy Spirit in the application of redemption, which too many are ready to reproach. . . .

But if it is justly expected of all who profess themselves the disciples of Christ, that they should openly acknowledge and rejoice in a work of this nature, wherein the honor of their divine Master is so much concerned; how much more is it to be looked for from those who are employed in the ministry of the Lord Jesus, and so stand in a special relation to him, as servants of his household, and officers in his kingdom! These stand as watchmen upon the walls of Jerusalem; and it is their business not only to give the alarm of war when the enemy is approaching, but to sound the trumpet of praise when the King of Zion cometh, in a meek triumph, having salvation.

For these and other reasons, we, whose names are hereunto annexed, pastors of churches in New England, met together in Boston, July 7, 1743, think it our indispensable duty, (without judging or censuring such of our brethren as cannot at present see things in the same light with us,) in this open and conjunct manner to declare, to the glory of sovereign grace, our full persuasion, either from what we have seen ourselves, or received upon credible testimony, that there has been a happy and remarkable revival of religion in many parts of this land, through an uncommon divine influence; after a long time of great decay and deadness, and a sensible and very awful withdraw of the Holy Spirit from his sanctuary among us.

Though the work of grace wrought on the hearts of men by the word and Spirit of God, and which has been more or less carried on in the church from the beginning, is always the same for substance, and agrees, at one time and another, in one place or person and another, as to the main strokes and lineaments of it, yet the present work appears to be remarkable and extraordinary.

#### PROOF OF GOD'S WORK

*On account of the numbers wrought upon.* We never before saw so many brought under soul concern, and with distress making the inquiry, What must we do to be saved? And these persons of all characters and ages. *With regard to the suddenness and quick progress of it.* Many persons and places were surprised with the gracious visit together, or near about the same time; and the

heavenly influence diffused itself far and wide like the light of the morning. *Also in respect of the degree of operation,* both in a way of terror and in a way of consolation; attended in many with unusual bodily effects. . . .

As to those whose inward concern has occasioned extraordinary outward distresses, the most of them, when we came to converse with them, were able to give, what appeared to us, a rational account of what so affected their minds; viz., a quick sense of their guilt, misery, and danger; and they would often mention the passages in the sermons they heard, or particular texts of Scripture, which were set home upon them with such a powerful impression. And as to such whose joys have carried them into transports and extasies, they in like manner have accounted for them, from a lively sense of the danger they hoped they were freed from, and the happiness they were now possessed of; such clear views of divine and heavenly things, and particularly of the excellencies and loveliness of Jesus Christ, and such sweet tastes of redeeming love, as they never had before. The instances were very few in which we had reason to think these affections were produced by visionary or sensible representations, or by any other images than such as the Scripture itself presents unto us.

And here we think it not amiss to declare, that in dealing with these persons, we have been careful to inform them, that the nature of conversion does not consist in these passionate feelings; and to warn them not to look upon their state safe, because they have passed out of deep distress into high joys, unless they experience a renovation of nature, followed with a change of life, and a course of vital holiness. Nor have we gone into such an opinion of the bodily effects with which this work has been attended in some of its subjects, as to judge them any signs that persons who have been so affected, were then under a saving work of the Spirit of God. No; we never so much as called these bodily seizures, convictions; or spake of them as the immediate work of the Holy Spirit. Yet we do not think them inconsistent with a work of God upon the soul at that very time; but judge that those inward impressions which come from the Spirit of God, those terrors and consolations of which he is the author, may, according to the natural frame and constitution which some persons are of, occasion such bodily effects; and therefore that those extraordinary outward symptoms are not an argument that the work is delusive, or from the influence and agency of the evil spirit.

With respect to numbers of those who have been under the impressions of the present day, we must declare there is good ground to conclude they are become real Christians; the account they give of their conviction and consolation agreeing with the standard of the Holy Scriptures, corresponding with the experiences of the saints, and evidenced by the external fruits of holiness

in their lives; so that they appear to those who have the nearest access to them, as so many epistles of Christ, written, not with ink, but by the Spirit of the living God, attesting to the genuineness of the present operation, and representing the excellency of it. . . .

Thus we have freely declared our thoughts as to the work of God, so remarkably revived in many parts of this land. And now, we desire to bow the knee in thanksgiving to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that our eyes have seen and our ears heard such things. And while these are our sentiments, we must necessarily be grieved at any accounts sent abroad, representing this work as all enthusiasm, delusion and disorder.

