



A NEW & CONTROVE RSIAL LIGHT

The Debate between Jonathan
Edwards & Charles Chauncy
concerning the events of the First
Great Awakening.

ABSTRACT

The events of 1740-1742 have long been marked by historians as the beginning of the modern controversies. Here, we trace the original debate, the reasons, the players and the legacy of the New & Old Light controversy surrounding the First Great Awakening.

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Readings & Research, Jonathan Edwards.

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An Incredible New, and Controversial, Light.

Today, one might look at the events surrounding the First Great Awakening and the Connecticut River valley revival nine years before and wonder what all the fuss was about. In a world that accepts Pluralism as easily as it accepts the existence of grass we may find where Post-Modernity has won the day and truth is perceived as entirely subjective, one might wonder as to the motivations of men. Yet, one who wondered at their motivations must realize that they themselves have drawn the same line in the sand along what has become a spectrum of viewpoints. These viewpoints range from the total rejection of the Supernatural posited by Chauncy and the Theological Liberals to the acceptance of traditional evangelical revivalism as put forward by Jonathan Edwards and his Evangelical descendants. What is now known as the Old and New Light Controversy is still playing out before us, and it has continued to devolve into more warring parties on both sides of the spectrum. Whether it is recognized as the Old Light or New Light or Old School and New School¹ or Modernist and Fundamentalist or Fundamentalist and Postmodernity, we have continued to perpetuate the same argument interminably and, in doing so, have only deepened the divide and solidified our divisions so that no point of commonality may be found. I suppose when you are, as 19th century Church

¹ George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford England, 2006

Historian Phil Schaff called the American Church: “A Church without History.”² this is the unescapable and inevitable result. We are doomed to make the same mistake of the ones who went before.

In many ways, the disagreement over the First Great Awakening between the Old Light Charles Chauncy, nicknamed “Old Brick” by his counterparts, and New Light Jonathan Edwards is the cause of the aforementioned split in the Americas. Though only one cause, it is a very important one as it meant that two groups were now going to be vying for control of the Church in New England and one would have to win and one would have to be pushed to the Margins. One must wonder if Edwards had lived passed 1758 if they would have long put to bed the controversy. The great preacher of the First Great Awakening certainly had the support behind him and eventually the New Lights would gain a tenuous victory over their Old Light rivals, but at the cost of Church Unity and perhaps even grace.

Here, we will evaluate the two differing viewpoints and examine the context in which these theologies appeared, mainly in the Connecticut River Valley Revival (1731-1735) and the First Great Awakening (1740-1742). We will evaluate the viewpoints of Edwards and his rival Chauncy by looking at points of agreement and at points of disagreement in their individual works as well as by examining the broader response to the Awakening. The hope of this present work is that a future generation may learn from what has happened. Indeed, we might seek to heal the wounds still bleeding from their initial controversy. To do this, we must deal with both men on their own terms and consider their reasoning within their own shared yet differing contexts.

² Michael Baurman, *Historians of the Christian Tradition*, Stephan Graham, “Phillip Schaff” pg 273-300, 1995, Boardman and Hamilton

Part 1: The Connecticut River Valley Revival and The First Great Awakening.

To understand the debate between Charles Chauncy and Jonathan Edwards, we must return to the facts of the events themselves. While it is true that Chauncy has nothing to say concerning the Connecticut River Valley which Edwards oversaw from 1731 to 1735, it is important to understand Edwards' insistence to the biblical justification of the First Great Awakening. Given that many were still alive in 1740 who had witnessed the previous revival, it is important to keep the two events together as they explain for us Edwards' insistence upon and defense of the legitimacy of the First Great Awakening. That is not to say that Chauncy was ignorant of these events, but in his own record he never mentions what happens. Timothy Cutler, a minister who was opposed to both revivals, in a letter dated 1739, called some of what he witnessed among the youth as "Undermining proper authority"³ However, Cutler wrote this four years after he witnessed the supposed incident he was describing, thought to be entirely made up by biographers which casts considerable shade on his credibility.⁴

The Connecticut River Valley Revival (1731-1735).

Edwards himself was a strong part of the Revivalist Tradition. His grandfather, Solomon Stoddard (d. 1731) had witnessed many such revivals during his own time preaching in the town

³ George Marsden, Jonathan Edwards, A Life, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2004

⁴ Cutler was describing an incident he supposedly witnessed in Northampton where a boy had been asked to go do his chores and instead had gone out to the barn and been thrown into a fit. When Edwards was called, he arrived as supposedly told the family not to worry about the convulsions as it was the boy "Getting Through." See Marsden, A Life, 2004, Edwards himself, meticulous in his accounts of both the CRVR and The Awakening never recounts the incident. This combined with the fact that Cutler wrote about it four years later, when he was doing all he could to discredit Edwards, puts his credibility in jeopardy.

of Northampton.⁵ But, even he was not prepared for the Connecticut River Valley Revival which started in the little town of Pascommuch and soon spread all the way down the valley.

What makes this revival historically significant is its intensity. Marsden writes in his biography:

“In other parts of the European World many other communities had revivals under a variety of conditions, so one cannot generalize concerning external causes. Nevertheless the revivals in western New England were among the most intense and the particular social conditions of the 1730’s were the occasion for that intensity”⁶

Even if one cannot pinpoint an exact cause, one might suggest that the constant threat of Indian Attack and the particular pains of a harsh New England Frontier supplied the proper conditions for such a revival. Regardless of their origin, it is known that the conditions were right and Edwards would soon witness a revival unlike any other.

