

**PRIMARY
SOURCE**

“OLD LIGHTS” VS. “NEW LIGHTS”

CHAPTER 3

As it swept through New England, the Great Awakening was greeted with joy, fear, and suspicion. The New Lights, who promoted the religious revival, believed that they were rescuing souls from spiritual darkness; the conservative Old Lights, who criticized the movement, felt that common folk were being led astray by the new brand of preachers. These two camps disagreed on many theological points as well as on the value of revivalism. One debate centered on the strongly emotional response people had to the message of the New Lights. Some religious figures asserted that the only genuine spiritual experience was an emotional experience. Others claimed emotions were merely a substitute for true spirituality and that only through the mind could a true religious revival be experienced. Within individual congregations, parishioners took sides, and clergymen were judged according to which side they took.

The Dangers of Religious Fervor

Charles Chauncy, a conservative Boston clergyman, opposed the religious revival on many grounds. Here, he voices fear of the widespread passionate response to the evangelical message.

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. . . .

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

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 [false] 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.

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. . . . 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. . . .

Those, to be sure, who venture to debate with them about their errors and mistakes, their weaknesses and indiscretions, run the hazard of being stigmatiz'd [given a bad name] by them as poor unconverted wretches, without the SPIRIT, under the government of carnal [not spiritual; worldly] reason, enemies to GOD and religion, and in the broad way to hell.

They are likewise . . . fond of their own imaginations, and invincibly set upon propagating [spreading] them . . . from the strong impressions they are under, that they are authorized by the immediate command of GOD himself, they sometimes exert themselves with a sort of *extatic* violence: And 'tis this that gives them the advantage, among

the less knowing and judicious, of those who are modest, suspicious of themselves, and not too assuming in matters of conscience and salvation. The extraordinary fervor of their minds, accompanied with uncommon bodily motions, and an excessive confidence and assurance gains them great reputation among the populace; who speak of them as *men of GOD* in distinction from all others, and too commonly hearken to, and revere their dictates, as tho' they really were . . . immediately communicated to them from the DIVINE SPIRIT. . . .

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 [seriousness] or reasonableness of it, that there have been *enthusiasts*, who have acted as tho' it was a

The Religion of the Heart

Jonathan Edwards, perhaps the most gifted theologian in American history, was a strong supporter of revivalism. He believed true salvation was such a powerful thing that one could not experience it without a profound emotional response.

All will allow that true virtue or holiness has its seat chiefly in the heart, rather than in the head: it therefore follows, from what has been said already, that it consists chiefly in holy affections. The things of religion take place in men's hearts, no further than they are *affected* with them. The informing of the understanding is all vain, any farther than it *affects* the heart; or which is the same thing, has influence on the *affections*.

Those gentlemen that make light of these raised affections in religion, will doubtless allow that true religion and holiness, as it has its seat in the heart, is capable of very high degrees, and high exercises in the soul. . . .

Though there are false affections in religion, and affections that in some respects are raised high, that are flashy, yet undoubtedly there are also true, holy and solid affections; and the higher these are raised, the better: and if they are raised to an exceedingly great height, they are not to be thought meanly of or suspected, merely because of their great degree, but, on the contrary, to be esteemed and rejoiced in. . . .

It is a stumbling to some that religious affections should seem to be so violent (as they express it) in some persons: they are therefore ready to doubt whether it can be the Spirit of God, or whether this vehemence be not rather a sign of the operation of an evil spirit. But why should such a doubt arise from no other ground than this? What is represented in Scripture, as more powerful in its effects, than the Spirit or God? . . .

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 should 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. . . .

The first discovery therefore of such a spirit, unless due care is taken to give check to its growth and progress, is much to be feared; for there is no knowing, how high it may rise, nor what it may end in.

Ministers are made the watchmen of men's souls, and not of their bodies; and therefore the great rule which God has committed into their hands, is to make them divines, and not physicians. Christ knew what instructions and rules his church would stand in need of better than we do; and if he had seen it needful in order to the church's safety, he doubtless would have given ministers rules to judge of bodily effects, and would have told them how the pulse should beat under such and such religious exercises of mind; when men should look pale, and when they should shed tears; when they should tremble, and whether or no they should ever be faint or cry out; or whether the body should ever be put into convulsions: he probably would have put some book into their hands, that should have tended to make them excellent anatomists and physicians: but he has not done it, because he did not see it to be needful. He judged, that if ministers thoroughly did their duty as watchmen and overseers of the state and frame of men's souls, and of their voluntary conduct, according to the rules he had given, his church would be well provided for, as to its safety in these matters. And therefore those ministers of Christ and overseers of souls, that busy themselves, and are full of concern about the involuntary motions of the fluids and solids of men's bodies, and from thence full of doubts and suspicions of the cause, when nothing appears but that the state and frame of their minds, and their voluntary behavior is good, and agreeable to God's word: I say, such ministers go out of the place that Christ has set them in, and leave their proper busi-

ness.

Another thing that some make their rule to judge of this work by, instead of the Holy Scriptures, is history, or former observation. Herein they err two ways: *First*, if there be any thing new and extraordinary in the circumstances of this work, that was not observed in former times, that is a rule with them to reject this work as not the work of God. Herein they . . . limit God, where he has not limited himself. And this is especially unreasonable in this case: for whoso ever has well weighed the wonderful and mysterious methods of divine wisdom, in carrying on the work of the new creation, or in the progress of the work of redemption . . . may easily observe that it has all along been God's manner to open new scenes, and to bring forth to view things new and wonderful, such as the eye has not seen, nor the ear heard, nor entered

into the heart of man or angels, to the astonishment of heaven or earth, not only in the revelation he makes of his mind and will, but also in the works of his hands. . . .

And if these things are so, it gives more abundant reason to hope that what is now seen in America, and especially in New England, may prove the dawn of that glorious day: and the very uncommon and wonderful circumstances and events of this work, seem to me strongly to argue that God intends it as the beginning or forerunner of something vastly great.

I have thus long insisted on this point, because if these things are so, it greatly manifests [shows] how much it behooves [benefits] us to encourage and promote this work, and how dangerous it will be to forbear to do so.