

THE LIFE AND MINISTRY OF GILBERT TENNENT

By Pastor Chris Anderson¹

In his own day Gilbert Tennent (1703-1764) was a renowned pastor and leader of the first Great Awakening. As an historical figure, however, he has been outshone by such men as George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards and is largely forgotten. Our neglect of this good man is unfortunate, for he is in many ways exemplary of pastoral ministry. His personal life, theological and ministerial distinctives and contributions to the first Great Awakening are filled with lessons for the pastor today.

I. GILBERT TENNENT'S PERSONAL AND MINISTERIAL LIFE

Tennent's Upbringing

Gilbert was the eldest of four sons of the Presbyterian preacher and educator, William Tennent. He was informally educated for the ministry by his father, who later would found what came to be known (especially by its critics) as "the Log College." Besides helping to fill vacant pulpits with good men, the school was started as a reaction against the dead orthodoxy being promoted within the Presbyterian denomination in the colonies.

Tennent's Mentors

Two men had a particularly strong role in shaping Gilbert Tennent's spiritual life, effectively "laying the kindling" for the revival fires the Lord would eventually send.

I. William Tennent, Sr.

The Tennent "patriarch" made his finest contribution to the Great Awakening through his Log College, located about 20 miles north of Philadelphia.² After training Gilbert in his home, William started the more formal training of men in 1726 in an effort "to prepare ministers to preach a personalized message that called men to repentance."³ As its name suggests, it was a simple log cabin built in the corner of William Tennent's yard, and it was ultimately used to train 19 men (including 4 Tennents) for the ministry. Archibald Alexander made the following comment about the College founded by William Tennent: "The surest criterion by which to judge of the character of any school, is to observe the attainments and habits of those educated in it."⁴ The school founded by William Tennent, by this measure, was fine indeed. The graduates of the Log College were very prominent among the revival's leaders. These men would later rally around the leadership of Gilbert, who assisted his father with teaching during the school's first year.

Though the school's graduates were sometimes derided for their poor education, the charges were unfounded. Kuiper writes the following of William and his school:

¹ This lecture was originally presented to the 2002 Ohio Bible Fellowship Pastor's Conference.

² Archibald Alexander, *Biographical Sketches of the Founder and Principal Alumni of the Log College* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1851), 24.

³ M. E. Dieter, "Revivalism" in *The Concise Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 435.

⁴ Alexander, 9.

“He trained his students very thoroughly in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, in logic and in theology. Above all he stirred in them a fervent evangelical spirit.”⁵ Iain Murray explains how the institution filled a large gap within the early American church:

“At the time of The Great Awakening the log colleges of such men as William Tennent at Neshaminy and Samuel Blair at Fagg’s Manor had done more to supply able men for the ministry than had such older institutions as Harvard and Yale which had identified themselves with the criticism of the revival.”⁶

Tennent’s Log College was the unofficial forerunner to The College of New Jersey at Princeton.

It was William who taught Gilbert the traits for which the Tennent family would become famous: a passion for experiential religion, the importance of sound doctrine and the willingness to battle for truth. His own battles – including his separation from the Irish Episcopal Church prior to his immigration to the American colonies – were but a foretaste of those his sons would engage in.⁷

2. Theodore J. Frelinghuysen.

Tennent’s first pastorate was in New Brunswick, New Jersey. By the providence of God, this church was just miles from a Dutch Reformed church pastured by Theodore J. Frelinghuysen, whom some credit with being the human vessel used to start the Great Awakening. Frelinghuysen’s served as mentor to the young Tennent, especially reinforcing the pietistic ideas which were planted by his father, the most important of which was the necessity of repentance and conversion. Practically, Frelinghuysen seems to have introduced the idea of “preaching terrors” to Tennent’s pulpit ministry.⁸

Tennent’s Pastoral Ministry

Tennent’s ministry covered all of the colonies and most of Great Britain at some point in his life. However, it can be summarized by his two pastorates:

1. He pastored the Presbyterian Church of New Brunswick (1726-1743).

It was here that he learned from Frelinghuysen and here that he first met George Whitefield. During this time, Tennent traveled often to promote the Awakening. His ministry here was especially characterized by fiery evangelistic messages.