In his own town, it began with the conversion of a Company Keeper, a young woman who spent her time going about in raucous living: partying, drinking and engaging in other lascivious behavior. Yet, one day she came to Edwards and gave an account of saving faith, so dramatic was the change that Edwards was convinced of her sincerity. Still, he had his concerns; “Though the work was glorious, yet I was concerned about the effect it might have upon others. I was ready to conclude (though too rashly) that some would be hardened by it in carelessness or looseness of life”⁷ Edwards, writing to Isaac Watts on the matter in “A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God” in 1736, notes that he was surprised to find the reverse to be true; “God made it, I suppose, the greatest occasion of awakening.”⁸ One cannot necessarily blame Edwards. To the totally rational mind, it may not seem logical for GOD to use the worst among

⁵ Marsden, A Life

⁶ Marsden, A Life, 2004

⁷ Jonathan Edwards, On Revival: A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God, Banner of Truth Trust, Ebook, 2014

⁸ Edwards, A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God

us to start a flame. Yet, that is what he chose to do. Soon, the revival was spreading down the river valley, catching in Deerfield and other towns within the parish. “Presently upon this,” Edwards writes, “A great and earnest concern about the great things of religion and the eternal world because universal in all parts of the town.”⁹ So great was Edwards’ account that Watts was concerned that Edwards might be “Exaggerating the events”¹⁰ after Edwards’ initial letter. The Faithful Narrative was Edwards’ response and the first detailed work in which he laid out the events of the revival. Watts had it published in 1738, and soon after it was read by Wesley and became a basis for Wesley’s Methodism. It was also read by Whitefield, the Itinerant at the heart of the controversy between Jonathan Edwards. The two would meet during the 1740 revival, which we now call the First Great Awakening. Despite the criticism this publishing drew from many and the scoffing it brought from some, like Timothy Cutler, Edwards was convinced this was a work of God. In A Faithful Narrative he again writes; “This seems to have been an extraordinary dispensation of providence. In much respects God has gone out of, and much beyond, his usual way.”¹¹

Unfortunately, by 1735 the Connecticut River Valley revival was cooling and a different kind of feeling was settling in. Indeed, it seemed the fire was completely stamped out, something that was most assuredly of the Devil himself. This decline occurred even despite many miraculous signs that occurred during the waning years of the revival, such as the collapse of the old meeting house where the Church at Northampton met. The great beams collapsed in the center and those sitting below, mostly women and children, were swallowed up by the hole.¹²

⁹ Edwards, A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God.

¹⁰ Marsden, A Life

¹¹ Edwards, A Faithful Narrative on the Surprising Work of God.

¹² Marsden, A 9life

Amazingly, no one was hurt. But even this sign of God, as Edwards considered it, would not affect the town as it had been affected just a year earlier. By the end of 1735, the revival had cooled. Though many more were in church, some of the youth had gone back to their previous ways. Indeed, it seemed a great depression had set about the valley and the suicide rate, which included one of Edwards' uncles, spiked as new fears of Indian attacks once again became the focus of attention. Also, those things which had so marked the revival, things that Chauncy would later call "Enthusiasms"¹³ such as crying out and uncontrollable sobbing and wild ravings, had also left the community. Yes, many had shown what Edwards considered proof of conversion, but the amount of people "Getting through,"¹⁴ which was a puritan term for coming to conversion, had greatly decreased. Alas, the work had left the town. In a last effort, Edwards preached to renew and defend the revival, as he did in a sermon he preached at Yale called *Distinguishing Marks of the Work of the Spirit of GOD*, in which he defended the Great Awakening some years after the Revival and laid forth the theology he would develop after the Great Awakening in response to Chauncy, *Religious Affections*.¹⁵ Still, he kept up hope. Despite the apparent cooling of the town, Edwards wrote in 1742, after the Great Awakening swept through Northampton to the Rev. Thomas Prince of Boston; "Ever since the great work of God that was wrought here about nine years ago, there has been a great and abiding alteration to the town in many respects."¹⁶ This was to say that there was still much "Religion has been kept up in the town"¹⁷ So, even before the arrival of Whitefield in the colonies 1740 and again in 1742, Edwards was still hopeful of another great revival of Religion.

¹³ Charles Chauncy, *Enthusiasm Described and Cautioned Against*, University Microfilms international, Ann Arbor MI, 1979

¹⁴ Marsden, *A Life*

¹⁵ Marsden, *A Life*

¹⁶ Edwards: *On Revival: An Account of the revival of religion in Northampton in 1740-1742*

¹⁷ Edwards, *On Revival: A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*.

The First Great Awakening (1740-1742).

In 1741, in the middle of what History would come to know as “The First Great Awakening” Edwards wrote to Deacon Moses Lyman in response to concerns about the excesses occurring in the first Awakening. Edwards, who would defend the Awakening enthusiastically long after the revival fires had cooled, told the former Northampton Deacon and veteran of the Connecticut River Valley Revival: “There have been some imprudence’s and irregularities as there was and always will be in this perfect state.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, Edwards was furious in his defense of The Awakening and even of Itinerancy and men like the young George Whitefield who first drew the attention of Charles Chauncy and other Old Lights.¹⁹

Indeed, one might say that the 25 year Anglican preacher from England, a friend of the Wesley’s, graduate of Oxford and one of the founders of the Methodism, was one of the principle causes of the Awakening in the Colonies and even around the world.²⁰ Whitefield was born in 1714 and ordained an Anglican, but he strongly preferred preaching to the people who were not in Church on Sunday. He was, in his own right, quite a Thespian. His loud voice “Could be heard for miles,”²¹ according to the testimony of Benjamin Franklin who heard him speak in Philadelphia in 1741 during his second of seven missionary journeys to the Colonies. His presentation must have been extremely unique because nearly 100 years later the Prince of

¹⁸ The letter appears here as quoted in Jonathan Edwards, *A Life*, Marsden, George, 2004. Deacon Lyman witnessed and even defended the CRVR as he served as a Deacon at the church in Northampton from 1729-1738.

¹⁹ Also spelled Whitfield

²⁰ Thomas Kidd, *George Whitefield, America’s Spiritual Founding Father*, 2014, Yale University Press, New Haven, London.