#### WARNINGS OF SATAN'S DEVICES

Indeed, it is not to be denied, that in some places many irregularities and extravagances have been permitted to accompany it, which we would deeply lament and bewail before God, and look upon ourselves obliged, for the honor of the Holy Spirit, and of his blessed operations on the souls of men, to bear a public and faithful testimony against; though at the same time it is to be acknowledged with much thankfulness, that in other places, where the work has greatly flourished, there have been few, if any, of these disorders and excesses. But who can wonder, if at such a time as this, Satan should intermingle himself, to hinder and blemish a work so directly contrary to the interests of his own kingdom? Or if, while so much good seed is sowing, the enemy should be busy to sow tares? We would therefore, in the bowels of Jesus, beseech such as have been partakers of this work, or are zealous to promote it, that they be not ignorant of Satan's devices; that they watch and pray against errors and misconduct of every kind, lest they blemish and hinder that which they desire to honor and advance. Particularly,

That they do not make secret impulses on their minds, without a due regard to the written word, the rule of their duty: a very dangerous mistake, which, we apprehend, some in these times have gone into. That to avoid Arminianism, they do not verge to the opposite side of Antinomianism; while we would have others take good heed to themselves, lest they be by some led into, or fixed in, Arminian tenets, under the pretense of opposing Antinomian errors. That laymen do not invade the ministerial office, and under a pretense of exhorting, set up preaching; which is very contrary to gospel order, and tends to introduce errors and confusion into the church. That ministers do not invade the province of others, and in ordinary cases preach in another's parish without his knowledge, and against his consent; nor encourage raw and indiscreet young candidates, in rushing into particular places, and preaching publicly or privately, as some have done, to the no small disrepute and damage of the work in places where it once promised

to flourish. Though at the same time we would have ministers show their regard to the spiritual welfare of their people, by suffering them to partake of the gifts and graces of able, sound and zealous preachers of the word, as God in his providence may give opportunity therefor; being persuaded God has in this day remarkably blessed the labors of some of his servants who have travelled in preaching the gospel of Christ. That people beware of entertaining prejudices against their own pastors, and do not run into unscriptural separations. That they do not indulge a disputatious spirit, which has been attended with mischievous effects; nor discover a spirit of censoriousness, uncharitableness, and rash judging the state of others than which scarce any thing has more blemished the work of God amongst us. And while we would meekly exhort both ministers and Christians, so far as is consistent with truth and holiness, to follow the things that make for peace; we would most earnestly warn all sorts of persons not to despise these outpourings of the Spirit, lest a holy God be provoked to withhold them, and instead thereof, to pour out upon this people the vials of his wrath, in temporal judgments and spiritual plagues; and would call upon every one to improve this remarkable season of grace, and put in for a share of the heavenly blessings so liberally dispensed.

#### Viewpoint 7B *The Great Awakening Has Led to Harmful Religious Zealotry (1742)*

Charles Chauncy (1705–1787)

INTRODUCTION *The Great Awakening—the religious revival movement that swept the American colonies in the middle of the eighteenth century—often caused many divisions within communities and their churches. Congregations split between factions of the newly converted (the New Lights) and those who looked on the emotional displays of the Great Awakening with suspicion (the Old Lights). Revivalist preacher Gilbert Tennent called most practicing clergy “dead formalists” who were not true Christians. Some ministers responded by barring Tennent and other preachers from speaking in their churches, and accusing them of being charlatans, deceivers, or even workers of the devil. A prominent clerical critic of the Great Awakening was Charles Chauncy, a minister of the First Church in Boston. In the following viewpoint, taken from a sermon published in Boston in 1742, Chauncy describes the harms of religious “enthusiasm” engendered by the Great Awakening. Like many other detractors, Chauncy criticized the emotionalism and mysticism of the movement, which he felt displaced reason and learning.*

*How does Chauncy describe “enthusiasm” and contrast it with “the proper work of the Spirit”? The Great Awakening was noteworthy for increasing the*

*involvement of women, slaves, and the uneducated poor in religious life; some historians have argued that Chauncy's views reflect his class position as a conservative upper-class white male. What, if anything, do you find in the viewpoint to support this argument?*

I shall take occasion to discourse to you upon the following Particulars.

I. I shall give you some account of Enthusiasm, in its nature and influence.

II. Point you to a rule by which you may judge of persons, whether they are under the influence of Enthusiasm.

III. Say what may be proper to guard you against this unhappy turn of mind.

The whole will then be follow'd with some suitable Application.

*The Enthusiast. . . fancies himself immediately inspired by the Spirit of God, when all the while, he is under no other influence than that of an over-heated imagination.*

I am in the first place, to give you some account of Enthusiasm. And as this a thing much talk'd of at present, more perhaps than at any other time that has pass'd over us, it will not be tho't unseasonable, if I take some pains to let you into a true understanding of it.