2. He pastored the Second Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia (1743-1764).

During this time, Tennent traveled less in the American colonies. He did, however, tour Great Britain to raise funds for the fledgling College of New Jersey (1753-1754). His ministry here (for reasons to be seen) was especially characterized by expository preaching.

⁵ B. K. Kuiper, *The Church in History* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1951), 418-19.

⁶ Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 13-14.

⁷ Alexander, 15.

⁸ Milton J. Coalter, Jr., *Gilbert Tennent, Son of Thunder: A Case Study of Continental Pietism’s Impact on the First Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 20.

II. GILBERT TENNENT'S THEOLOGICAL AND MINISTERIAL DISTINCTIVES

It is sometimes easiest to classify a man's positions by considering his friends and foes. Tennent had plenty of both:

Tennent's theological and ministerial positions are evident from his friends.

1. **He was a student of Theodore J. Frelinghuysen and William Tennent.**
2. **He was a co-laborer and mentor of George Whitefield and Samuel Davies.**

- Whitefield wrote the following of his friend and co-laborer:

"I never before heard such a searching sermon. He convinced me more and more that we can preach the Gospel of Christ no further than we have experienced the power of it in our own hearts. Being deeply convicted of sin, by God's Holy Spirit, at his first conversion, he has learned experimentally to dissect the heart of a natural man. Hypocrites must either soon be converted or enraged at his preaching. He is a son of thunder, and does not fear the faces of men."⁹

Though Whitefield would eventually become the "Paul" and Tennent the "Barnabas," some suggest that even Whitefield's fiery preaching bore the fingerprints of Tennent's influence.¹⁰

- Samuel Davies, the fiery preacher and Tennent's companion during his trip to Great Britain in order to raise funds for The College of New Jersey, grew to especially appreciate the older Tennent, referring to him as his "Spiritual Father."¹¹

3. **He was greatly admired by C.H. Spurgeon.**

Spurgeon, who lived a century and an ocean apart from Tennent, referred to him several times, calling him "one of the most earnest and seraphic men who ever proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ."¹² Spurgeon at other times referred to him as "Holy Mr. Tennant....a man remarkable for eloquence"¹³ and "the mighty American preacher."¹⁴

His theological and ministerial positions are evident from his foes.

As stated earlier, Tennent was loved or hated; he left people no middle ground. And those who opposed him did so very publicly and venomously.

1. **He battled "Old Light" Presbyterians.**

These battles took place within the Presbyterian denomination with those often referred to as "subscriptionists" because of their insistence that those within their denomination subscribe to the *Westminster Confession and Catechism*. This label is

⁹ Ibid., 73.

¹⁰ Ibid., 73.

¹¹ Ibid., 147.

¹² Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 46, p. 114.

¹³ Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 16, p. 639.

¹⁴ Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 42, p. 661.

somewhat misleading, however, because Tennent himself gladly agreed to the need for subscription to the creed as a test of orthodoxy. His differences with the so-called subscriptionists (for lack of a better term) were as follows:

Tennent and the “Revivalists” in New Jersey	“Subscriptionists” represented by the Presbyterian Synod in Philadelphia
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proponents of the Great Awakening. • Sought renewal of the dead denomination through conversion and pietism, especially among the clergy. • Especially loyal to the Log College • Fought for a level of autonomy, especially at the level of the presbytery. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opponents of the Great Awakening. • Sought renewal of the dead denomination through tests of orthodoxy and strict standards for admittance to ministry. • Especially critical of the Log College • Fought for synod control of presbyteries, churches and men.