²¹ Marsden, *A Life*, 2004

Preachers himself, the great Charles Spurgeon, would call Whitefield: “That great wind and force.”²² Whitefield was reformed, which only confirmed what Edwards had heard about the “Great interest in Reformed Theology in the Anglican Church”²³ something which gave him great hope. Whitefield first arrived in the Colonies in 1738 in Georgia during John Wesley’s disastrous appointment as Chaplain. In 1740, he traveled North and began preaching from Boston to Philadelphia and back again. There, he attracted congregations in the thousands, all ready and eager to hear the Gospel of Christ. From Boston he made his way West, where he visited and even stayed with the Edwards Family and where he was particularly impressed by Jonathan and his wife for their “plain dress.”²⁴ The Edwards children also impressed him with their piety and devotion to matters of religion. When he set out to head South, Edwards accompanied him several days talking and exhorting and encouraging the young preacher.²⁵

Whitefield was not the only Itinerant preacher to grace the Edwards home. In 1742, Samuel Buell worked his way through the Connecticut River Valley and even preached in Edwards’ stead while he was away for a time. It was under Samuel Buell’s teaching and not Edwards where Sarah Edwards began to have her own religious Awakening. “Though this person was converted some 27 years ago”²⁶ Sarah’s experiences were so intense that some

²² Kidd, George Whitefield, American’s Spiritual Founding Father, 2014

²³ Edwards: On Revival, An Account of the Revival of Religion in Northampton from 1740-1742.

²⁴ Marsden, A Life, 2004 – Many Puritans were well informed on the latest fashion trends coming from England and Boston. Sarah Edwards, being from a wealthy, Aristocratic family like the Williams clan into which she married was likely well versed in all the great fashion trends. Whitefield saw the plain dress of the Edwards family as a sign of their piety and devotion to GOD. Extravagant Dress and the lack of Charity for the poor were among the things which Whitefield preached against on his various tours.

²⁵ Marsden, A Life, 2004 – It was common practice for the local preacher several miles into his journey, though Edwards went beyond that, traveling several days with Whitefield, instead of several miles.

²⁶ Jonathan Edwards, Works, Volume 1, Some thoughts on the present revival of religion, John Jewett Co. Cleveland OH 1854. – Sara was a fervent believer for many, many years before meeting Jonathan, and though slightly younger than him (she was born in 1710), for Edwards account to be accurate she would have been 4 years

thought she was ill. In fact, a piece of paper survives, with some of Edwards' own notes which appears to be a prescription from the local physician Samuel Mather for a treatment of "Vapors."²⁷ Nonetheless, Edwards rejoiced in the experiences of his wife and encouraged them, allowing her to even teach a group of young women in the town.

Unfortunately, not all those who were spreading the good news of the Awakening were taking the care that Edwards was. Even though Edwards supported Whitefield, he admonished him against certain practices like accusing clergy of being unconverted. This was something both Whitefield and fellow Itinerant Gilbert Tennant, who had even preached a sermon on the topic of the necessity of the conversion of Clergymen, were taking heat for doing. Even so, there was a big difference between Edwards' cautioning and Chauncy's condemnation, as we will see.

Still, neither of these men were as divisive as James Davenport, a Presbyterian New Light who had graduated from Yale and who was distantly related to the Williams Clan. He was, in a way, a new Gilbert Tennent with one exception: he took what Marsden calls: "the Subversive side"²⁸ of the Awakening to new and incredible heights. He was responsible for splitting several churches, and his followers put even Edwards on edge by claiming special revelation and visions from God. Right before the Yale commencement of 1741, in which Edwards gave the address and preached "Distinguishing Marks of the Works of the Spirit of God," the Trustees banned the students from attending his gatherings lest he should destroy the unity of the students. He was not above condemning ministers, as he did to the Rev. Joseph Noise, whom he called "A Wolf in

old when she was converted. He never actually names Sarah by name, but as Marsden points out in *A Life*, 2004, "It was obvious that the person of whom he was writing was someone he cared for very deeply"

²⁷ Marsden, *A Life*, 2004 – Marsden also asserts that the fact that Sara was, for the first time, not on a two year cycle of childbearing could have contributed to Sarah's condition.

²⁸ Marsden, *A Life*, 2004

Sheep's Clothing,"²⁹ a Comment which led to the indictment of "Inciting Gross Insubordination"³⁰ by the Yale Trustees and the subsequent ban on attending his gatherings.

His gatherings themselves were the very thing Edwards had warned against and which would be the basis for Chauncy and the Old Lights attack on the New Light Revivalists. In Chauncy's first work, written specifically against and addressed to Davenport he writes: "Sometimes it affects their tongues...sometimes it affects their bodies, throws them into convulsions and distortions, sometimes it affects their conduct... sometimes it appears in their imaginations peculiar intimacy with heaven."³¹ At one point, after being banished, Davenport appeared in Boston preaching even stranger doctrine than usual. He even appeared on Chauncy's doorstep to inquire about his own salvation. Chauncy sent him a letter with the sermon attached in which he exhorted Davenport to: "Suffer me sir, to beseech you in the bowels of Jesus Christ, and as you regard your own soul, renew your conduct in such a manner with reason and uncharitable judging. You know how many worthy ministers you have condemned."³²

Meanwhile, Edwards and associates were: "committed to maintaining order in the perishes, increasingly their own."³³ The preaching and increasing excesses brought about under Davenport and his associates made that an increasingly difficult task. This remains true even though Davenport would eventually repent and take responsibility for all the damage that he had caused. In 1742, the Council of the Clergy in Boston, a group made up of both Old and New Lights, would vote to ban Itinerant Preaching unless approved by the local parish minister, much to the chagrin of the New Lights who were the Minority at the meeting. Edwards himself was at

²⁹ Marsden, A Life, 2004

³⁰ Marsden, A Life, 2004

³¹ Chauncy, Enthusiasm Described and Cautioned against, 1979

³² Charles Chauncy, A letter to James Davenport, as printed in Enthusiasm described and cautioned against, 1979

³³ Marsden, A Life, 2004 – For more see Section 2.

this meeting, but little is known about his participation. Surprisingly enough, Chauncy was not present. The reason for his absence is unknown. With a victory under their belts, the Old Lights stepped up their attacks and, by 1743, what had started as clergy from both sides anonymously publishing letters in Boston Newspapers debating the Awakening became a full-blown assault on what they saw as “Detrimental to the order of Religion”³⁴ with Chauncy the Champion of the Old Lights and Edwards the Champion of the New Lights. Their respective books against each other, Edwards being: “Thoughts on the Revival of Religion in New England” and Chauncy’s: “Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England:” were not only written to refute one another’s arguments, but to outdo each other in publishing. Edwards work was published with over 300 pages. Chauncy, never to be outdone, wrote over 400 in response.³⁵

By 1743, the New Light Ministers were setting about the task of sealing the Awakening. Edwards, who had witnessed the cooling of the Connecticut River Valley Revival, was determined not to allow the same thing to happen at the end of the Awakening. In Northampton, he drafted a Covenant and asked everyone in the town to sign it. The covenant called for living by the Moral Law and grace of the New Covenant and even, subtly, subverted his grandfather Solomon Stoddard’s practice of open communion.³⁶ All this was to ensure that the great life changes that were characteristic of the Awakening were maintained, though the covenant itself would get Edwards in trouble at the end of his ministry at Northampton.

