

**DISCERNING THE MARKS OF THE SPIRIT:  
TEEN REVIVALS SEEN THROUGH THE LENS OF JONATHAN EDWARDS'S  
PNEUMATOLOGY**

To read the reports and reflections of those who have attended, teen revivals are one of two things. Either, they are the hope and salvation of the church in the United States because they attract thousands of youth to each event, convict them of the power of Christ, and wage war against the corrupting influences of today's media-saturated society.<sup>1</sup> Or, teen revivals are corrupting influences that manipulate youth using the trappings of popular culture while indoctrinating them with theologies of hate and intolerance.<sup>2</sup> Whichever side of the controversy you find yourself on, it is clear that youth revivals are impacting teens by the tens of thousands; and, while the media is critiquing and reporting on this phenomenon, the scholarly community has yet to respond. This paper is an attempt to remedy that lack of attention by critiquing one teen revival company using the pneumatology of Jonathan Edwards.

Jonathan Edwards may seem a strange choice, having lived over two centuries ago in a time when revival looked very different than it does today, but I argue his theology is an important tool in evaluating revivals today for two reasons. First, Edwards's own writings directly addressed the concept of revival. Using theology, particularly a theology of the Holy Spirit, Edwards critiqued not only the theology of revival, but the spirituality, or lived experience of the revival as well. Second, Edwards attempted to walk a fine middle line in his critique: he willingly acknowledged both the importance as well as the excesses of revival. This balance

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Becky Tirabassi, "Young, Restless, and Ready for Revival : On-Campus Christians Are Seeking Holiness in Unexpected Numbers," *Christianity Today* Dec 2007 (2007 2007); Mary Beth McCauley, "Extreme Devotion," *Christian Science Monitor* May 7, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Brad A. Greenberg, "'Get Out of San Francisco!'" *Christianity Today* 50, no. 6 (June 2006): 18-18; Jen Gerson, "Pop Culture Versus God," *The Toronto Star*, 2006 October 31, 2006; Jesse McKinley, "A Youth Ministry Some Call Antigay Tests Tolerance," *The New York Times*, 2007 March 9, 2007; Matthai Chakko Kuruvila, "Faith's Battlefield / S.F. Event Designed to Get Teens Energized About Evangelical Christianity Divides Believers With Its Combative Language and Emphasis on Culture War," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 2007 Mar 8.

makes it possible for those of us caught up in the controversy of teen revivals to both appreciate the potential and importance of teen revivals as well as critique their abuses.

For the purposes of presentation, I am going to describe one particular teen revival company, then briefly lay out a summary of Edwards's pneumatology and finally conclude with an evaluation of teen revivals using Edwards's pneumatology. To that end, I'd like to begin with a brief video that will show you a clip of the teen revivals put on by Teen Mania, a non-denominational company that puts on between 30 and 40 teen revivals across the United States and Canada every year.

[Video Clip]

Founded in 1986 by Ron and Katie Luce, Teen Mania endeavors "to provoke a young generation to passionately pursue Jesus Christ and to take His life-giving message to the ends of the earth."<sup>3</sup> While it began small, today Teen Mania reaches hundreds of thousands of youth each year through their revivals, international mission trips, summer camps, internship programs, television shows and internet ministries. BattleCry and Acquire the Fire, their two live revival events, are by far the most well-known ministries due both to the sheer number of youth they reach as well as the news media they provoke. In 2007, Teen Mania reported that over 200,000 teenagers attended 37 BattleCry and Acquire the Fire events in North America.<sup>4</sup>

According to Teen Mania, today's teenagers are a generation in moral peril, "a generation in crisis ... without morality ... without truth"<sup>5</sup> and "whoever raises their voices the loudest in

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<sup>3</sup> Teen Mania Ministries, "Corporate Site Homepage," <http://www.teenmania.org/corporate/index.cfm> (accessed October 26, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Teen Mania Ministries, "Annual Report 2006/07."

