

Satan's Saboteurs

A Biblical & Historical Look at Demonic Interference in Revival

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Where there are no oxen, the manger is clean,
but abundant crops come by the strength of the ox.

—Proverbs 14:4¹

Three thousand years ago, Solomon spoke of the “messiness” of productive labor. While the sluggard might enjoy the absence of cleaning up after oxen, he will undoubtedly suffer far worse privations in the future due to his laziness. The wise, however, recognize the value of the oxen’s labor and its necessity for a prosperous harvest. In return, the wise are more than happy to make the relatively small sacrifice of managing the messy process.² The wise prosper for their diligence and sacrifice, while the lazy “miss out,” as it were.

Three hundred years ago, Jonathan Edwards observed a similar principle in the spiritual realm. Though he admitted it to be “very mysterious,” he noted that it was “no new thing” that “much false religion should prevail” during a time of a great work of the Holy Spirit in reviving true religion.³ For him, it was well attested both historically and by his own experience that true revival was accompanied by this false religion, as he called it.⁴ From biblical times, to the reformation era, to Edwards’ own time of the eighteenth century, seminal moves of God had been marred by corresponding upticks in counterfeit religion. This paper will endeavor to offer a theological framework for understanding this “mysterious” phenomenon, drawing both from

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

² While this proverb does not explicitly assign these divergent paths to the sluggard and the wise/diligent, respectively, it does fit well with the plethora of proverbs which do so. Therefore, one may fairly assume that these characters are implied.

³ Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections: A Treatise by Jonathan Edwards*, Christian Heritage Series (Moscow: Canon Press, 2020), 2.

⁴ Importantly, Edwards’ postmillennial eschatology led him to believe that this would not always be the case. He considered it “evident, that there will come a time of much greater purity in the church of God, than has been in ages past,” likely referring to the golden age of the millennium or a time near its advent. (Ibid., 3.)

biblical and historical sources in the process, and it will argue that this tainting effect upon revivals comes from demonic influences for the purpose of dividing the church and discrediting said works of God.

Of first importance in approaching this topic is a foray into Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares, found in Matthew 13:24-43. The parable's immediate concern is with the respective natures and destinies of the righteous and the reprobate, yet one may infer an overarching general principle from the story as well, namely, that Satan will attempt to corrupt and spoil any given work of God. Attention to detail will reveal that this corruption is accomplished in a subtle fashion, inasmuch as A) the infiltration of the tares into the wheat field is surreptitiously accomplished and B) the outward form of the tares and wheat are indistinguishable until the time of harvest, when their true fruit will be manifested. If the aforementioned principle is applied to the phenomenon broadly known as "revival," then one may expect a Satanic, corrupting assault on these moves of the Spirit of God to effect large amounts of conversions and renewals of spiritual vitality. It must be carefully noted, however, that the preferable approach of this "father of lies" and feigned "angel of light" is subterfuge and infiltration rather than bare assault, in accordance with the theme of the parable and other scriptural indications of Satan's attributes.⁵ Therefore demonic attacks on seasons of revival may well come in the form of corruption from within the confines of the church rather than opposition from the quarters of self-proclaimed unbelievers.⁶

⁵ The epithets "father of lies" and "angel of light" come from John 8:44 and 2 Corinthians 11:14, respectively. Also note the Genesis serpent's designation as "crafty" (ESV), "subtil" (KJV), or "cunning" (NASB) in Genesis 3:1, in which passage he presents himself as a friend offering advice rather than a naked antagonist.

⁶ The latter form of opposition may easily be assigned merely to the flesh of unregenerate human nature that instinctively reacts against the repent-and-believe message of the gospel. See 1 Corinthians 2:14 and John 15:20. Of course room must be left for demonic opposition that is more conspicuous and direct as well.