Part 2: The Controversy.

³⁴ Charles Chauncy, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England*, 1975, The Regina Press, Hicksville New York,

³⁵ Marsden, *A Life*, 2004 – Both works are a daunting read for those uninitiated with either man.

³⁶ Marsden, *A Life*, 2004

Turning to the controversy itself, one must avoid making broad assertions and simply meet the two men within their context. In what is essentially a Pre-Pluralistic framework, both men must be understood in their Puritan context. One must also avoid Presentism and accuse both of them of being “wrong” based on a 21st century context of thought. Certainly, if this controversy were to start today it would take on a very different tone and form. However, one must understand that both men, and both sides, considered themselves absolutely right. That means one must evaluate both arguments based not on our own understanding, but by the source both men were claiming as their authority: the Holy Word of God and Church History. A failure to do so would undermine Historical Study³⁷ and give an improper impression of the men and their time. Edwards was a strict Calvinist and Chauncy, though not as reformed as Edwards, remains within Puritan Orthodoxy for the duration of the debate.

Points of Agreement:

Despite the obvious and heated disagreement between the two men that spanned four works and countless letters, it is important to note that there was much the two men agreed on. Charles Chauncy even admired Edwards, but he could not understand how he could reason to support the Awakening.³⁸ Because Edwards has already condemned the excesses in “Thoughts” Chauncy’s work “Seasonable Thoughts” focused on creating boundaries within which one should judge a work of God. Edwards would do the same in his magnum opus *Religious Affections* sometime later. Most notably, Chauncy may not have directly disputed that an Awakening was indeed happening. In “Seasonable Thoughts” he comments: “There are, I doubt

³⁸ Marsden, *A Life*, 2004

not, a number of those in this land upon where God has graciously shed the influence of his blessed spirit.”³⁹ In fact, the two men agreed on three basic pieces in regards to the Awakenings.

1. They were both opposed to and cautioned against the excess some were committing under Whitefield, whom he had warned, and especially under Davenport. 2. They both strongly rooted their arguments in reason and believed that there should be a type of order, though on which type they disagreed. 3. Both agreed that scripture should be the ultimate authority as to what constituted a work of the Spirit.

The first point of agreement was the excesses that were manifest among certain people, especially those under Wheelock, Davenport and Pomeroy. The real issue for Chauncy was with the itinerants and the excesses. Edwards acknowledged that excesses were indeed happening, just like in his letter to Deacon Lyman,⁴⁰ but just as vigorously defended the Awakening. One must wonder if Chauncy had not encountered those alarming issues with the followers of Davenport if he would have been so adamantly against the Awakening in the end. Still, both Edwards and Chauncy warned against calling ministers and even other lay persons “Unconverted.”⁴¹ Chauncy writes in “Seasonable Thoughts” concerning Davenport: “Was not the reason for your traveling hundreds of miles to preach the Gospel, in this place, founded on the insufficiency of the ministers.”⁴² Not that the ministers were at all insufficient or at least that Davenport, who was not from the region, could make that judgment. Interestingly enough, included among these excesses was Lay Preaching, something Edwards even exhorted Deacon Lyman not to do. It was one of the excesses both men spoke out against. This may be surprising given the Puritan

³⁹ Chauncy, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England*, 1975

⁴⁰ See Footnote 17

⁴¹ Edwards: *On Revival: Distinguishing Marks of the Spirit of God*, 2014

⁴² Chauncy, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England*, 1975, pg38

emphasis on Lay Spirituality.⁴³ Apparently, that excluded lay pastoral service; a lay person could be a Deacon, but only an ordained, trained minister could be a preacher.⁴⁴

The Second point of agreement was the need for reason and order to guide religious theory and practice. Edwards did strive to maintain order and to quell certain excesses, as we saw above. But, he thought it perfectly reasonable for this to be the work of the Spirit of God. Chauncy, on the other hand, thought even the less dramatic of these occurrences were outside the bounds of reason and should thus be rejected. Indeed, Edwards “Distinguishing Marks” and “Thoughts on the State of Religion” are both logically sound and reasonable in their arguments and so are Chauncy’s two works which came from the debate. Marsden even notes that Chauncy even considered Edwards “One of the most reasonable ministers in New England.”⁴⁵ Indeed History, as Edwin Scott Gaustad puts it in his book on the First Great Awakening, would remember: “Edwards was the more modern and rational and having more clarity than Chauncy”⁴⁶ This is ironic, given that Chauncy considered himself to be the very things which are now attributed to Edwards. Still, both men thought a Rational and Orderly solution must be the result of revival, and be the mark of the revival.

Finally, both Edwards and Chauncy agreed that the Word of God was the ultimate authority on those things which God does and how He chooses to act. Both men’s works deal with scriptural texts. Both men believed that God would not act outside of His nature and, nor would he do things that are contrary to scripture.

⁴³ Francis J. Brenner, *Puritanism, A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, New York, New York 2009 See also Chapter 15 in Marsden, *A Life*.

⁴⁴ Gilbert Tennant’s sermon concerning the need to the training of Clergy shows a new light concern for educated clergymen. Eventually the New Lights would win this part of the debate in the Presbyterian Church. Though eventually Charles Finney would reject the need for formal pastoral education. See Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*.

⁴⁵ Marsden, *A Life*, 2004

⁴⁶ Edwin Scott Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England*, Harper Brothers, New York, 1957, pg 82

Ironically, these three points - the excesses, the need for reason to prevail and scripture - would also be where their main arguments would settle, as we will soon see.