Tennent was especially critical of those whom he judged to be unconverted clergy within his denomination, a criticism which he made publicly in his famous sermon “The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry.” Alexander, though a great admirer of Tennent, calls this sermon “one of the most severely abusive sermons which was ever penned.”¹⁵ It was this sermon which especially made the split of the Presbyterian denomination in the colonies inevitable.¹⁶ The schism finally took place in 1741 when the revivalists were forced out by the majority subscriptionists. The division is summarized in *The Concise Dictionary of Christianity in America*:

“During the 1730s and 1740s Presbyterians suffered internal divisions over questions regarding the theological legitimacy and ecclesiastical propriety of the Great Awakening. Under the leadership of Gilbert Tennent, ‘New Side’ Presbyterians labored to advance the Awakening, against the objections of ‘Old Side’ traditionalists.”¹⁷

These battles – along with his revival preaching – especially characterized the first half of Tennent’s ministry. It is worth noting that aforementioned schism was healed—in large part due to Tennent’s efforts—in 1758.¹⁸ Further, Tennent later regretted having preached the sermon.¹⁹

2. He battled Arminianism, especially as expressed by the Moravians.

Unfortunately, Tennent’s good emphasis on practical piety and experiential Christianity was taken to the extreme by some of his co-laborers and hearers. The result was an emotionalism that was not guarded by orthodoxy. A sect known as the Moravians especially hijacked the enthusiasm of the Awakeners. When they combined it with their extreme Arminianism (and even Universalism), the result was

¹⁵ Alexander, 38.

¹⁶ Ian Paisley, *Those Flaming Tennents!*, 16.

¹⁷ “Old School Presbyterians” in *Concise Dictionary of Christianity in America*, Daniel G. Reid, ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 249.

¹⁸ Alexander, 40.

¹⁹ Archibald Alexander, ed. *Sermons of the Log College* (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1993), 404.

tragic. Tennent's response to the Moravian enthusiasts was two-fold: like Nehemiah's remnant in Nehemiah 4, he wielded both the sword and the trowel. With his literary sword he aggressively opposed the Moravians, publishing a 110-page attack on Moravian doctrinal errors entitled *The Necessity of holding fast the Truth*.²⁰ And with his trowel he aggressively built up his hearers in orthodox doctrine. This battle for truth especially characterized the second half of Tennent's ministry.

As stated, Tennent's later battles were vastly different from those he fought as a young man. Whereas critics saw this shift as a change of heart or position—a flip-flop—it was in reality a change of *circumstance* and *need*. Tennent never changed his theological position or ministry philosophy. He initially preached “terrors,” emphasizing the need for regeneration and experiential piety. But as the swelling support of pietism became man-focused emotionalism, he moved to correct it with strong doctrinal messages. Thus, he addressed different needs with different emphases: against dead orthodoxy, he preached the necessity of heart religion. When that message was taken to excesses by his hearers, he preached the necessity of orthodoxy against mere emotionalism. Like many good men, he fought a battle on two fronts against two differing extremes.

Coalter's summary is insightful:

“Against the Old Lights, he had preached heart knowledge, conversion, and practical piety, while against the Moravians he had proclaimed the value of head knowledge, doctrine, and ecclesiastical order.”²¹

In modern terms, he was an active part of the “revival,” and he moved to correct it when it became “revivalism.”

Tennent's theological and ministerial positions may aptly be described as “balanced.”

Coalter writes,

“Colonial New Lights like Gilbert Tennent were neither heretics nor anarchists. They sought a balance between the demands of individual conscience and ecclesiastical structure, between ecumenical cooperation and denominational integrity, and between heartfelt piety and doctrinal probity (integrity).”²²

I. He carefully balanced doctrinal orthodoxy & experiential pietism.

- a. Tennent was unquestionably orthodox.
He was especially dogmatic regarding his Calvinistic theology. Alexander writes that his sermons were “rigidly orthodox.”²³
- b. Tennent added to doctrinal orthodoxy the need for heart religion – pietism.

²⁰ Coalter, 102.

²¹ Ibid., 115.

²² Ibid., 92-93.

²³ Alexander, *Biographical Sketches*, 66.

