

Sermon 37: The Nature of Enthusiasm

John Wesley

Methodist · Post-Reformation · Sermon

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INTRODUCTION

Wesley preaching on a word his critics used against him constantly, "enthusiasm," the eighteenth century's term for religious delusion, and turning it back on his accusers with some care. He distinguishes real enthusiasm (claiming a grace, gift, or divine guidance one doesn't actually have) from the charge simply thrown at anyone whose faith runs warmer than convention allows, working through several specific varieties: false assurance of salvation, imagined spiritual gifts, and the trap of expecting God to act without using the ordinary means he's provided. It's Wesley at his most self-diagnostic, aware that a movement built on personal religious experience needs its own account of how that experience goes wrong. Expect careful, taxonomic argument rather than fervor.

"And Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, thou art beside thyself." Acts 26:24.

- And so say all the world, the men who know not God, of all that are of Paul's religion: of every one who is so a follower of him as he was of Christ. It is true, there is a sort of religion, nay, and it is called Christianity too, which may be practised without any such Imputation, which is generally allowed to be consistent with common sense, --that is, a religion of form, a round of outward duties, performed in a decent, regular manner. You may add orthodoxy thereto, a system of right opinions, yea, and some quantity of heathen morality; and yet not many will pronounce, that "much religion hath made you mad." But if you aim at the religion of the heart, if you talk of "righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost," then it will not be long before your sentence is passed, "Thou art beside thyself."
- And it is no compliment which the men of the world pay you here. They, for once, mean what they say. They not only affirm, but cordially believe, that every man is beside himself who says, "the love of God is shed abroad in" his "heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him;" and that God has enabled him to rejoice in Christ "with joy unspeakable and full of glory." If a man is indeed alive to God, and dead to all things here below; if he continually sees Him that is invisible, and accordingly walks by faith, and not by sight; then they account it a clear case: beyond all dispute, "much religion hath made him mad."
- It is easy to observe, that the determinate thing which the world account madness is, that utter contempt of all temporal things, and steady pursuit of things eternal; that divine conviction of

things not seen; that rejoicing in the favour of God that happy, holy love of God; and that testimony of His Spirit with our spirit, that we are the children of God, --that is, in truth, the whole spirit, and life, and power of the religion of Jesus Christ.

- They will, however, allow, in other respects, the man acts and talks like one in his senses. In other things, he is a reasonable man, it is in these instances only his head is touched. It is therefore acknowledged, that the madness under which he labours is of a particular kind; and accordingly they are accustomed to distinguish it by a particular name, "enthusiasm."
- A term this, which is exceeding frequently used, which is scarce ever out of some men's mouths; and yet it is exceeding rarely understood, even by those who use it most. It may be, therefore, not unacceptable to serious men, to all who desire to understand what they speak or hear, if I endeavour to explain the meaning of this term -- to show what enthusiasm is. It may be an encouragement to those who are unjustly charged therewith; and may possibly be of use to some who are justly charged with it; at least to others who might be so, were they not cautioned against it.
- As to the word itself, it is generally allowed to be of Greek extraction. But whence the Greek word, *enqousiasmos*, is derived, none has yet been able to show. Some have endeavoured to derive it from *en qev*, -- in God; because all enthusiasm has reference to Him. But this is quite forced; there being small resemblance between the word derived, and those they strive to derive it from. Others would derive it from *en qusia*, -- in sacrifice; because many of the enthusiasts of old were affected in the most violent manner during the time of sacrifice. Perhaps it is a fictitious word, invented from the noise which some of those made who were so affected.
- It is not improbable, that one reason why this uncouth word has been retained in so many languages was, because men were not better agreed concerning the meaning than concerning the derivation of it. They therefore adopted the Greek word, because they did not understand it: they did not translate it into their own tongues, because they knew not how to translate it; it having been always a word of a loose, uncertain sense, to which no determinate meaning was affixed.
- It is not, therefore, at all surprising, that it is so variously taken at this day; different persons understanding it in different senses, quite inconsistent with each other. Some take it in a good sense, for a divine impulse or impression, superior to all the natural faculties, and suspending, for the time, either in whole or in part, both the reason and the outward senses. In this meaning of the word, both the Prophets of old, and the Apostles, were proper enthusiasts; being, at divers times, so filled with the Spirit, and so influenced by Him who dwelt in their hearts, that the exercise of their own reason, their senses, and all their natural faculties, being suspended, they were wholly actuated by the power of God, and "spake" only "as they were moved by the Holy Ghost."
- Others take the word in an indifferent sense, such as is neither morally good nor evil: thus they speak of the enthusiasm of the poets; of Homer and Virgil in particular. And this a late eminent writer extends so far as to assert, there is no man excellent in his profession, whatsoever it be, who has not in his temper a strong tincture of enthusiasm. By enthusiasm these appear to understand, all uncommon vigour of thought, a peculiar fervour of spirit, a vivacity and strength not to be