The Disagreement:

The irony of the major religious debates throughout the century is that the points of agreement often also serve as the points of disagreement. It is the case of two sides looking at two different sides of the coin while forgetting that they are looking at the same coin. This is what Edwards and Chauncy were doing. Edwards was convinced of the necessity of the revival and was fully supportive of what he considered the true revival. Yes, he was against the Excesses, but the general enthusiasm which so bothered Chauncy did not bother Edwards. Both men agreed on the need for rationality, reason and order, but Edwards was willing to take on Faith that God was doing a work and it was not outside of God's ability to do so. Both men used Scripture but differed in their interpretation. Like Benjamin Franklin, Chauncy rejected the idea of the Supernatural, especially if it was outside of Scripture. Edwards believed that the evidence to support God working in this way was found within Scripture. Both men considered themselves to be right, and in their context, pre-pluralism⁴⁷, they were to some extent. Both are considered within Orthodoxy in their viewpoints. It was not until the end of his life that Chauncy would become a Proto-Theological Liberal and embrace Universalism.

Taking a broad approach, there were two major issues which Chauncy took with the Awakening. 1.) The itinerancy of men like Whitefield, Tennant, Wheelock, Pomeroy and

⁴⁷ Brenner, Puritanism, A Very Short introduction, 2009, by the time of Edwards Pluralism had yet to make its way across the Atlantic and was only beginning to make its way through the English churches. They two men had no concept of a spectrum in relationship to viewpoints and the supernatural. TO say that they did and that they were both wrong in assuming their correctness is "Presentism" and should be rejected at every point. One cannot force a historical character to accept a 18th century concept.

especially Davenport. And 2.) the many Enthusiasms that were being committed by those under what he thought was the “Supposed” work of the spirit.

Give me a transition line for this paragraph ... are you speaking about point No. 1 here? Chauncy begins “Seasonable Thoughts” saying: “Never in the history of this land has there been such a flocking to particular ministers and glorying in them as if they were gods and not men.”⁴⁸ Chauncy was speaking here of the Itinerants. He had, of course, seen the thousands of people who flocked to hear Whitefield preach in 1740 and again in 1742. He had also witnessed all three of Davenport’s visitations and had even been visited by Davenport unexpectedly. He took issue with many of them in the way that they “Called some ministers unconverted”⁴⁹ something which Edwards had warned Whitefield against. Though the statement is true of Davenport, Pomeroy and Wheelock, all of whom directly attacked the character of many ministers, Whitefield would likely have balked at the idea that he considered himself a god. Though Whitefield was openly reformed and ardently Calvinist, Chauncy accused him of preaching a “Gospel of Inward Feelings.”⁵⁰ It was obvious to Chauncy that some might question the faith and conversion of certain ministers. This was, after-all, upsetting the status quo which assures that all ministers are saved. To Chauncy, to even question a minister was worthy of condemnation and to take people from the ministers God had put over a certain congregation was disrespectful of the ministers. To Chauncy, the Itinerants were prideful and presumptuous, especially Davenport who had called the minister of the Church the Yale boys attended a: “Wolf in Sheeps clothing” a comment

⁴⁸ Chauncy, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England*, gp 2, 1979

⁴⁹ Chauncy, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England*, pg 5, 1979

⁵⁰ Chauncy, *Enthusiasm Described and Cautioned Against*, 1979,, A quick evaluation of Whitefield’s Sermons finds this claim to be erroneous. Whitefield was thoroughly reformed, something that would later cause his divide with the Wesley’s. For a good sampling of George Whitefield’s Sermons check out: *The Collected Sermons of George Whitefield*, 2015, Jawbone Digital, in the Kindle Book store.

which precipitated the ban on attending Davenports sessions right before Edwards Commencement Address.⁵¹ Edwards, on the other hand, fully supported the Itinerants. He even encouraged and exhorted the young Whitefield, taking him in during his visit to Northampton in the fall of 1740. In fact, it was under the Itinerant preacher Samuel Buell's care that Sarah Edwards would have her remarkable experience that would become the central theme of "Some Thoughts"⁵² In regards to his relationship with Whitefield, Marsden writes:

Despite their differences, the two men admired each other and had much in common, they were both deeply passionate and were passionate about the same concern, true gospel preaching that God would use to save souls and to bring in his kingdom both were ardently spiritual and almost Spartan in their zeal for their higher cause and their aspiration to throw off every worldly concern. Each had been humbled and gratified by the marvels of God they had seen through their preaching⁵³

Chauncy's limited interaction with Whitefield, or perhaps this lack of interaction and his subsequent repeated interactions with Davenport, may have turned him against the itinerancy by the time he wrote both of his works. Edwards had seen great life change because of the preaching of Whitefield and would see great life change in his own wife because of the preaching of Buell. Edwards did not see the character flaws that Chauncy was using as the basis for rejecting Itinerancy as a sign that the work was not of God. Sighting the disagreement between Peter and Paul in Galatians 2:11-13 Edwards says: "IF we see great imprudence's and even sinful irregularities in some who are great instruments to carry on the work, it will not prove it not to be

⁵¹ Marsden, A Life, 2004.

⁵² Marsden, A Life, 2004

⁵³ Marsden, A Life, 2004

a work of God.”⁵⁴ Edwards understood better than many that God often used the “Foolish things of the world to shame the wise”⁵⁵ because of his own struggles with sin as a youth. Edwards was adamant that one should not, as Chauncy was doing, “Judge the whole work by its cause, but by its effects.”⁵⁶ One needed to look at the results of such a work, in Edwards case, changed and transformed lives, rather than the Earthly causes, men who were flawed and prone to sin. As Edwards would later posit in *Religious Affections*: “Therefore, in order to persons being entitled to full esteem and charity, with their neighbors, as being sincere professors of Christianity by those aforementioned rules of Christ and his Apostles, there must be a visibly holy life...we are to know them by their fruits.”⁵⁷ To Edwards, the only way to determine a work of God was to recognize and examine when that which was inwardly formed came outward. Since man could not see the heart, the “Fruit,” a reference to Galatians 5:22, had to serve as the truest and most sincere sign of conversion.⁵⁸ Echoing Jesus words in Matthew 7:16, Edwards believed that one had to say: “you will know them by their fruits.”