The *Concise Dictionary of Christianity in America* defines pietism as follows:

“In general terms Pietism represents a reaction against the lack of religious fervor, the moral laxity, the tendency toward cultural accommodation and the interconfessional bickering of the representatives of orthodoxy within the established Protestant communions....In 1720 Theodorus J. Frelinghuysen, a confirmed Pietist, arrived in America and presently took up his work in the Raritan Valley of New Jersey. Under his fervent preaching a revival broke out which attracted the Tennents – William Sr. and his son Gilbert. This fused the Pietist impulse with Puritanism.”²⁴

Tennent’s pietism was pietism at its best. It was not a denial of doctrinal orthodoxy, but a complement to it...a matter of both/and as opposed to either/or. It required heart religion to balance the head. It demanded conduct that paralleled creed. In particular, it especially emphasized *repentance* and *conversion* and the *godliness* that would surely result from it. He was particularly adamant about the need for regeneration. His own words demonstrate his position:

“Assent is necessary but not sufficient; Laws are not sufficiently owned when they are believed to be the Kings Laws. There is something to be done as well as believed....words without practice nor a profession without reality will do.”²⁵

Another of his statements demonstrate his balance of orthodoxy and pietism:

“[P]assion without knowledge and judgment [is but] vain fancy....knowledge and judgment without some degree of passion [is but] dead formality.”²⁶

Notice again the unstated correction of both the Old Lights and the Moravians.

2. He carefully balanced transdenominationalism & militant separatism.

The first Great Awakening was strikingly transdenominational, including orthodox men from a wide variety of denominational positions. M. A. Noll describes it thus:

“The first Great Awakening (ca. 1735-43) is associated with the labors of the Dutch Reformed clergyman Theodore Frelinghuysen, the Presbyterian Gilbert Tennent, the Congregationalist Jonathan Edwards, and especially the itinerant Anglican George Whitefield – all Calvinists whose theological commitments provided a definite shape for their work.”²⁷

Thus, their cooperation was based in their “like precious faith” and not prohibited by their differing distinctives and titles. Tennent, though a convinced Presbyterian, gladly co-laborered with these good men.

²⁴ “Pietism” in *Concise Dictionary of Christianity in America*, Daniel G. Reid, ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 267.

²⁵ Coalter, 6, 8.

²⁶ Ibid., 120.

²⁷ M. A. Noll, “The Great Awakenings” in *The Concise Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 211.

On the other hand, Tennent did not take his cooperative charity to an unbiblical extreme. When confronted with false teaching, Tennent (unlike Whitefield) separated on the basis of doctrinal error. Whereas Whitefield cooperated with the Universalist Moravians, who in Coalter's estimation "were willing, if not eager, to achieve [union of all Christians] by ignoring differences of creed or form," Tennent refused to fellowship with disbelief.²⁸ The exchange between Whitefield and Tennent is instructive. Because it is so parallel to the thoughts of our day, a lengthy passage from Coalter's book will be reproduced here:

"[Upon receiving a letter from Tennent concerning the Moravians' errors], Whitefield admitted that he did not agree with most of the Unitas Fratrum's principles, but he could not see why this disagreement should interfere with his or Tennent's cooperation with them. After all, he asked, 'Do not you and I preach up and profess a Cath[olic] Spirit.' Whitefield was convinced the Moravians were the 'Children of God' and their ultimate purpose was the 'glory of God and the good of souls.' Therefore, he chided his colonial friend for being too confined by his Presbyterian principles. As for himself, Whitefield declared he would continue to attempt to bring 'people to Jesus Christ and then let them join with such Congregations as they upon due urging judge to be nearest the Mind of Jesus Christ.'

"When Tennent answered Whitefield's letter in June 1742, he expressed deep disappointment over his colleague's views. 'Your high opinion of the Moravians and attempts to join with them Shocks me Exceedingly and opens a Scene of Terror and distress. Oh my dear brother! I believe in my Soul You never did anything in all your Life of such dreadful Tendency to the Church of God as your favouring that Sect of Enthusiastical Hereticks...'