Another pericope of Scripture offers a possible example of this principle in action, though a reasonable amount of inference may be necessary to connect the dots. Christ's letter to the church at Thyatira in Revelation 2:18-29 begins with praise for the congregation's increasing "love, faithfulness, service, and endurance," good works that have exceeded those of their past. While it would be an overstatement to categorize this spiritual growth as a revival, there is no doubt but that the Holy Spirit was at work and advancing the Kingdom of God through the believers in Thyatira. If this work of God is compared to the sowing of wheat in the aforementioned parable, then the corrupting influence of the Jezebel character in verses 20-24 corresponds to the infiltration of the tares. Directly alongside a spiritual renewal, a false prophetess emerges into a position of *de facto* leadership in the church and endeavors to spoil the good fruit of this local body of believers by enticing them into the sins of sexual immorality and idolatry, thereby bringing their good name into disrepute and draining them of spiritual power. Based on verse 24, Gordon Fee notes that it is "[v]ery likely" that this Jezebel was teaching "the deep things of Satan," implying that demonic influences were at work behind the scenes.⁷ Jezebel's position as a teacher from within the congregation rather than an outside antagonist, as well as the very probable demonic connection, fits well into the mold of the paradigm advanced in this paper.

The era of the Great Awakening, and particularly its zenith in the early 1740's, provides a fitting historical case study for this theological concept.⁸ The Great Awakening was a time of mass conversions and renewals of spiritual vitality that centered around a recovery of the New

⁷ Gordon D. Fee, *Revelation*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 42.

⁸ Thomas Kidd refers to the early years of the 1740's as the Great Awakening proper, while recognizing a larger trend that began prior to Edwards' Northampton Revival of the 1730's all the way to the American Revolution which he names the "long First Great Awakening." (Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), xix.) This paper will reference "the Great Awakening" with the latter in mind.

Testament doctrine of “the new birth.”⁹ Such was the significance of these religious upheavals that they are today recognized as being the launchpad of the rapid expansion of Christianity across the United States for decades thereafter, and it has been fairly stated that they “gave birth to American evangelical Christianity.”¹⁰ Given this tremendous positive impact of the events of the Great Awakening, the model advanced in this paper would predict demonic attempts to infiltrate, corrupt, and undermine the legitimate works of God taking place. And such a messy combination of good and evil is precisely what took place, if one takes a close look at some of the contemporary accounts and considers them in light of this paper’s proposed model.

The unprecedented characteristics of the Great Awakening revivals—dramatic bodily exertions, uncontrolled shouting, and fainting, among others—soon provoked waves of criticism from anti-revivalists who came to be known as the Old Lights, due to their conservatism in the outward forms of religious expression. Such pushback on what he saw as a legitimate move of God compelled Jonathan Edwards to deliver his address to Yale entitled *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*. In the expanded, printed version of this address, Edwards conceded that “delusions of Satan” were evident in some of these revivals and that Satan might have the ability to “mimic” works of God, but he argued that these instances were on the periphery of a largely positive movement. He spoke in support of the evangelicals and rejected the Old Light approach of attributing everything to Satan simply because he was involved to some degree. Edwards’ approach of discernment was based upon 1 John 4:1’s admonition to “not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.”¹¹ He understood this to mean judging a work by its fruit, not by its novelty or messiness.

⁹ Ibid., xv.

¹⁰ Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: A Brief History with Documents*, The Bedford Series in History and Culture, ed. by Thomas S. Kidd (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2008), vii.

¹¹ Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America*, 118-119.

Whether or not he had Proverbs 14:4 in mind, Edwards adopted the mindset of the diligent, wise man who recognizes that fruitful work will come with an unavoidable messiness, even a demonically caused messiness in this instance. To further the analogy, this often difficult work of discernment becomes the proverbial “cleanup job” that the sluggard shrinks from, and the “clean trough” approach of the Old Lights deprives them of sharing in the monumental blessings happening all around them.

A notable instance of this “messy work” is evident in the ministry of James Davenport, a radical evangelical prominent in the early 1740’s revivals. Beyond the realm of his Southold congregation, Davenport was a major player in the Long Island and southern Connecticut revivals, pioneering the preaching of the new birth in this region.¹² The fruit of his itinerations cannot be readily dismissed, particularly as he is credited with the conversion of a young Samson Occom, who went on to become the most well-known and respected Native American minister of the century.¹³

On the other end of the spectrum, James Davenport had a reputation for excessive enthusiasm, divisiveness, and reckless trust of mental impressions over the authority of Scripture. Unsurprisingly, the anti-revivalists pointed to these faults as evidence of the illegitimacy of the revivals in general, and moderate evangelicals considered Davenport as giving more advantage to Satan in undermining the revivals than the anti-revivalists themselves.¹⁴ Davenport’s antics came to a head at his infamous bonfire in New London, Connecticut, where he and his zealous followers burned the books of ostensibly faithful Christians that veered from his idiosyncratic conceptions of revival, whilst consigning the

¹² Ibid., 62-63.