The difference in perspective here is striking. Edwards wanted to reserve judgment of a work until the fruit could be seen since: “The devil can duplicate many of these signs”⁵⁹ while Chauncy wanted to judge a work by the immediate cause of the hysteria. To Chauncy, this could not be a work of God because it was disturbing the order in the churches that the Puritans had long established. During the Awakening, Chauncy barely left Boston with the exception of a

⁵⁴ Edwards *On Revival: Distinguishing Marks of a work of the Spirit of God*,

⁵⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:27, NIV, 1970.

⁵⁶ Edwards, *Works 1: Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England*, 1854

⁵⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, Fig Classic Series, figbooks.com, 2012

⁵⁸ This viewpoint actually sharply contrasts Puritan views of Conversion since the Puritans had certain stages and experiences one must have to be converted. Chauncy calls on this “ordered” way of conversion in *Seasonable Thoughts*”

⁵⁹ Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 2012, See also - *Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*, 2015, *Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England*, as found in *Works 1*, 1854

three-month tour of towns affected by the Awakening⁶⁰. Given his limited exposure, mostly revolving around Davenport, Chauncy had very little contact with those whom Edwards had seen, such as Phebe Bartlett, a young child who Edwards viewed as indisputable evidence of the work of the Spirit.⁶¹ One could sum up Edwards' views by saying a work must be judged by its fruit and Chauncy's views by saying a work must be judged by its rational and orderly nature in following true religion. To Chauncy, the Itinerants were upsetting this state of true religion and making bold and boisterous claims as to who was saved. Though Edwards warned them against it, he supported the Itinerants because he saw the fruits of the labors of Whitefield, Tennant and Buell first hand. This is something it seems Chauncy, if he did at all, did on a very limited and highly contextualized basis after his view on the Awakening had already been solidified. It stands to reason that the results of the itinerancy under Davenport and other more extreme New Lights would have soured many views of the Awakening. Edwards wanted the work to be judged by the results of the work and condemned any results that were divisive or extreme. To Edwards, if God could not use flawed men he could rarely use anyone to complete his work. Whitefield had his flaws, as did Edwards, but the men doing the work - the Itinerants - were not the way to judge the work.

The second disagreement revolved around reason and rationality. Gaustad describes the argument as a debate between "Calvinism and Rationalism."⁶² This does not seem to be a valid summation as Edwards himself considered Calvinism to be a rational worldview from which to work. To Edwards, personal experience and Faith had to be part of the rational process. To

⁶⁰ Marsden, A Life, 2004

⁶¹ Edwards, Works 1, Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England, 1854

⁶² Gaustad, The Great Awakening in New England,

Edwards, it was perfectly rational to take the events he was witnessing on faith. Since one could judge a work “not by the cause, but by the result”⁶³ then one had to take on faith that the cause of the work was of the Spirit.

Chauncy sharply disagreed on this point. To him, it seemed certainly outside of how they had observed God to act for these things to be even remotely rational. This led Chauncy to compare Edwards the Awakeners to Abigail Hutchins who was tried and found guilty of Antinominalism⁶⁴ in the previous century. To Chauncy, these excesses that men like Davenport and others were promoting were a special kind of “Wickedness” and there was no greater evil than the general enthusiasm that marked the Awakening.⁶⁵ In *Enthusiasm Described* he describes Enthusiasm as: “Intending an imaginary, nor real inspiration, according to which sense that the enthusiast is one, who has conceited in himself as a person favored with the preference of the deity. Who confuses the communications of the deity for his own commutations.”⁶⁶ This is not far from the writing of David Hume who, in his essay on Enthusiasm, describes all Enthusiasm as “False Religion.”⁶⁷ He and Chauncy both include the Quakers in those religions that are false. It is true that “New England Clergy were deeply suspicious of enthusiasm which they defined as “undisciplined Religious Fervor”⁶⁸ and Chauncy is no exception to the attitudes of his fellow Clergymen. For that matter, neither is Edwards. Though he had warned against many of the excesses in both “Distinguishing Marks” and “Some Thoughts” he also cautioned the opponents

⁶³ See Footnote 60

⁶⁴ Brenner, *Puritanism, A short introduction*, Antinominalism is the abandonment of the teachings of Jesus and failure to acknowledge the Authority of Christ. In Craig Keener’s commentary on Matthew Keener attributes Matthew inclusion of Matthew 5:17-20 to the original Antinominal controversy in the region Matthew may have lived.

⁶⁵ Chauncy, *Enthusiasm Described and Cautioned Against*, 1979

⁶⁶ Chauncy, *Enthusiasm Described and Cautioned Against*, 1979

⁶⁷ David Hume, *Essays*, John Long LTD, London, 1767

⁶⁸ Marsden, *A Life*, 2004

of the Awakening that they, by opposing the Awakening, may themselves be opposing a work of God. To Edwards, Opposing the Awakening was no different than “Opposing the Holy Spirit.”⁶⁹ In his preface to *Distinguishing Marks* by William Coleman, who was responsible for united the New Light Calvinists after the Awakening and the death of Edwards⁷⁰, he writes: “Such Scoffers, I am ready to think, would have been disbelievers and opposers of the miracle and mission of our savior had they lived in his day. The Malignity that some of them have discovered, to me approaches near to the unpardonable sin.”⁷¹ These are strong words, but not nearly as strong and accusing as Chauncy’s words to Davenport which read: “Popery itself had not been the mother of such blasphemies and Abominations.”⁷²

It stands to reason, that when we assume that God will only work a certain way, as Edwards and Chauncy and their contemporaries did, there is going to be a violent and dramatic reaction when a work occurs that is outside of the bounds of what we think God will do. Edwards was not quick to dismiss the work. In fact, he embraced it. Though cautioning against the excesses, he had faith that God was doing a great work and it would be foolish to oppose that work. He had seen the lasting effects of the revivals under his grandfather Solomon Stoddard and the Connecticut River Valley Revival and even discussed them at length in a letter to Rev. Thomas Prince of Boston dated 1744.⁷³ Edwards had seen genuine and lasting life change and the genuine fruit of the Spirit that he insisted were the marks of true Revival.