"Tennent warned that 'there can be no scriptural valuable union without an assent to main Doctrinal Principles [for] any other Union is but a Confederacy against Truth and a betraying the Cause of God into the hands of Enemies.'" ²⁹

Tennent was neither sectarian nor ecumenical. When faced with disobedient Presbyterians, he corrected them. When faced with orthodox men from other denominations, he worked with them. When faced with unbelievers, he separated from them. Coalter again effectively summarizes the balance struck by Tennent:

"In the last analysis, theological systems were not as important to Whitefield as the fellowship of reborn Christians. Therefore, while he differed significantly with [the Moravians] in doctrine, he preferred to cooperate with the Moravians in practice.

"Tennent would not accept this strategy. Against the Old Lights of his synod, he had defended theological tolerance because he believed many doctrines were not essential for Christian fellowship or cooperation. But the sort of tolerance that required association with the Moravians amounted to theological suicide, in

²⁸ Coalter, 101.

²⁹ Ibid., 111-112.

his opinion, since it necessitated relinquishing essential tenets of the Reformed tradition.”³⁰

Tennent would later write that “tho’ we are earnestly to prosecute peace, yet not so far as to barter truth and holiness to obtain it.”³¹ At his funeral, Tennent’s friend Dr. Samuel Finley (himself a Log College graduate) said the following of his denominational balance:

“[A]lthough he was a great lover of the truth, and very zealous for its propagation; yet, he was so far above a narrow, party spirit, that he loved and honored all who seemed to have ‘the root of the matter in them,’ and made it their business to promote the essentials of religion, though they were in various points, opposed to his own sentiments.”³²

It is worth noting that Whitefield later published his disagreement with the Moravians and their doctrine at Tennent’s encouragement.³³

3. He carefully balanced Reformed doctrine & aggressive evangelism.

Regarding his evangelistic zeal. Tennent is especially noted for his “preaching of terrors,” through which he would convince his hearers of their depravity and guilt before a righteous God in a manner analogous to Edwards’ “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” He insisted that men must be shown their guilt and desperate need *before* they could be ready to hear of the remedy in Christ. Thus, to quote Coalter, Tennent believed that “warning was the truest mark of a Christian minister.”³⁴

Tennent’s method of “preaching terrors” had a tremendous influence on other revival preachers, most notably on George Whitefield. As carried out by these men, it was fervent application of Bible truth. It is easy to see how men with less scruples and doctrinal soundness would later abuse it, however.

4. He balanced higher education & practical godliness.

- As stated earlier, he was educated by his father before the formal foundation of the Log College.
- As stated earlier, he taught the first year at the Log College.
- He received an honorary M.A. from Yale in 1725 (before the controversy of the Awakening).³⁵
- He became a trustee of the College of New Jersey in 1747.³⁶
- He raised money in Great Britain for the College of New Jersey in 1753.
- He assisted with a student revival at the College in 1757.³⁷

The balance between education and piety is seen even in his famous sermon “The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry”:

³⁰ Ibid., 112.

³¹ Ibid., 157.

³² Alexander, *Biographical Sketches*, 28.

³³ Coalter, 130.

³⁴ Ibid., 22.

³⁵ Paisley, 11.

³⁶ Coalter, 144.

³⁷ Ibid., 151.

“The most likely method to stock the church with a faithful ministry, in the present situation of things, the public academies being so much corrupted and abused generally, is to encourage private schools or seminaries of learning, which are under the care of skilful and experienced Christians; in which those only should be admitted who, upon strict examination have, in the judgment of a reasonable charity, the plain evidences of experimental religion.”³⁸

III. GILBERT TENNENT’S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FIRST GREAT AWAKENING

Though Gilbert Tennent is outshined by such men as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, his contributions to the Great Awakening were no less significant. Alexander writes, “Indeed, all must acknowledge, that among the friends and promoters of the revival he stood pre-eminent.”³⁹ Whereas Edwards ministered mainly in the New England colonies and Whitefield traveled throughout the colonies, Tennent ministered in the middle colonies: New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania. All of them ministered during a time of moral and spiritual decline, and all of them issued a clarion call for sinners to repent, pastors to lead and churches and denominations to purify themselves. The result – by God’s grace – was a special “awakening” as the Holy Spirit stirred the slumbering masses and drew many to Christ.

Tennent was a crucial human catalyst to the beginning of the Great Awakening.