¹³ Ibid., 206.

¹⁴ Ibid., 140.

authors to eternal torment in hell. This accomplished, he proceeded on the following day to burn his own pants on account of their supposed vanity, which broke the spell over his followers, as it were, and led to the collapse of his ministry and reputation.¹⁵

In the near future, James Davenport would recant many of his earlier actions, apologizing to and reconciling with a number of ministers and writing of his faults. Pertinent to this study is his comments in his *Confessions and Retractions*, wherein he admits to being influenced by “misguided Zeal” working in tandem with a “false Spirit” which operated unbeknownst to him. He points to this as the reason for his misconduct in 1) publicly naming other ministers as unregenerate, 2) urging his followers to abandon their local churches to form separate congregations, 3) following impulses over Scripture (with the bonfire incident undoubtedly in mind), 4) encouraging neophyte, non-ordained exhorters to preach publicly, and 5) whipping up frenetic singing crowds in the streets.¹⁶

Despite his regret over these wrongheaded and demonically inspired missteps, Davenport still considered the Great Awakening a “glorious and wonderful Work of [God’s] Power and Grace” and that he was directly assisted and given success by the Lord in his preaching of the new birth. In this retrospective evaluation of his own ministry, Davenport understood that negative “appendages...of a different and contrary Nature and Tendency” existed alongside the glorious work of the Holy Spirit. His regret was that of promoting the appendages at the expense of the true work of God.¹⁷ At the same time, he did not regret being part of the evangelical movement as a whole, as evidenced by his later warm affiliation with Jonathan Edwards.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid., 153-155.

¹⁶ James Davenport, *The Reverend Mr. Davenport’s Confessions and Retractions* (Boston, 1744), 3-8, cited in *The Great Awakening: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. by Thomas S. Kidd, 109-111.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America*, 154, 201.

Another episode of the Great Awakening germane to this study is that of Georgia planter and radical evangelical Hugh Bryan. Converted under the preaching of George Whitefield in 1740, Bryan soon became a direct protege of Whitefield and carried on the work of revival in the Georgia colony. His story is characterized by several radical evangelical distinctives, including a censorious attitude toward non-evangelical ministers, experiences of spiritual ecstasies, and willingness to act on the guidance of mental impressions.¹⁹ Whitefield's close friendship with Bryan and commitment to disciple him speak volumes toward the sincerity of Bryan's conversion and resultant fruit. Bryan's penchant for following impressions, however, eventually led him to count himself a modern-day prophet, and he went on to agitate for a violent slave rebellion supposedly inspired by God. His mission and pretensions to prophethood were derailed, however, when he failed in a Mosaic attempt to split the waters of a river and came to his senses after nearly drowning, admitting that he had been under "a Delusion of Satan."²⁰

While it would be understandable to dismiss the entirety of Bryan's ministerial ventures on the basis of his delusional and demonically-instigated prophetic blunders, this was not the unanimous verdict among contemporaries. Jonathan Barber, one of Whitefield's hand-picked directors of the Bethesda orphanage, conceded that Bryan was deceived by Satan in some respects, yet Barber defended Bryan as an "honest, humble Man" with an earnest desire to promote the best interests of the African slave population in the colonies. While not discounting Bryan's failings, Barber considered them much less severe than the sin of dead orthodoxy that was so ubiquitous in Georgia at the time.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid., 78, 217. Notably, Whitefield approved of Bryan's censures of the Anglican priests, at least at the beginning.

²⁰ Ibid., 218. His brother Jonathan Bryan spoke of Hugh being led by "an Invisible Spirit," discounting the interpretation of the "Delusion of Satan" being a mere figure of speech for sarcogenic enthusiasm. (Ibid.)

