CH30—European Expansion and David Brainerd

Last week we discussed Christianity in the Americas, the Puritans, Separatists, John Rogers, and the arrival of the Baptists on the scene.

This week, we'll talk about the expansion of the European presence in the Americas, the emergence of a poisonous false doctrine, and the efforts of one man to evangelize the native americans.

I. Expansion of the European Colonies in America

The English

- By 1660 both New England and the Chesapeake bay had roughly similar populations of about 35,000 English colonists each.[1]
- By the mid-1600s there was a modest effort by some Puritans to evangelize the Native Americans who had "survived the first waves of disease and the wars with the English."[2]
- A Puritan minister named John Eliot was the first in 1663 to publish a Bible in the language of the Indians who lived in the Massachusetts area. This was the first complete Bible printed in the Western Hemisphere
- While there is debate about how deeply received Christianity was by the natives, it stands that a concerted effort was made to evangelize them in their own tongue. Additionally, in 1670, "a Wampanoag convert named Hiacoomes became the first ordained Indian minister in the English Colonies."[3]
- However, Prince Philip's War (1675) war broke out shortly thereafter and frustrated the missionary efforts.

The Middle Colonies

- Beyond the colonies established in New England there was also extensive colonization in the South where extensive plantations began to do the landscape. In between the two were the Middle Colonies. These were much more ethnically and religiously diverse than the other colonies. One of these colonies was New Amsterdam which was, of course, founded by the Dutch. There, not only the Dutch but also Fins, Germans, Swedes, and freed as well as enslaved Africans found a home.[4]
- The English conquered New Amsterdam in 1664 and renamed it New York after King James I, the Duke of York.[5]
- The Quakers, under the leadership of William Penn, founded Pennsylvania in 1682.
    - Pennsylvania promised that no one would be "prejudiced for their religious persuasion or practice, in matters of faith or worship, nor shall they be compelled, at any time, to frequent or maintain any religious worship, place, or ministry

[1]Thomas Kidd, *American History, Volume 1*, (B&H Academic, 2019), 34.
[2]Kidd, 36.
[3]Kidd, 37.
[4]Kidd, 37-38.
[5]Kidd, 40.

whatever." Though Quakers would exercise great political influence in the colony, they did not make themselves into an established church. The colony's religious freedom did have limits, however. Pennsylvania's proprietors would not tolerate atheists, and they enjoined people to observe the Sabbath.[6]

- Quakers also were among the first to oppose the Atlantic slave trade. Nice!

Carolina

- Lord Anthony Ashley Cooper and his secretary, John Locke, helped to establish the Colony of Carolina in 1670 (North Carolina would become a separate colony in 1712).[7]

Georgia

- Georgia was founded in 1732 as a buffer between the English and the Spanish (who were in Florida).[8] The colony was named after King George II.

Dramatic Change in the Americas

- The influx of Europeans on the American continent forever changed. The continent was quickly developed for agriculture and integrated into the European economy. An aspect of this was the introduction of African slaves to support the agricultural industry. This was especially prevalent in southern colonies—including those in the Caribbean—where cash crops like sugar and tobacco required exorbitant amounts of labor.
- While high-minded ideals had driven some to cross the Atlantic to seek a new life and the proclamation of the gospel, many others were driven entirely by the bottom line.
- Kidd writes:
    - Although religious beliefs were pervasive, the English colonies were divided about their original purposes. The New England colonies and Pennsylvania, for instance, began with a clear religious mission. Others, such as Virginia, New York, and Carolina, had a commercial bent, even if colonial leaders were aware of their Christian obligation to evangelize Native Americans. Too often, wars between the English settlers dashed whatever hopes the white colonists might have had of bringing substantial numbers of Indians into the Christian fold.

II. Hyper-Calvinism

Withholding the Gospel (historic)

- It was around this time that a strange doctrine emerged from the Reformed churches in Europe. It was a form of Calvinism that exaggerated certain aspects of the reformer's theology. Particularly unconditional election, the spiritual deadness (or total depravity) of man, and the sovereignty of God in conversion.