The word, from its Etymology, carries in it a good meaning, as signifying inspiration from God: in which sense, the prophets under the old testament, and the apostles under the new, might properly be called Enthusiasts. For they were under a divine influence, spake as moved by the Holy Ghost, and did such things as can be accounted for in no way, but by recurring to an immediate extraordinary power, present with them.

#### THE BAD SIDE OF ENTHUSIASM

But the word is more commonly used in a bad sense, as intending an imaginary, not a real inspiration: according to which sense, the Enthusiast is one, who has a conceit of himself as a person favoured with the extraordinary presence of the Deity. He mistakes the workings of his own passions for divine communications, and fancies himself immediately inspired by the Spirit of God, when all the while, he is under no other influence than that of an over-heated imagination.

The cause of this enthusiasm is a bad temperament of the blood and spirits; 'tis properly a disease, a sort

From *Enthusiasm Described and Caution'd Against*, by Charles Chauncy (Boston, 1742).

of madness: And there are few; perhaps none at all, but are subject to it, tho' none are so much in danger of it as those, in whom melancholy is the prevailing ingredient in their constitution. In these it often reigns; and sometimes to so great a degree, that they are really beside themselves, acting as truly by the blind impetus of a wild fancy, as tho' they had neither reason nor understanding.

And various are the ways in which their enthusiasm discovers itself.

Sometimes, it may be seen in their countenance. A certain wildness is discernable in their general look and air; especially when their imaginations are mov'd and fired.

Sometimes, it strangely loosens their tongues, and gives them such an energy, as well as fluency and volubility in speaking, as they themselves, by their utmost efforts, can't so much as imitate, when they are not under the enthusiastick influence.

Sometimes, it affects their bodies, throws them into convulsions and distortions, into quakings and tremblings. This was formerly common among the people called Quakers. I was myself, when a Lad, an eye witness to such violent agitations and foamings, in a boisterous female speaker, as I could not behold but with surprize and wonder.

Sometimes, it will unaccountably mix itself with their conduct, and give it such a tincture of that which is freakish or furious, as none can have an idea of, but those who have seen the behaviour of a person in a phrenzy.

Sometimes, it appears in their imaginary peculiar intimacy with heaven. They are, in their own opinion, the special favourites of God, have more familiar converse with him than other good men, and receive immediate, extraordinary communications from him. The tho'ts, which suddenly rise up in their minds, they take for suggestions of the Spirit; their very fancies are divine illuminations; nor are they strongly inclin'd to any thing, but 'tis an impulse from God, a plain revelation of his will.

And what extravagances, in this temper of mind, are they not capable of, and under the specious pretext too of paying obedience to the authority of God? Many have fancied themselves acting by immediate warrant from heaven, while they have been committing the most undoubted wickedness. There is indeed scarce any thing so wild, either in speculation or practice, but they have given into it: They have, in many instances, been blasphemers of God, and open disturbers of the peace of the world.

#### AGAINST ALL REASON

But in nothing does the enthusiasm of these persons discover it self more, than in the disregard they express to the Dictates of reason. They are above the force of argument,

beyond conviction from a calm and sober address to their understandings. As for them, they are distinguish'd persons; God himself speaks inwardly and immediately to their souls. "They see the light infused into their understandings, and cannot be mistaken; 'tis clear and visible there, like the light of bright sunshine; shews it self and needs no other proof but its own evidence. They feel the hand of God moving them within, and the impulses of his Spirit; and cannot be mistaken in what they feel. Thus they support themselves, and are sure reason hath nothing to do with what they see and feel. What they have a sensible experience of, admits no doubt, needs no probation." And in vain will you endeavour to convince such persons of any mistakes they are fallen into. They are certainly in the right, and know themselves to be so. They have the Spirit opening their understandings and revealing the truth to them. They believe only as he has taught them: and to suspect they are in the wrong is to do dishonour to the Spirit; 'tis to oppose his dictates, to set up their own wisdom in opposition to his, and shut their eyes against that light with which he has shined into their souls. They are not therefore capable of being argued with; you had as good reason with the wind. . . .

This is the nature of Enthusiasm, and this its operation, in a less or greater degree, in all who are under the influence of it. 'Tis a kind of religious Phrenzy, and evidently discovers it self to be so, whenever it rises to any great height. . . .

#### GUARDING AGAINST ENTHUSIASM

But as the most suitable guard against the first tendencies towards enthusiasm, let me recommend to you the following words of counsel.