²¹ Ibid.

Barber’s view of Bryan opens the door to the interpretation that Bryan was targeted by demonic influences due to his evangelical trajectory and especially his connection to Whitefield. Instead of being an outright lunatic or vainglorious attention seeker, Bryan may well have started out with a sincerity and godliness that was a threat to the dominion of darkness, and perhaps immaturity or theological weakness (e.g. an unguarded willingness to follow impressions) made him an easy target of demonic agents on a mission to discredit and extinguish the burgeoning evangelical movement.^{22,23}

In these two episodes of the Great Awakening, two primary lines of demonic strategy may be inferred. The first of these is that of sinful division of the body of Christ.²⁴ One of the confessions and regrets of James Davenport—in which he ascribed partial blame to Satan’s influence—was that of publicly damning ministers of the gospel by name and encouraging their parishioners to separate from their congregations to form assemblies of their own. This with-us-or-against-us *modus operandi*, which was common among the radical evangelicals, left no room for charitably acknowledging non-evangelicals as fellow believers even though they may not have experienced conversion according to the radicals’ expected scheme.²⁵

The New Testament is filled with admonitions against the danger of division in the church. Jude calls divisive people “wordly” and “devoid of the Spirit.”²⁶ Paul urges his readers to

²² The dominion of darkness is a Pauline term (Colossians 1:13) alluding to the spiritual jurisdictions of Satan and his demonic colleagues.

²³ As further evidence of his sincerity, Bryan later became a moderate evangelical and went on to found a church that actively worked for the conversion of slaves, a people group for which that he had a particular love since the time of his conversion, though he no longer agitated for emancipation. (Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America*, 253-254.)

²⁴ The “sinful” modifier is necessary for clarification since there are clear Scriptural instructions to separate from unrepentant professors of the faith (e.g. 1 Corinthians 5:11-13, Matthew 18:15-17). Therefore not all division of the visible church ought to be categorized as sinful.

²⁵ For Davenport, it didn’t leave room for acknowledging even moderate evangelicals as fellow believers.

²⁶ Jude 19.

avoid “those who cause divisions,”²⁷ warning them up to a mere two times before shunning such “warped and sinful” actors.²⁸ His clarion call to the church is to be of one mind²⁹ and to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,”³⁰ in keeping with the Lord’s petition “that they may be one.”³¹ In the Old Testament, moreover, we learn that “one who sows discord among brothers” is an abomination to Yahweh.³² For the saints’ perennial enemy looking to cripple them, attacking this central pillar of unity by influencing them to sow discord and divisions amongst themselves appears as a plausible line of attack. Sadly, the evangelical movement of the eighteenth century was a fractured one, even from the early years of the 1740’s, with moderate and radical evangelicals diverging from one another and at times censoring one another, to the detriment of the overall growth of the movement centered on the doctrine of the experiential new birth. In retrospect, it would be no stretch of the imagination or biblical principles to ascribe part of this division to demonic infiltration and subsequent corruption of key players in positions of influence.

The second demonic strategy plausibly inferred from these episodes is that of discrediting the revivals in the eyes of the public at large, including both believers and non-believers. In discussing the proper decorum for employing the gift of tongues in a congregational setting, Paul has a concern that these Spirit-filled believers not come across as insane to outside observers.³³ And in his list of requirements for those aspiring to the office of overseer, he insists that candidates be “well thought of by outsiders” lest they fall into “disgrace...a snare of the devil.”³⁴

²⁷ Romans 16:17.

²⁸ Titus 3:10.

²⁹ 1 Corinthians 1:10.

³⁰ Ephesians 4:3.

³¹ John 17:11.

³² Proverbs 6:19.

³³ 1 Corinthians 14:23.

³⁴ 1 Timothy 3:7. Cf. 1 Peter 3:13-17.

Clearly there is a legitimate, biblical concern for appearing sane and reputable to outsiders; otherwise, disgrace will fall on the person, church, or movement in question.