---

[6]Kidd, 41.
[7]Kidd, 42.
[8]Kidd, 43.

- "[H]yper-Calvinism refers to a distortion of historic Calvinism, and the distortion says it is inappropriate and unbiblical to invite people to Christ unless they give some evidence of being among the elect."[9]
- Piper adds,
    - The net effect of this viewpoint is to put a governor on the indiscriminate preaching of the gospel and wholehearted engagement in world missions… In other words, the emphasis is put so completely on the unconditional election of God and the spiritual deadness of man and the sovereignty of grace in conversion (all of which are true) that the irrational and unbiblical inference is drawn that we should not say to any non-elect person who's spiritually dead, "Repent. Believe. Come to Christ."... Now, the reason I say that's irrational and unbiblical to draw that inference from election and deadness and sovereign grace is this: nothing in reason says that summoning a spiritually dead sinner to repent might not be the means God uses to perform the miracle of making him alive, and thus demonstrating he is elect. I say it's unbiblical because the Bible tells us to preach the gospel to everyone, and the sheep will hear the Shepherd's voice in the preaching and follow him (John 10:27).[10]

- Hyper-Calvinism is a horrible distortion of the gospel that destroys the joy of obedient proclamation of Christ to the world.
- Worse still, where the gospel is proclaimed the focus is entirely wrong. Rather than the sinner running to Christ with empty hands and receiving the blessing of forgiveness, justification, and adoption amongst so many others, one is encouraged to look within to find evidence of election. This introspection drives one either to pride or, more likely, despair. The result is that the Gospel is not proclaimed or one is commanded to look to oneself instead of Christ the All-sufficient Savior. In either case, Christ is robbed of glory.
- Hyper-Calvinism is a wicked twisting of the truth. May this doctrine cease to exist!

Withholding assurance (contemporary)

- The contemporary form of Hyper-Calvinism "is hesitant to offer gospel assurance to professing Christians who might not be elect. [the result in the church is that one is so concerned with] the danger of giving false assurance to possibly *fake* Christians that [one preaches] in such a way as to withhold true assurance from *real* Christians."[11]
- This contemporary manifestation of hyper-Calvinism robs Christ of glory because his saints, again, look to themselves for a sense of assurance instead of to Christ.
- When we shift our eyes from the Lord of Glory to ourselves, we rob him of the glory that is rightly his.
- Christ and him only is our justification. May we rest our eyes, our hope, our everything in him.

---

[9]John Piper, https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-is-hyper-calvinism
[10]Ibid.
[11]Ibid.

- Bernard of Clairvaux said it well, "Man's whole merit is to put his whole hope in him who makes the whole man safe." If it is our whole merit, then there is no place for morbid introspection and senseless naval gazing.

The expansion of Europe into the Americas, the desire of some to evangelize the native americans, the vice of hyper-Calvinism all converge in the story of the man we'll be considering this morning: David Brainerd.

III. David Brainerd

Some would say that David Brainerd was a bit of an Eeyore. He was described by Jonathan Edwards as being "by his constitution and natural temper, so prone to *melancholy* and dejection of Spirit."[12] Elsewhere Edwards noted that Brainerd distinguished himself in that "he exceeded all melancholy persons that ever I was acquainted with."[13] Despite this glass-half-empty disposition, a reviewer commenting on a freshly published edition of Brainerd's memoirs in 1885—some 140 years after his death—said this about him:

> "Fifty years ago the name of David Brainerd was a household word in thousands of Christian homes throughout the country. It had been a vital force in moulding the new missionary era… And what a vital force, too, it had been in moulding the piety of the American churches for nearly a hundred years!"[14]

How is it that Brainerd, a man so afflicted by a depressed spirit, was able to make such a lasting impact on the spirituality of the Americas and the Western missions movement? In this article, I will answer that question by considering the lasting relevancy of David Brainerd's spirituality. I will demonstrate this by providing a summary of the major events of Brainerd's life; then, I will present the transformation of his understanding of God's grace in Christ in his own words; and, last, I will apply his precious and hard-earned insights to the modern-day believer to show their enduring value.