found in common men; elevating the soul to greater and higher things than cool reason could have attained.

- But neither of these is the sense wherein the word "enthusiasm" is most usually understood. The generality of men, if no farther agreed, at least agree thus far concerning it, that it is something evil: and this is plainly the sentiment of all those who call the religion of the heart "enthusiasm." Accordingly, I shall take it in the following pages, as an evil; a misfortune, if not a fault.
- As to the nature of enthusiasm, it is, undoubtedly a disorder of the mind; and such a disorder as greatly hinders the exercise of reason. Nay, sometimes it wholly sets it aside: it not only dims but shuts the eyes of the understanding. It may, therefore, well be accounted a species of madness; of madness rather than of folly: seeing a fool is properly one who draws wrong conclusions from right premisses; whereas a madman draws right conclusions, but from wrong premisses. And so does an enthusiast suppose his premisses true, and his conclusions would necessarily follow. But here lies his mistake: his premisses are false. He imagines himself to be what he is not: and therefore, setting out wrong, the farther he goes, the more he wanders out of the way.
- Every enthusiast, then, is properly a madman. Yet his is not an ordinary, but a religious, madness. By "religious," I do not mean, that it is any part of religion: quite the reverse. Religion is the spirit of a sound mind; and, consequently, stands in direct opposition to madness of every kind. But I mean, it has religion for its object; it is conversant about religion. And so the enthusiast is generally talking of religion, of God, or of the things of God, but talking in such a manner that every reasonable Christian may discern the disorder of his mind. Enthusiasm in general may then be described in some such manner as this: a religious madness arising from some falsely imagined influence or inspiration of God; at least, from imputing something to God which ought not to be imputed to Him, or expecting something from God which ought not to be expected from Him.
- There are innumerable sorts of enthusiasm. Those which are most common, and for that reason most dangerous, I shall endeavour to reduce under a few general heads, that they may be more easily understood and avoided.

The first sort of enthusiasm which I shall mention, is that of those who imagine they have the grace which they have not. Thus some imagine, when it is not so, that they have redemption through Christ, "even the forgiveness of sins." These are usually such as "have no root in themselves;" no deep repentance, or thorough conviction. "Therefore they receive the word with joy." And "because they have no deepness of earth," no deep work in their heart, therefore the seed "immediately springs up." There is immediately a superficial change, which, together with that light joy, striking in with the pride of their unbroken heart, and with their inordinate self-love, easily persuades them they have already "tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come."

- This is properly an instance of the first sort of enthusiasm: it is a kind of madness, arising from the imagination that they have that grace which, in truth, they have not: so that they only deceive their own souls. Madness it may be justly termed: for the reasonings of these poor men are right, were their premisses good; but as those are a mere creature of their own imagination, so all that is built

on them falls to the ground. The foundation of all their reveries is this: they imagine themselves to have faith in Christ. If they had this, they would be "kings and priests to God;" possessed of a "kingdom which cannot be moved": but they have it not; consequently, all their following behaviour is as wide of truth and soberness as that of the ordinary madman who, fancying himself an earthly king, speaks and acts in that character.