According to Thomas Kidd, the various streams of revival in the Great Awakening suffered setbacks due to the unnecessary stigma caused by the excesses of the radicals. He writes that by sometime in the year 1742, “the taint of enthusiasm seems finally to have jaded popular opinion” of the evangelical movement, causing many of those previously intrigued by the revivals to be dismissive of them.³⁵ Due to the Bryan brothers’ close connection with George Whitefield, the Hugh Bryan prophetic scandal brought the Grand Itinerant’s name (along with the movement it represented) into general disrepute, with one skeptic attributing the incident to the “Workings of Whitefieldism in its native Tendency,” implying that these outrageous actions were not appendages to the evangelical movement, but the essence and truest form of it.³⁶ Likewise, Davenport’s embarrassing bonfire incident gave critics the ammunition to assert that such behavior “had illuminated evangelicals’ true colors.”³⁷ Again, to posit this resultant disgrace and its corresponding retardation of the awakenings as a deliberate strategy of the evil one is well within biblical bounds, particularly in light of Paul’s designation of disgrace as “a snare of the devil.”³⁸

The general thesis of this paper being established, questions of applicability to contemporary religious movements are warranted. Harkening back to the paradigm sketched out in the introductory proverb and developed throughout this essay, one must determine who today

³⁵ Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America*, 155.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 218.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 155.

³⁸ Charles Wesley records a transatlantic example of demonic interference in the evangelical movement, wherein he recounts meeting a man who associated with the cultic French prophets and considered their authority equal to that of the Old Testament prophets. This man, in the middle of their discussion, “fell into violent agitations and gobbled like a turkey cock.” Wesley proceeded to exorcise a demon from the man. (Charles Wesley in *The Nature of Revival*, The Wesley Library for Today’s Reader, ed. by Clare G. Weakley (Minneapolis, Minn: Bethany House, 1987), 126.)

fit the descriptions of the wise and sluggard in this area of discernment of spiritual awakenings. Edwards, in his era, viewed those who steadfastly opposed the works of revival *in toto* as not only spurning a genuine work of God but also missing out on the blessings of spiritual renewal in their own congregations and personal lives. Their tendency to reject the entire package due to a peripheral chaos may well be categorized as a sluggard's rejection of the laborious task of divining right from wrong. Rather, these types awaited a move of God that would be clean cut, respectable according to social norms of the time, and absent interference from the evil one. It might be argued that these standards are strict to the point that they would only be possible in the eschatological glory. Edwards and his collaborators in the evangelical movement, however, understood the mixture of good and evil in revival and—putting on the mantle of the wise, diligent man of Proverbs—dutifully took upon themselves the careful task of discerning right from wrong, godly from demonic.

An obvious modern-day instance of such a muddied work of God—in many ways parallel to the landscape of the Great Awakening—would be the Pentecostal and Charismatic renewal movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While much can be said of the abuses and even demonic influences adjacent to and at times pervading these spiritual awakenings,³⁹ one must fairly acknowledge the monumental fruits of mass conversions and renewals of personal holiness and spiritual power that have resulted therefrom. According to a 2011 survey, these fast-growing movements comprise an estimated 584 million Christians worldwide, an astonishing figure that presents difficulties for those seeking to dismiss the entirety of them as fueled by nothing more than fleshly or demonic delusion.⁴⁰ Those involved in

³⁹ Among the most well-known catalogues of these errors is John MacArthur, *Strange Fire: The Danger of Offending the Holy Spirit with Counterfeit Worship* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2013), as well as the 2013 conference of the same name.

⁴⁰ “Global Christianity – A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Christian Population,” Pew Research Center, December 19, 2011, <https://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>.

what are known today as “discernment ministries,” of which there are legion, may often be guilty of sluggard-esque rank dismissal based on erroneous presuppositions about what a work of God must look like, rather than engaging in true, careful discernment.

Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the fruits and correlative demonic interferences in these charismatic movements, the theological concepts presented and defended in this paper provide a helpful paradigm for the reader who may be engaged in such a process of discernment, wherein Spirit-instigated renewal is discerned from demonic influences that seek to divide the church and discredit the work of God. In doing so, the reader may appropriate the wisdom of the diligent archetype of Proverbs and expect to share in the fruits of genuine revivals rather than eschewing this responsibility and being deprived of the accompanying blessings.

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