---

[12]Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol. 2* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 314. Emphasis original.

[13]Edwards, 314.

[14]George L. Prentiss, "Historical Theology. Review of Memoirs of Rev. David Brainerd, Missionary to the Indians of North America Edited by J. M. Sherwood," The Presbyterian Review VI, no. 21–24 (1885): 366.

I. The Life of David Brainerd

A Somber Beginning

David Brainerd was born in 1718 in Haddam, Connecticut. He was the third of five sons who, in addition to four daughters, would eventually fill the house of Hezekiah and Dorothy Brainerd. However, young David's life was not destined to be one of familial sublimity and ease; instead, it was marked by grief. By the time Brainerd was fourteen, he had already been fatherless for five years and had lately added to that wound the death of his mother.[15]

It is possible that these losses were significant contributors to Brainerd's glum disposition. However, there were other factors at play as well. Piper writes that—in addition to these grievous losses—"David probably inherited some kind of physical tendency to depression."[16] About the years of his youth Brainerd himself wrote, "I was from my youth somewhat sober, and inclined rather to melancholy than the contrary extreme…"[17] Another source of his introspective gloom was his concern for the lostness of his own soul. Brainerd had been richly blessed by having a family full of puritans; indeed, many of his relatives and grandparents were involved in ministry.[18] However, despite these positive influences, he consistently failed to understand the good news of Christ.

The Vice of Hypercalvinism

Brainerd, reflecting on his experience as a seven or eight-year-old, writes that "I became concerned for my soul, and terrified at the thoughts of death, and was driven to the performance of duties: but it appeared a melancholy business…"[19] Brainerd supposed that the performance of

---

[15]Edwards, 316. Information in this paragraph was drawn from Edwards' biography.

[16]John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God: The Fruit of Affliction in the Lives of John Bunyan, William Cowper, and David Brainerd*, (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2008), 124.

[17]Edwards, 316.

[18]Marcus L. Loane, *They Were Pilgrims* (Sydney, AU: Angus and Robertson, 1970), 3.

[19]Edwards, 316.

these duties, or good works, in themselves contributed to his peace with God—that in some way they gave him a greater likelihood of being truly converted. As a thirteen-year-old he "sometimes hoped that I was converted, or at least in a good and hopeful way for heaven and happiness, not knowing what conversion was."[20]

Six years later, in 1737, Brainerd was nineteen and working on his farm in Durham, Connecticut. During this time of rural labor, he was subject to,

> "frequently longing, from a natural inclination, after a liberal education… I became very strict, and watchful over my thoughts, words, and actions; and thought I must be sober indeed, because I designed to devote myself to the ministry; and *imagining* I *did* dedicate myself to the Lord."[21]

With a new aspiration to enter the ministry, he doubled-down on his religious activities: he read his bible often, met frequently with others for prayer, listened to and then recounted sermons to himself, and even separated himself from young people to associate himself "with grave elderly people".[22] Summarizing, he described himself: "In short, I had a very good *outside*, and rested entirely on my duties, though not sensible of it."[23]

For all these activities, he had not yet joined the church. He did not believe that he had been converted—Brainerd had subconsciously imbibed the hypercalvinism of his era. He held to the false belief that he did not yet have a sufficiently legitimate warrant to be truly converted. He wrote that:

> "...sometimes there appeared mountains before me to obstruct my hopes of mercy; and the work of conversion appeared so great, that I thought I should never be the subject of it. I used, however to pray and cry to God, and perform other duties with great earnestness; and thus hoped by some means to make the case better."[24]

---

[20]Edwards, 316.
[21]Edwards, 316. Emphasis original.
[22]Edwards, 316.
[23]Edwards, 317. Emphasis original.
[24]Edwards, 317.