1. Get a true understanding of the proper work of the Spirit; and don't place it in those things wherein the gospel does not make it to consist. The work of the Spirit is different now from what it was in the first days of christianity. Men were then favored with the extraordinary presence of the Spirit. He came upon them in miraculous gifts and powers; as a spirit of prophecy, of knowledge, of revelation, of tongues, of miracles: But the Spirit is not now to be expected in these ways. His grand business lies in preparing men's minds for the grace of God, by true humiliation, from an apprehension of sin, and the necessity of a Saviour; then in working in them faith and repentance, and such a change as shall turn them from the power of sin and satan unto God; and in fine, by carrying on the good work he has begun in them; assisting them in duty, strengthening them against temptation, and in a word, preserving them blameless thro' faith unto salvation: And all this he does by the word and prayer, as the great means in the accomplishment of these purposes of mercy.

Herein, in general, consists the work of the Spirit. It does not lie in giving men private revelations, but in opening their minds to understand the publick ones contained in the scripture. It does not lie in sudden impulses and impressions, in immediate calls and extraordinary missions. Men mistake the business of the Spirit, if they understand by it such things as these. And 'tis, probably, from such unhappy mistakes, that they are at first betrayed into enthusiasm. Having a wrong notion of the work of the Spirit, 'tis no wonder if they take the uncommon sallies of their own minds for his influences.

You cannot, my brethren, be too well acquainted with what the bible makes the work of the Holy Ghost, in the affair of salvation: And if you have upon your minds a clear and distinct understanding of this, it will be a powerful guard to you against all enthusiastical impressions.

2. Keep close to the scripture, and admit of nothing for an impression of the Spirit, but what agrees with that unerring rule. Fix it in your minds as a truth you will invariably abide by, that the bible is the grand test, by which every thing in religion is to be tried; and that you can, at no time, nor in any instance, be under the guidance of the Spirit of God, much less his extraordinary guidance, if what you are led to, is inconsistent with the things there revealed, either in point of faith or practice. And let it be your care to compare the motions of your minds, and the workings of your imaginations and passions, with the rule of God's word. And see to it, that you be impartial in this matter: Don't make the rule bend to your pre-conceiv'd notions and inclinations; but repair to the bible, with a mind dispos'd, as much as may be, to know the truth as it lies nakedly and plainly in the scripture it self. And whatever you are moved to, reject the motion, esteem it as nothing more than a vain fancy, if it puts you upon any method of thinking, or acting, that can't be evidently reconcil'd with the revelations of God in his word. . . .

#### MAKE USE OF REASON

3. Make use of the Reason and Understanding God has given you. This may be tho't an ill-advis'd direction, but 'tis as necessary as either of the former. Next to the scripture, there is no greater enemy to enthusiasm, than reason. 'Tis indeed impossible a man shou'd be an enthusiast, who is in the just exercise of his understanding; and 'tis because men don't pay a due regard to the sober dictates of a well inform'd mind, that they are led aside by the delusions of a vain imagination. Be advised then to shew yourselves men, to make use of your reasonable powers; and not act as the horse or mule, as tho' you had no understanding.

'Tis true, you must not go about to set up your own reason in opposition to revelation: Nor may you entertain a tho't of making reason your rule instead of scripture. The bible, as I said before, is the great rule of religion, the grand test in matters of salvation: But then you must use your reason in order to understand the bible: Nor is there any other possible way, in which, as a reasonable creature, you shou'd come to an understanding of it. . . .

4. You must not lay too great stress upon the workings of your passions and affections. These will be excited, in a less or greater degree, in the business of religion: And 'tis proper they shou'd. The passions, when suitably mov'd, tend mightily to awaken the reasonable powers, and put them upon a lively and vigorous exercise. And this is their proper use: And when address'd to, and excited to this purpose, they may be of good service: whereas we shall mistake the right use of the passions, if we place our religion only or chiefly, in the heat and fervour of them. . . .

#### REAL, SOBER RELIGION

There is such a thing as real religion, let the conduct of men be what it will; and 'tis, in its nature, a sober, calm, reasonable thing: Nor is it an objection of any weight against the sobriety or reasonableness of it, that there have been enthusiasts, who have acted as tho' it was a wild, imaginary business. We should not make our estimate of religion as exhibited in the behaviour of men of a fanciful mind; to be sure, we should not take up an ill opinion of it, because in the example they give of it, it don't appear so amiable as we might expect. This is unfair. We shou'd rather judge of it from the conduct of men of a sound judgment; whose lives have been such a uniform, beautiful transcript of that which is just and good, that we can't but think well of religion, as display'd in their example.

#### FOR FURTHER READING

Edward M. Griffin, *Old Brick: Charles Chauncy of Boston, 1705–1787*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980.

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Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys*. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004.

The complete original text of both the New England pastors' statement and Charles Chauncy's sermon can be found at Gale's Eighteenth Century Collections Online (document numbers CW119875094 and CW3320607149).