<sup>5</sup> Ministries, "Corporate Site Homepage".

culture, shapes culture.”<sup>6</sup> To this end, Teen Mania spends millions of dollars<sup>7</sup> on each event to make sure their message is as catchy, relevant, and attractive as the messages of pop culture. In the fight for today’s teenagers, Teen Mania is waging war. According to Ron Luce, one of the founders and the primary spokesperson, Teen Mania is “trying to educate kids about how pop culture is putting them in a trance ... I call these people terrorists. They’re virtue terrorists because they’re ripping any kind of moral virtue from our kids. They’re worse than Al Qaeda because they give kids a piece of candy with poison in it and then laugh as they take their money to the bank as (the kids) die morally.”<sup>8</sup> At a rally in San Francisco, Luce charged that advertisers are “raping virgin teenage America on the sidewalk, and everybody’s walking by and acting like everything’s OK. And it’s just not OK.”<sup>9</sup> For Teen Mania, the ministries they are engaged in are a matter of life and death for the souls of today’s American teenagers and they are willing to pull out all the stops in order to compete with the money and media of their opponents.

Teen Mania is not simply fighting *against* culture, however, they are also fighting **for** Christ. While half the battle may be against culture, BattleCry and Acquire the Fire revivals are also designed to draw youth closer to Christ through worship. To this end, Teen Mania brings in popular Christian musicians<sup>10</sup> and speakers<sup>11</sup> to inspire teenagers and provide alternative role models. Additionally, as the video showed, the revivals are technologically-savvy, using lighting

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<sup>6</sup> O’Reilly Factor, “Ron Luce on the O’reilly Factor,” *Youtube.com*.

<sup>7</sup> According to their 2006-2007 Annual Report, Teen Mania spent over 28 million dollars in 2006-2007 on their ministry expenses. Ministries, “Annual Report 2006/07”.

<sup>8</sup> Gerson, “Pop Culture Versus God”.

<sup>9</sup> Christiane Amanpour, Julie O’Neill, and Taylor Gandossy, “Teen Christians Campaign Against Pop Culture,” *CNN* (August 23, 2007):.

<sup>10</sup> Bands for the 2008-2009 Acquire the Fire include David Crowder, Unhindered, Skillet, and Leeland, among others. Teen Mania Ministries, “Here Comes Trouble: Acquire the Fire '08-'09 Bands,” <http://events.acquirethefire.com/index.php/bands/> (accessed December 1, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Speakers for the 2008-2009 Acquire the Fire include Ron Luce, Joel & Casey Johnson, and Mike Guzzardo, Teen Mania Ministries, “Here Comes Trouble: Acquire the Fire '08-'09 Speakers,” <http://events.acquirethefire.com/index.php/speakers/> (accessed December 1, 2008).

effects, dramas, fireworks and pyrotechnics to create an atmosphere of energy and emotion. It is in this fevered environment that Teen Mania projects its message of salvation and evangelism.<sup>12</sup>

### **EDWARDS'S PNEUMATOLOGY:**

While *Acquire the Fire* and *BattleCry* revivals are primarily anthropocentric insofar as they rely on the personalities of their speakers, the popularity of their musicians, and the ability of their participants to make a life-changing decision, Jonathan Edwards saw revival in a different light. Rather than a staged event or even a protracted meeting, revival in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was seen as a movement of the Spirit. While the advent of revival might have been attributed to a particular sermon or period of prayer, revival was not an event, but a long-lasting renewal of the community's faith.

Pastor of the congregational church in Northampton, Edwards saw small revivals occur under the leadership of his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, but it was after his grandfather's death that revival became a significant part of church life in Northampton. The first notable revival occurred during 1734-1735, but it was in 1740 that the revival that would later be known as the Great Awakening began. Jonathan Edwards was respected then, as he still is today, as a theologian of revival.