- There are many other enthusiasts of this sort. Such, for instance, is the fiery zealot for religion; or, more properly, for the opinions and modes of worship which he dignifies with that name. This man, also, strongly imagines himself to be a believer in Jesus; yea, that he is a champion for the faith which was once delivered to the saints. Accordingly, all his conduct is formed upon that vain imagination. And allowing his supposition to be just, he would have some tolerable plea for his behaviour; whereas now it is evidently the effect of a distempered brain, as well as of a distempered heart.
- But the most common of all the enthusiasts of this kind are those who imagine themselves Christians, and are not. These abound, not only in all parts of our land, but in most parts of the habitable earth. That they are not Christians, is clear and undeniable, if we believe the oracles of God. For Christians are holy; these are unholy: Christians love God; these love the world: Christians are humble; these are proud: Christians are gentle; these are passionate; Christians have the mind which was in Christ; these are at the utmost distance from it. Consequently, they are no more Christians, than they are archangels. Yet they imagine themselves so to be; and they can give several reasons for it: for they have been called so ever since they can remember; they were christened many years ago; they embrace the Christian opinions, vulgarly termed the Christian or catholic faith; they use the Christian modes of worship, as their fathers did before them; they live what is called a good Christian life, as the rest of their neighbours do. And who shall presume to think or say that these men are not Christians -- though without one grain of true faith in Christ, or of real, inward holiness; without ever having tasted the love of God, or been "made partakers of the Holy Ghost!"

- Ah poor self-deceivers! Christians ye are not. But you are enthusiasts in a high degree. Physicians, heal yourselves! But first know your disease: your whole life is enthusiasm; as being all suitable to the imagination, that you have received that grace of God which you have not. In consequence of this grand mistake, you blunder on, day by day, speaking and acting under a character which does in no wise belong to you. Hence arises that palpable, glaring inconsistency that runs through your whole behaviour; which is an awkward mixture of real Heathenism and imaginary Christianity. Yet still, as you have so vast a majority on your side, you will always carry it by mere dint of numbers, "that you are the only men in your senses, and all are lunatics who are not as you are." But this alters not the nature of things. In the sight of God, and His holy angels, yea, and all the children of God upon earth, you are mere madmen, mere enthusiasts all! Are you not Are you not "walking in a vain shadow, a shadow of religion, a shadow of happiness Are you not still "disquieting yourselves in vain" with misfortunes as imaginary as your happiness or religion Do you not fancy yourselves great or good -- very knowing and very wise How long Perhaps till death brings you back to your senses, to bewail your folly for ever and ever!
- A second sort of enthusiasm is that of those who imagine they have such gifts from God as they have not. Thus some have imagined themselves to be endued with a power of working miracles, of healing the sick by a word or a touch, of restoring sight to the blind: yea, even of raising the dead -- a notorious instance of which is still fresh un our own history. Others have undertaken to prophesy, to foretell things to come, and that with the utmost certainty and exactness. But a little time usually convinces these enthusiasts. When plain facts run counter to their predictions, experience performs what reason could not, and sinks them down into their senses.
- To the same class belong those who, in preaching or prayer, imagine themselves to be so influenced by the Spirit of God, as, in fact, they are not. I am sensible, indeed, that without Him we can do nothing, more especially in our public ministry; that all our preaching is utterly vain, unless it be attended with His power; and all our prayer, unless His Spirit therein help our infirmities. I know, if we do not both preach and pray by the Spirit, it is all but lost labour; seeing the help that is done upon earth He doeth it Himself, who worketh all in all. But this does not affect the case before us. Though there is a real influence of the Spirit of God, there is also an imaginary one: and many there are who mistake the one for the other. Many suppose themselves to be under that influence, when they are not, when it is far from them. And many others suppose they are more under that influence than they really are. Of this number, I fear, are all they who imagine that God dictates the very words they speak; and that, consequently, it is impossible they should speak anything amiss, either as to the matter or manner of it. It is well known how many enthusiasts of this sort also have appeared during the present century; some of whom speak in a far more authoritative manner than either St. Paul or any of the Apostles.
- The same sort of enthusiasm, though in a lower degree, is frequently found in men of a private character. They may likewise imagine themselves to be influenced or directed by the Spirit when they are not. I allow, "if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His;" and that if ever we either think, speak, or act aright, it is through the assistance of that blessed Spirit. But how many impute things to Him, or expect things from Him, without any rational or scriptural

ground! Such are they who imagine, they either do or shall receive particular directions from God, not only in points of importance, but in things of no moment; in the most trifling circumstances of life. Whereas in these cases God has given us our own reason for a guide; though never excluding the secret assistance of His Spirit.