Brainerd was caught between the tripartite vice of hypercalvinism, his legalistic works, and his own sense of despair; he did not comprehend the love of God the Father that was held out for him in Christ, nor did he yet fathom the richness of Christ's all-sufficiency. The following quotation is worth citing at length because it reveals the protracted, shadowy night into which his sinful introspection had thrown himself:

> "And though, hundred of times, I renounced all pretences of any *worth* in my duties, as I thought, even while performing them, and often confessed to God that I deserved nothing for the very best of them, but eternal condemnation; yet still I had secret hope of *recommending* myself to God by my religious duties. When I prayed affectionately, and my heart seemed in some measure to melt, I hoped God would be thereby moved to pity me… Though at times the gate appeared so very straight, that it looked to next to impossible to enter, yet, at other times, I flattered myself that it was not so very difficult, and hoped I should by diligence and watchfulness soon gain the point. Sometimes after enlargement in duty and considerable affection, I hoped I had made a *good step* towards heaven; imagined that God was affected as I was, and that he would hear such *sincere cries*, as I called them."[25]

Loane poetically reflects on Brainerd's state, "...a sense of guilt and lack of peace still haunted his mind, and he found that there was nothing stable in the inner world of private feelings. He would look with sensitive interest into the pools of his own heart, and he could see nothing in their troubled depths to reflect back the image of Christ."[26]

Daybreak

Praise God, Brainerd's case was not hopeless. Loane waxes, "...his cry had been heard, and the end was at hand. Light shone at last, and with that flash from the sun of glory, he caught sight of 'the king in his beauty' (Isa. 33:17)."[27] Brainerd recounts his conversion with these precious words:

> "I continued, as I remember, in this state of mind, from Friday morning till the sabbath evening following, (July 12, 1739,) when I was walking again the same solitary place, where I was brought to see myself lost and helpless, as before mentioned. Here, in a

[25]Edwards, 317. Emphasis original.
[26]Loane, 4.
[27]Loane, 4.

> mournful melancholy state, I was attempting to pray; but found no heart to engage in that or any other duty; my former concern, exercise, and religious affections were now gone. I thought the Spirit of God had *quite* left me; but still was not distressed: yet disconsolate, as if there was nothing in heaven or earth could make me happy. Having been thus endeavoring to pray—though, as I thought, very stupid and senseless—for nearly half an hour, then, as I was walking in a dark thick grove, *unspeakable glory* seemed to open to the view and apprehension of my soul… it was a new inward apprehension or view that I had of *God*, such as I never had before, nor anything which had the least resemblance of it. I stood still, wondered and admired! I knew that I never had seen before any thing comparable to it for excellency and beauty…"[28]

Thus, Brainerd was forever changed because the Father granted him, through the blessed work of the Spirit, to behold the beautiful Christ. His countless hours of toil in religious practices were of no avail—they only more firmly fixed the blindfold about his eyes. But now, the veil was removed; Brainerd saw Christ! The Father had made him alive and transferred him from the domain of darkness to the kingdom of his beloved Son (Col. 1:13).

II. David Brainerd, Transformed by Beholding Christ

A New Disposition

Brainerd relished this fact: he had been transformed by beholding Christ. The Lord uprooted his sinful pride and sowed in him a new heart that yearned to serve his Savior. He wrote, "Thus God, I trust, brought me to a hearty disposition to *exalt him*, and set him on the throne, and principally and ultimately to aim at his honour and glory, as King of the universe."[29] While clouds of depression, disappointment, and illness would still sometimes obstruct Brainerd's vision of his kind Redeemer, his life was thereafter characterized by a "passionate longing for and a fervent dedication to that glorious Divine Being."[30]

---

[28]Edwards, 319. Emphasis original.
[29]Edwards, 319. Emphasis original.
[30]David Wynbeek, *David Brainerd: Beloved Yankee* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1961), 19.

Difficulty at Yale College

In an effort to placard Christ the Savior, Brainerd entered Yale College in 1739 to fulfill the education requirement for ordination as a minister. It was during his time at Yale that the Great Awakening began in New England. George Whitefield himself stopped there but only reflected, "...I was obliged to say of your College that your light was become darkness… A dead ministry will always make a dead people. Whereas, if ministers are warmed with the love of God themselves, they cannot but be instruments of diffusing that love among others."[31]

Brainerd yearned to be one of those ministers who was warmed by the radiant love of God. However, the faculty of the College were in doubt about the spirituality of the so-called "New Lights" and their revival. Brainerd dismissed the concern of the faculty and "attended [New Light] meetings when forbidden to do so, and criticized one of the tutors as having "no more grace than a chair".[32] His foolish comment was repeated to the rector of the College and he was consequently expelled. For his sin, Brainerd repented and asked for forgiveness; but he was not remitted to the College.