I. He contributed to the Awakening’s beginning through his pulpit ministry.

Historian Robert Hastings Nichols points to Tennent’s preaching as “one of the causes of the Great Awakening in America.”⁴⁰ Church historian B. K. Kuiper concurs:

“[T]hrough the warm evangelical preaching of Gilbert Tennent and the graduates of the Log College, a revival got under way which in course of time ran like a forest fire among the Presbyterians from Long Island to Virginia.”⁴¹

Most notably, Tennent’s ministry provided the “spark” that ignited the revival fires during a series of meetings in Staten Island in 1728. In Tennent’s own words, the people were

“generally affected about the State of their Souls; and some to that Degree, that they fell upon their Knees in the Time of the Sermon, in order to pray to God for pardoning Mercy: Many went Home from that Sermon; and then the general Inquiry was, what shall I do to be saved?”⁴²

Thus, the special working of the Spirit of God was evident and would continue: revival!

³⁸ Alexander, *Sermons*, 388-389.

³⁹ Alexander, *Biographical Sketches*, 37.

⁴⁰ Robert Hastings Nichols, *The Growth of the Christian Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1941), 257.

⁴¹ Kuiper, 419.

⁴² Coalter, 40.

Earle E. Cairns effectively summarizes the contributions of many men at the revival's outset:

"The Great Awakening had its beginning in the preaching of Theodore Frelinghuysen to his Dutch Reformed congregations in New Jersey in 1726. The revival stimulated earnest moral and spiritual life among the people. Frelinghuysen's work influenced the Presbyterian pastors, Gilbert Tennent and William Tennent, Jr., so that they became fiery evangelists of revival among the Scotch-Irish of the Middle colonies. Whitefield thus found the groundwork for revival soundly laid when he came to the Middle colonies in 1739....The revival fires that had started among the Calvinistic Dutch Reformed and Presbyterians of the Middle colonies soon spread to Congregationalist New England through the efforts of Jonathan Edwards."⁴³

2. He contributed to the Awakening's beginning through his influence.

It was Tennent who introduced Whitefield to the pulpits of churches in New York and New Jersey. The fact that the younger Whitefield had Tennent's endorsement was at times the only factor that gained him a hearing.

It was also Tennent who was the spearhead of a group of dissenters within his denomination, referred to in various publications as "New Light" Presbyterians," "New Side" Presbyterians, "New Brunswick" Presbyterians (based on the location of Tennent's church) and even "evangelical" Presbyterians.⁴⁴ As such, he is remembered as "the chief spokesman for supporters of the Great Awakening."⁴⁵

3. He contributed to the Awakening's beginning through his publishing ministry.

Coalter writes, "Before the Revolution, Tennent published more than any other clergyman of the middle colonies."⁴⁶ Much of Tennent's writing was a defense of the revival movement from those who were antagonistic to it, especially within his own Presbyterian denomination. He would later regret the harsh tone of some of his works, but essentially stood by the content.

Tennent was an active leader during the continuation of the Great Awakening.

1. He followed up on the work of Whitefield in New England (1740-41).

At Whitefield's bidding, Tennent revisited the areas where revival had struck under Whitefield's preaching. The response was at times even more striking under Tennent's preaching.⁴⁷

2. He worked on behalf of the College of New Jersey.

As stated earlier, Tennent traveled to Great Britain in an effort to raise funds for the College of New Jersey. Murray writes,

⁴³ Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1954), 400-401

⁴⁴ Murray, 14.

⁴⁵ "Tennent, Gilbert" in *Concise Dictionary of Christianity in America*, Daniel G. Reid, ed., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 336.

⁴⁶ Coalter, xvi.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 75.

“The idea of a fund-raising mission had been urged by George Whitefield on his American brethren as early as 1748 and on hearing news of the Synod’s decision he immediately wrote: ‘I am glad Mr. Tennent is coming with Mr. Davies, if they come with their old fire I trust they will be able to do wonders.’”⁴⁸

Tennent was a saddened critic of the abuses which effectively ended the Great Awakening.