In endeavoring to understand revivals theologically, Edwards relied on a theology of the Spirit. According to Edwards, true religion consisted both of right understanding and religious affections: **light and heat**, and neither without the other. While understanding is rooted in the mind, affections are the result of our inclinations and reside in the soul. Religious affections, as opposed to commonplace affections, are given by the Spirit. Moreover, the Spirit gives two kinds of affections: saving and ordinary. Given the different kinds of affections and the different

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<sup>12</sup> Teen Mania Ministries, "Atf 2008-2009 Trailer," *Acquire the Fire Website*.

sources they could come from, Edwards deemed it essential to be able to discern the difference. If true religion consisted in right understanding and religious affection, one needed to be able to tell if their affections were from the Spirit or not; and if they were from the Spirit, if they were saving or not. To this end, Edwards wrote multiples treatises and works on discerning the marks of the Spirit. [As a side note, it is helpful to know that Edwards referred to saving affections alternately as saving, gracious, or true affections.]

Edwards began by describing signs which do not determine one way or another the nature of the affection. Signs that fall into this category are: effects on the body, confidence in the holiness of the experience, affections raised to a high level, the ability to speak coherently on religious topics, Scripture passages brought to mind, and the list goes on. All of these Edwards argued could be signs of a saving affection or signs of the devil at work. In beginning with this list, Edwards undercut both the supporters of the revival who relied on signs such as these to confirm the sanctity of their own experiences as well as the critics of the revival who pointed to these signs as clear indications that these were purely emotional and ecstatic experiences.

Edwards, however, was not content simply to lay out signs that could not be used to judge experiences, he also delineated those signs by which one could distinguish gracious affections. To begin with, true affections arise from divine influences and are wonderful in and of themselves, apart from what they might do for us. Edwards notes particularly that there are some hypocrites who, “instead of rejoicing in Christ Jesus, they rejoice in their admirable experiences.”<sup>13</sup> It is not the experiences themselves, nor any benefits one might receive that will be the object of attention when one is affected by the gracious work of the Spirit; rather, attention

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<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections*, (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 177

will be directed to God. Moreover, the stronger a true affection gets, the more one longs after God and spiritual things.<sup>14</sup>

Along similar lines, true affections allow for correct understanding, “holy affections are not heat without light.”<sup>15</sup> As was noted above, Edwards deliberately took a middle position in the debates surrounding revivals, arguing forcefully that true religion consisted partly in true affections, but that it also required correct understanding. To this end, Edwards also argued that true affections are attended with reasonable and spiritual conviction, by which he meant a conviction grounded in real evidence.

Third, Edwards argued that holy affections are attended with humiliation, a dove-like nature, and tenderness of spirit. With regard to humiliation, Edwards argued that true affections cause one to be aware of one’s own utter depravity. With regard to the second two qualities, a dove-like nature was Christ’s nature and therefore the nature of the Christian spirit that is laid upon the souls of those converted so that one’s heart is softened. Anticipating objections similar to those raised against the teen revivals, Edwards wrote,

But here some may be ready to say, Is there no such thing as Christian fortitude, and boldness for Christ, being good soldiers in the Christian warfare, and coming out boldly against the enemies of Christ and His people? To which I answer, There doubtless is such a thing. The whole Christian life is compared to a warfare, and fitly so. . . . It is the duty of God’s people to be steadfast and vigorous in their opposition to the designs and ways of such as are endeavoring to overthrow the kingdom of Christ and the interest of religion. But yet many people seem to be quite mistaken concerning the nature of Christian fortitude. . . . True Christian fortitude consists in strength of mind, through grace, exerted in two things; in ruling and suppressing evil and unruly passions and affections of the mind; and in steadfastly and freely exerting and following good affections and dispositions, without being hindered by sinful fear of the opposition enemies.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 303

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 192

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 277.

In this way, Edwards clearly confines the image of battle to one's own personal struggle with evil and unruly passions, and not only the negative struggle with passions, but the positive struggle to allow true affections to flourish.