This posed a serious problem. If he could not obtain an undergraduate degree, he would not be able to achieve ordination and receive a license to preach. It seemed that with this expulsion, his yearnings for pastoral ministry were also ended. But God—in his sovereign plan—ordained it so that even this depressing event would turn out for good.

A Desire for the Heathen to Behold Christ

Brainerd went to study under Reverend Mr. Mills of Ripton.[33] It was while he was with Reverend Mills that Brainerd became increasingly concerned for the "advancement of Christ's

---

[31]Luke Tyerman, *Life of Whitefield*, vol. I (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1876), 496.

[32]Samuel Macauley Jackson, ed., *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge: Embracing Biblical, Historical, Doctrinal, and Practical Theology and Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Biography from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (New York; London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1908–1914), 251.

[33]Edwards, 321.

kingdom in the world" and began to have "much pleasure in the prospect of the heathen being brought home to Christ".[34] He desired that others might behold the same Christ who had delivered him and was changing him.

Indeed, it was through the continual beholding of Christ, and being sweetly melted by him, that Brainerd was continually being transformed. Consider the following journal entry from Wednesday, April 14: "My soul longed for communion with Christ, and for the mortification of indwelling corruption, especially spiritual pride. O there is a sweet day coming, wherein the weary will be at rest! My soul has enjoyed much sweetness this day in the hopes of its speedy arrival."[35]

On April 1, 1743, Brainerd left the home of Mr. Mills and relocated to Kaunaumeek (which is located in present-day Massachusetts) to minister to the Native Americans.[36] He had been ordained as a missionary by the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge.[37] This both comported with his desire to preach the gospel to the heathens and his limitation of not being able to be ordained as a pastor due to his lack of education. Brainerd ministered to that tribe for about a year, but very little visible fruit was borne.

Revival Along the Susquehanna

Rather, it would be among the Delaware tribe along the Susquehanna River that Brainerd would see Christ most radically exalted among the natives. He began preaching there in June of 1745, at the age of twenty-seven.[38] The following are portions of his journal entries from his initial week among them:

---

[34]Edwards, 321.
[35]Edwards, 322.
[36]Edwards, 333.
[37]Jackson, 251.
[38]Edwards, 359.

> "*Saturday, June 22*. About noon rode to the Indians again; and near night preached to them. Found my body much strengthened, and was enabled to speak with abundant plainness and warmth. And the power of God evidently attended the word; so that sundry persons were brought under great concern for their souls, and made to shed many tears, and to wish for Christ to save them."
>
> "*Thursday, June 27*. My soul rejoiced to find, that God enabled me to be faithful, and that he was pleased to awaken these poor Indians by my means. O how heart-reviving and soul-refreshing is it to me to see the fruit of my labours!"[39]

Brainerd was not only delighted to behold Christ himself but it was also clearly his boundless joy to witness others call out to Christ and receive his grace. Such was his zeal and the desire of the natives in the surrounding country that Brainerd established a preaching circuit by which he would visit several different settlements to preach to them on a regular basis. What transpired was a miniature revival.

The simple gospel that Brainerd held out for them laid bare their sinfulness, their total inability to rescue themselves, and it gloried deeply in the all-sufficiency of Christ to save. An entry in his journal from a few months later records this, "My thoughts ran with freedom, and I saw and felt what a glorious subject the *death* of Christ is for *glorified* souls to dwell upon in their conversation. Oh, the *death* of Christ! How infinitely *precious*!"[40] It was this infinitely precious Christ that Brainerd proclaimed to the natives along the Susquehanna. Piper writes that, "There are a few indians—perhaps several hundred—who, now and for eternity, owe their everlasting life to the direct love and ministry of David Brainerd."[41]

Declining Health

Brainerd's ministry was like a match: it burned hot and fast. As early as his days at Yale, there was evidence that Brainerd had contracted tuberculosis; ever since, the disease had lay dormant in his body. The demands of his preaching circuit and many nights spent in the open

[39]Edwards, 359.
[40]Edwards, 362. Emphasis original.
[41]Piper, 158.

wilderness began to wear heavily upon him. In April of 1747, after nearly a year and a half along the Susquehanna laboring among the fledgling native church, he returned to New England to recover his health. When it became clear that his prognosis was bleak, he retired to the home of Jonathan Edwards and lived out his remaining months there.