⁶⁹ Edwards, *Distinguishing Marks of the Spirit of God*, 2015

⁷⁰ Marsden, *A Life*, 2004

⁷¹ Edwards, *Works* 1, 1854, Preface to *Distinguishing Marks* written by William Cooper

⁷² Chauncy, *A Letter to a Gentlemen as Printed in Enthusiasm Described and Cautioned Against*, 1979

⁷³ Edwards, *On Revival, An Account of the events in Northampton between 1740-1742*. – this is the print edition of the letter and ends with I am, Sir Rev. Jonathan Edwards.

Chauncy, on the other hand, had been a primary witness to the extreme excesses of Davenport who had even accosted and raised questions of Chauncy's own salvation. Even though he had supported the Awakening in 1740, agreeing to the very things he would decry in 1741 - namely that crying out and calling out was a necessary part of conversion - he could not support them later on.⁷⁴ Witnessing the excesses under Whitefield, though not as exaggerated as those under Davenport, had caused Chauncy to sour.

The result was that both men tore down the structures of rigid orthodoxy, Chauncy through reason and natural philosophy and Edwards through religious experience and faith.⁷⁵ Edwards used reason, but did not glorify it, whereas Chauncy placed it above all other measures. Chauncy saw himself as: "Setting things in a just and true light"⁷⁶ and "Warning against those things which are dangers."⁷⁷ Edwards, meanwhile: "took great pains to teach them the distinction between true biblically based experiences and undisciplined imaginations."⁷⁸ He accomplished this through teaching and preaching sermons like "Distinguishing Marks" and "A Divine and Supernatural Light." To Edwards, the Emotions had their proper place in the religious life, but they had to be informed by scripture and by the Spirit of God.

Finally, the two men debated whether or not this work could be justified by Scripture. Chauncy saw a push against those things which are supernatural, perhaps leading to Benjamin Colman's reproach of the appoints of the Awakening in the Preface to "Distinguishing Marks,"⁷⁹ especially in the books of the letters to the Corinthians. To Chauncy, such enthusiastic faith was

⁷⁴ Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England*, 1957, pg 86

⁷⁵ Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England*, 1957, pg 83

⁷⁶ Chauncy, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England*, pg 365-498, 1975

⁷⁷ Chauncy, *Enthusiasm Described and Cautioned Against*, 1979

⁷⁸ Marsden, *A Life*, 2004

⁷⁹ See footnote 70

something for the Old Testament prophets or the first century church, but God had certainly abandoned working in those manners as the centuries proceeded.⁸⁰ He actually begins his sermon on Enthusiasm by comparing his task to one similar to Paul's in writing to the Corinthian's. Or, at the very least, he saw himself dealing with a similar situation, especially since, as he reports: "A Spirit of pride prevailed among them, they were conceited in their gifts and much too disposed to make a presentation of them."⁸¹ This was, of course, one of Chauncy's primary charges against the Itinerants and against anyone who encouraged the excesses in general. Unfortunately, Chauncy's works do little with scripture beyond the mention of the issue at Corinth, which may have justified Benjamin Colman's indictment. Indeed, a lack of references to the work of Jesus may indicate a line of thought similar to Franklin's. Chauncy does make mention to the prophets in "Enthusiasm" but only to point out that the very thing he was cautioning against was acceptable for them because: "The etymology of the word itself carries in it a good meaning, as it signifies the inspiration of God. In which sense the prophets under the Old Testament and the Apostles under the new might be called "Enthusiasts."⁸² The implication is that God would only allow for enthusiasm, or great works of the spirit, in the old and new testament times. Chauncy firmly believed that it was not the Holy Spirit who was behind the enthusiasms and private revelations: "He cannot be supposed to be the author of private revelations which are contrary to the standing one."⁸³ With the exception of equating

⁸⁰ Chauncy, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England*, pg. 365-498, 1975

⁸¹ Chauncy, *Enthusiasm Described and Cautioned Against*, 1979.

⁸² Chauncy, *Enthusiasm Described and Cautioned Against*, 1979, pg 3.

⁸³ Chauncy, *Enthusiasm Described and Cautioned Against*, 1979, pg 7 – Eastern Christian Thinker Simon Chan, in his book *Spiritual Theology* says that the natural result of the Christian Spiritual Life should be private revelation.

the events to the church at Corinth, Chauncy largely fails to give any specific defense of this argument in either work.⁸⁴

Evidently, this was not lost on Edwards, who likely would have read Chauncy's sermon and letters in the Boston papers. In Section One of "Some Thoughts" he lays out three grounds on which the opponents of the Awakening judged, or did not judge, the work itself: "First in judging the work a priori, secondly, in not taking the Holy Scriptures as a measure by which to judge such operations, thirdly, in not justly distinguishing the good from the bad."⁸⁵ Contrary to Chauncy, Edwards uses scripture throughout his works. "Some Thoughts" opens with the prophesy of Isaiah from 40:3 which states "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the dessert a highway for our God"⁸⁶ Edwards firmly believed that God was doing a work in New England and even globally. Therefore, he felt it should not be hindered. Even though the excesses were happening, they should not have been a defining factor as to whether or not this was a work of God. Therefore, the gates must be pushed open and the light of God must be allowed to shine forth. If God was doing a work, it would truly have been to the detriment of

This tracks both with the traditional evangelical revivalism and with more organic forms of Christian Faith. See, Chan, Simon, *Spiritual Thology*, 1998, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove IL

⁸⁴ The fact that Edwards had already addressed the excesses in "Some Thoughts" may offer an explanation for why Chauncy merely repeats his initial argument against Davenport in "Seasonable Thoughts." Edwards had already condemned the excesses, therefore Chauncy just needed to set the boundaries for orderly and proper religion. This only weakens Chauncy's argument and subsequently strengthens Edwards. Ignoring entire sections of scripture in favor of one fails to take the full council of the text. Paul does not appear to be totally condemning excesses, only those things which were causing strife and division. Paul upholds the spiritual gifts that Chauncy is rejecting, along with the deep, rich religious experience that can come form a community properly using the gifts. Chauncy, Edwards and Paul are all correct, there must be an order to worship. But neither Edwards or Paul find the enthusiasms that are often a part of the religion experience directly "Sinful" just that they should be considered as part of the whole of the Christian Life.