Notice that Tennent was not a critic of the revival itself, but of its perversion. From Tennent’s experiences, it seems that there were several factors which contributed to end this special visitation from God’s Spirit:

1. **Political battles within the denomination**
Much of this was fought before the public eye via pamphlets and newspapers.
2. **Manipulation and excesses by would-be revivalists.**
3. **Compromise with theological error.**
4. **Distraction from spiritual needs by political needs (the French and Indian War).**⁴⁹

How prone men are to distort even the best gifts of God! Yet, Alexander’s words on this matter are instructive:

“In all great revivals, where the people are under strong excitement, there will be some things which the judicious must regret; and, no doubt, there were many such things in this great and extensive awakening; but it was a dangerous mistake to repudiate the whole work on account of some irregularities.”⁵⁰

IV. LESSONS FOR TODAY FROM THE LIFE OF GILBERT TENNENT

We too need to balance heart religion and uncompromising orthodoxy.

We must beware of the extreme positions of Tennent’s opponents who insisted on either orthodoxy (Old Lights) or experiential religion (Arminians)...head or heart. Tennent urged heart religion within the bounds of sound doctrine...a legitimate experience and emotion governed by biblical understanding.

We too need to balance transdenominationalism and militant separatism.

Tennent’s cooperation with those outside of his denomination but within the confines of orthodoxy is exemplary. He was not sectarian, but neither was he ecumenical. He was as broad in his fellowship and cooperation as Scripture would allow, but no broader. He practiced charity with good, orthodox men. He practiced biblical separation from false teachers (though perhaps not as readily or to the same degree as we would).

⁴⁸ Murray, 13-14. It is possible that “if they come with their old fire” is a comment regarding the change of focus evident in Tennent’s later ministry.

⁴⁹ Coalter, 152.

⁵⁰ Alexander, *Biographical Sketches*, 37.

We too need to balance strong reformed doctrine and aggressive evangelism.

It is interesting that the most fiery evangelists of the day were all Calvinists. Their Reformed doctrine did not prohibit evangelistic zeal. Rather, it necessitated it! Their insistence on the need of repentance and conversion is especially needed in our day. Would God that we would have the same passion for the lost, show the same commitment to the blessed gospel and be visited with the same power of God! Alexander's comments on this score are challenging:

"Many pious people among us are not aware that the ground on which they tread has, as it were, been hallowed by the footsteps of the Almighty. And who knows but that prayers then offered then in faith remain yet to be answered?" ⁵¹

We could learn much from Tennent's homiletics.

1. We must make preaching our primary business.

The Tennents saw the remedy for the dead state of their churches in the preaching ministry, not merely in orthodoxy as stated in a creed. Gilbert in particular "was convinced that the sermon was the clergy's most important duty." ⁵² They were committed to a strong doctrinal stand that found its best expression in the pulpit, not the study.

2. We must provide both doctrinal teaching and practical application.

Besides being noted for its early fervency and later orthodoxy, Tennent's pulpit ministry was marked for his balance of "historical faith" (explanation) and "experiential knowledge" (application). ⁵³

3. We must first warn, then sooth.

Tennent's two-step homiletical practice was thoroughly biblical. Like Christ and the apostles, he used "the harsh reality of sin's consequences...to alarm the sinner," then applied "the soothing balsam of gospel promises." ⁵⁴ In other words, "terrors first, comforts second." ⁵⁵

We too need to wield both sword and trowel.

Tennent's example of defending the faith while building the faithful is exemplary. We too must wield both instruments, "earnestly contending for the faith" (Jude 3) while "building up ourselves on our most holy faith" (Jude 20). We can neither build with a sword nor defend with a trowel. To wield two trowels or two swords will result in ruin.

⁵¹ Ibid., 6.

⁵² Coalter, 42.

⁵³ Ibid., 42.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 43.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 45.

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Note: Those that are highlighted are the most helpful. Coalter's *Gilbert Tennent, Son of Thunder* and Alexander's *Biographical Sketches* are by far the most exhaustive and beneficial. Alexander's is the more inspiring and edifying of the two, as you are privileged to read a great man's assessment of a great man.