These months were often heavy with melancholy but as the day of his death drew nearer, Brainerd spoke of "longing desires after *death*, through a sense of the excellency of a state of perfection."[42] On Monday, Sept 7, he wrote:

> "This evening, when I was in great distress of body, my soul longed that God should be glorified: I saw there was no heaven but this. I could not but speak to the bystanders then of the only *happiness, viz. pleasing* God. O that I could for ever live to God! The day, I trust is at hand, the perfect day. *Oh, the day of deliverance from all sin*."[43]

It was the following month on October 9, 1747 that Brainerd died at the age of twenty-nine. Edwards wrote, "his soul, as we may well conclude, was received by his dear Lord and Master, as an eminently faithful servant…".[44]

III. Brainerd's Precious Insights for Modern Believers

We now return to the question which was posed at the beginning of this article: how is it that Brainerd, a man so afflicted by a depressed spirit, was able to make such a lasting impact on the spirituality of the Americas and the Western missions movement? Indeed, Brainerd's testimony was a chief catalyst for William Carey to sail to India.[45] His expulsion from Yale College was a key factor in the founding of Princeton College in 1746 in an effort to train

[42]Edwards, 382. Emphasis original.
[43]Edwards, 382. Emphasis original.
[44]Edwards, 386.
[45]John D. Woodbridge and Frank A. James III, *Church History Volume Two: From Pre-Reformation to the Present Day* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2013), 404.

ministers.[46] Missionaries and pastors for centuries have clung to Brainerd as an exemplar, and sought to imitate him. How can this be so?

I propose that the reason Brainerd's life was so impactful is because of the greatness of his Lord. Brainerd in himself was a feeble, depressed, and overly-introspective man. But when the Father was pleased to reveal Christ to Brainerd, he came alive. His affections were renewed and as he continued to behold Christ—despite his own weakness and difficulties—he was transformed from one degree of glory to another by the Spirit (2 Cor 3:18).

He was compelled by the glory of Christ to preach the gospel to the heathen, which ultimately cost him his life. But Christ was worth it. Shortly before his death, Brainerd wrote this in a letter to his brother, "I declare, now I am dying, I would not have spent my life *otherwise* for the whole world."[47] It is this zeal, this comprehension of the exceeding value of Christ, that makes Brainerd so durably relevant. He was a man who could say with Paul, "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ" (Phil 3:8 ESV). In short, David Brainerd was able to make such a lasting influence on American spirituality and Western missions because he was a trophy of God's amazing, all-sufficient grace.

The application for the modern-believer is simple: Christ is sufficient. Though we may be tempted to think complex marketing initiatives, the newest missions paradigm, and the most polished individuals are what is required to make much of Christ, that is patently false. Brainerd reminds us that "Christ is his own attraction".[48] May we in the 21st century be as ardent to preach Christ and his glorious gospel!

---

[46]Robert Glover, *The Progress of World-Wide Missions* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1952, orig. 1924), 55. Cited in John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 157.

[47]Edwards, 438.

[48]C. H. Spurgeon, "Christ Lifted Up," in The New Park Street Pulpit Sermons, vol. 3 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1857), 261–262.

Conclusion

In this article, I have endeavored to demonstrate the lasting relevancy of David Brainerd's spirituality. I did this by providing a summary of the major events of Brainerd's life; then, I presented the transformation of his understanding of God's grace in Christ in his own words; and, last, I applied his precious and hard-earned insights to the modern-day believer to show their enduring value. May we be zealous to behold Christ and proclaim his excellencies!