⁸⁵ Edwards, Works 1, "Some thoughts on the State of Religion in New England" pg 367

⁸⁶ Edwards, Works 1, "Some Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England" pg. 365– Quoted as the text appears in the work, likely based on the King James Version.

the opposition. Edwards warned against not using the Scripture as the primary measurement for an event: “Many are guilty of not taking the Holy Scriptures as the rule for this work”⁸⁷

Edwards himself turned to scripture for his defense of the Awakening and for his refutation of Chauncy and the other opponents. The sermon, “Distinguishing Marks of a Work of a Spirit of God” was taken from 1 John 4:1 as Edwards explains: “The Apostle, of set purpose, undertakes to supply the church of God with such true marks of the Spirit of God as may be plain and safe, as well as accommodated and well-practiced.”⁸⁸ To Edwards, God had always and would continue to do miraculous works such as what was going on around them.

⁸⁹However, He had also, through divine revelation, set forth the rules for such miraculous works. Since Satan could; “Duplicate most of these signs”⁹⁰ as he says in Religious Affections, one should only base their judgment of a work based on the fruit. To Edwards, most of the fruit was good and wholesome, so it was within reason to think that the work was of God. Those who committed excesses had been swept up in religious fervor, so it was necessary to remind them of the framework and rules which God’s word put forth for Revival. If something went beyond the boundaries laid out in scripture as to what constituted a work of God, then it must be condemned and the person participating in it must reform. However, one should never condemn a work as “Not of the Spirit” unless the overall effects of the work were contrary to scripture. In “Distinguishing Marks” Edwards both defended the Awakening and condemned

⁸⁷ Edwards, Works 1: Thoughts on the Revival of Religion in New England, pg 365-498

⁸⁸ Edwards, On Revival, Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God, 2015

⁸⁹ For a view in Edwards view of Redemptive History, See, Edwards: Works 1, A History of the Work of Redemption, pg, 533 - 615

⁹⁰ Edwards, Religious Affections, 1746,

the excesses under Davenport and others. He thoroughly cautioned Whitefield and Tennant, whom he liked, and worked hard to help his congregation understand the differences.⁹¹

Part III: The Legacy of the Debate;

“Up until that point” writes Marsden “The puritans had been able to solve any controversy without division, the debate over the first Great Awakening would leave them permanently divided.”⁹² Sadly, this would stand to be true. One could make the argument that the issue has never been resolved, and may never be. This is due to the way that Pluralism has made such divisions completely acceptable and has created a situation in which students do not have to listen to dissenting viewpoints. This debate would, in many ways, define the course of American Theological Discourse. In reading George Marsden’s book, “Fundamentalism” and American Culture and Mark Noll’s book “America’s God, Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln” one can find a theme of further division among both theological liberals, which Chauncy would become, and Revivalist Evangelicals, the Theological Descendants of the New Lights.⁹³

One must not think the two intended for their controversy to become our mess. In fact, Edwards and Chauncy may both have harsh words for us over our continued division. Both Edwards and Chauncy desired above everything to see the church united in doctrine and

⁹¹ Many other examples of scripture abound throughout *Some Thoughts and other Awakening Texts*. *Religious Affections* stands out as firmly rooted in scripture. One of the more notable sermons of the time was titled: “A Divine and Supernatural Light” which comes from Matthew 16:17 in which Edwards lays out the inward change that comes from the Spirit of God and the revealing of Gospel Truths to the believers. See Edwards, *Works 2: A Divine and Supernatural Light*, pg 12-16

⁹² Marsden, *A Life*, 2004

⁹³ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2006 See also, Mark Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, Oxford University Press, New York NY, 2002

worship done in such a way that God would receive all the glory. Yes, they had different views on how that should happen, but they both had the same goal in mind. Edwards firmly believed that “God has always preserved His Church”⁹⁴ and knew He would continue to do so until the Church reached that glorious age or perfect state.⁹⁵ He likely would have been disappointed in the pre-millennialism that later Evangelicals such as Jonathan Blanchard and others would adopt and have harsh words for the rapture Theology of the later Dispensationalists.⁹⁶ One must wonder what may have happened had Edwards lived to see the Revolution and the unification of the New Light Evangelical Calvinists by his friend Benjamin Colman.⁹⁷

The two men have themselves secured their place in Church History, with Chauncy being the lesser known opponent to the greatest Theologian in American Church History, who some believe has no Theological Successor, but who would pave the way for names like Charles Finney, D.L. Moody, Billy Sunday and Billy Graham.⁹⁸ Chauncy, along with Benjamin Franklin, would set the tone for Theological Liberalism’s rejection of the Supernatural and then become largely forgotten.

Regardless of what might have occurred, this debate left the church in America divided, and we have been doomed to repeat that division over and over again through various controversies and issues that continue into today.

Conclusion:

⁹⁴ Edwards, Works 1: A History of the Work of Redemption, pg 533-615

⁹⁵ Marsden, A Life, 2004

⁹⁶ Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture, 2006.

⁹⁷ Marsden, A Life, 2004

⁹⁸ Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture, 2006

Between 1740 and 1742, the First Great Awakening swept across the Colonies. It was known for Itinerant preaching, life change and great excesses. Two men would become the spokesmen for two groups. These were the Old Lights, who were against the Revival and led by Boston Pastor Charles Chauncy and the New Lights, who were pro-Revival and pre-evangelical and led by the Northampton Pastor and one who would become known as American's greatest Theologian Jonathan Edwards.

Both men agreed on some of the practices, such as the excesses, certain aspects of the Itinerants as well as the authority of the Word of God in setting the boundaries for a revival. However, they differed sharply on how those things should be used to define a work. Chauncy wanted to define a work by the causes of the work while Edwards wanted to define a work by its effects. If a man showed the Fruits of the Spirit then it must have been a work of GOD.

Both men's arguments have merits. We must be careful not to quickly jump to the conclusion that something is a work of God, for we cannot be sure until the fruits of that work are evident. Still, for Edwards, who had witnessed two revivals in ten years, it was essential to reserve judgement. To Chauncy, who experienced the extreme and subversive excesses of James Davenport, this was a dangerous work that must be shut down for the sake of the order of the Church. This debate would leave the American Church divided and we would be, as a church without knowledge of its history, doomed to repeat the divisions on repeat.

One must wonder if we can ever reconcile.

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