Finally, Edwards argues that true affections have “beautiful symmetry and proportion” and are best evidenced in Christian practice.<sup>17</sup> It is in talking about the symmetry of the religious affections that Edwards talks about the importance of consistency in the religious life, “if therefore persons are religious only by fits and starts; if they now and then seem to be raised up to the clouds in their affections, and then suddenly fall down again, lose all, and become quite careless and carnal ... they clearly evince their unsoundness.”<sup>18</sup> Edwards spends quite a bit of time on this final sign arguing that behavior is always guided by Christian rules, holy practice is the most important aspect of one's life and that one will persist in this way for the whole of one's life.<sup>19</sup>

## **EVALUATION:**

Having briefly surveyed Edwards's pneumatology, it is now possible to look again at Teen Mania's revivals through the lens of Edwards's theology. When we do so, five important critiques emerge. **First**, Edwards's own balance in affirming the need for revival while also critiquing its excesses, along with his insistence that the marks of the Spirit not be used as a checklist by which one might judge another's experience reminds us that discerning the effects of the revival, whether or not one has had a “religious” experience, is something only the individual can do. Nevertheless, one can critique the revival itself. One of Edwards's insights

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 292, 308

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 298-299.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 308.

was his use of theology to critique not only different theology, but also practices, recognizing that every practice has an implicit, if not explicit, theology. Teen revivals are no exception.

**Second**, according to Edwards, true affections arise from divine influences and are wonderful in and of themselves apart from what they might do for us. In other words, true affections are theocentric, not anthropocentric and certainly not experience-oriented. Despite Teen Mania's claim to be branding youth with the gospel, their revivals are far more focused on the experience, the big name speakers and musicians, and the individual decision for Christ than on the power and mystery of God. Moreover, where Edwards saw revival as a gift of the Spirit, Teen Mania seems to think of revival as a product that can be manufactured and sold.

**Third**, true affections are not heat without light. In other words, true religion, as Edwards defines it, requires both heartfelt emotion as well as right understanding. Teen Mania promotes emotion and experience at the expense of solid theology. While there are speakers and sermons at the revivals, it is the emotion, the loud music, the spectacular lights and the crowd effect that command the attention of youth, who remark on what an amazing experience they had, how much fun it was, and how amazing the dramas and the bands were; it is rare to come across a teen response that remarks on the new understanding they gained. Teen Mania manufactures "high" experiences in order to make an impression on youth. Unfortunately, they fail to do the follow up, leaving it to youth or their leaders to lead them through the day-to-day struggles that accompany a life of faith.

**Fourth**, true affections are attended with humiliation, a dove-like nature, and tenderness of spirit. Here we run up against the violent and extreme language that Teen Mania utilizes. While Edwards acknowledged that the Christian life is a battle, he was clear in making it primarily a personal battle. Ron Luce may be correct that Christians need to wage a war against

the culture if he believes, as Edwards put it, that it is “endeavoring to overthrow the kingdom of God,” but Luce places the emphasis on being the loudest voice with the most expensive show while Edwards argues for a struggle to resist and live out of one’s affections. Luce and Edwards may be seeing the same battle, but they are fighting different fights.

**Finally**, Edwards talks about the importance of symmetry, proportion and practice. Teen Mania revivals show little of these. The hyped-up rhetoric, the one-sided social commentary and theological perspective and the emphasis on this singular experience all lead to unrealistic expectations of what the Christian life is, what it involves and the disciplines required to sustain it. Although the battle cry to purge oneself of popular culture is a popular one that is easy to rally around, it is ultimately unrealistic. Living the Christian life might mean being *in* the world rather than *of* the world, but it also means be able to live *with* the world. No teenager today will succeed in completely shedding all of popular culture, and the guilt these revivals are setting them up to experience when they fail is overwhelming. Moreover, the Christian life is not about guilt; it is, as Edwards says, about symmetry, proportion and practice. These virtues are harder to rally around and don’t make as powerful a slogan, but true religion depends on them and we are misleading our teenagers until we teach them about the harder, balancing work required to live a life of faith in today’s culture.

[Using Edwards’s pneumatology, one cannot make every possible critique of contemporary teen revivals. Nevertheless, Edwards’s theology is a helpful tool in bringing sound, balanced theology to bear on a contemporary spiritual experience. The end result is not only a fuller understanding of teen revivals and a better sense of their shortcomings, but also one possible model for using historical theology to evaluate contemporary spirituality.]

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