- To this kind of enthusiasm they are peculiarly exposed, who expect to be directed of God, either in spiritual things or in common life, in what is justly called an extraordinary manner: I mean, by visions or dreams, by strong impressions or sudden impulses on the mind. I do not deny, that God has, of old times, manifested His will in this manner; or, that He can do so now: nay, I believe He does, in some very rare instances. But how frequently do men mistake herein! How are they misled by pride, and a warm imagination, to ascribe such impulses or impressions, dreams or visions, to God, as are utterly unworthy of Him! Now this is all pure enthusiasm; all as wide of religion, as it is of truth and soberness.
- Perhaps some may ask, "Ought we not then to inquire what is the will of God in all things And ought not His will to be the rule of our practice" Unquestionably it ought. But how is a sober Christian to make this inquiry to know what is the will of God Not by waiting for supernatural dreams; not by expecting God to reveal it in visions; not by looking for any particular impressions or sudden impulses on his mind: no; but by consulting the oracles of God. "To the law and to the testimony!" This is the general method of knowing what is "the holy and acceptable will of God."
- "But how shall I know what is the will of God, in such and such a particular case The thing proposed is, in itself, of an indifferent nature, and so left undetermined in Scripture." I answer, the Scripture itself gives you a general rule. applicable to all particular cases: "The will of God is our sanctification." It is His will that we should be inwardly and outwardly holy; that we should be good, and do good, in every kind and in the highest degree whereof we are capable. Thus far we tread upon firm ground. This is as clear as the shining of the sun. In order, therefore, to know what is the will of God in a particular case, we have only to apply this general rule.
- Suppose, for instance, it were proposed to a reasonable man to marry, or to enter into a new business: in order to know whether this is the will of God, being assured, "It is the will of God concerning me, that I should be as holy and do as much good as I can," he has only to enquire, "In which of these states can I be most holy, and do the most good" And this is to be determined, partly by reason, and partly by experience. Experience tells him what advantages he has in his present state, either for being or doing good; and reason is to show, what he certainly or probably will have in the state proposed. By comparing these, he is to judge which of the two may most conduce to his being and doing good; and as far as he knows this, so far he is certain what is the will of God.
- Meantime, the assistance of His Spirit is supposed, during the whole process of the inquiry. Indeed it is not easy to say, in how many ways that assistance is conveyed. He may bring many circumstances to our remembrance; may place others in a stronger and clearer light; may insensibly open our mind to receive conviction, and fix that conviction upon our heart. And to a concurrence of many circumstances of this kind, in favour of what is acceptable in His sight, He

may superadd such an unutterable peace of mind, and so uncommon a measure of His love, as will leave us no possibility of doubting, that this, even this, is His will concerning us.

- This is the plain, scriptural, rational way to know what is the will of God in a particular case. But considering how seldom this way is taken, and what a flood of enthusiasm must needs break in on those who endeavour to know the will of God by unscriptural, irrational ways; it were to be wished that the expression itself were far more sparingly used. The using it, as some do, on the most trivial occasions, is a plain breach of the third commandment. It is a gross way of taking the name of God in vain, and betrays great irreverence toward Him. Would it not be far better, then, to use other expressions, which are not liable to such objections For example: instead of saying, on any particular occasion, "I want to know what is the will of God;" would it not be better to say, "I want to know what will be most for my improvement; and what will make me most useful" this way of speaking is clear and unexceptionable: it is putting the matter on a plain, scriptural issue, and that without any danger of enthusiasm.
- A Third very common sort of enthusiasm (if it does not coincide with the former) is that of those who think to attain the end without using the means, by the immediate power of God. If, indeed, those means were providentially withheld, they would not fall under this charge. God can, and sometimes does, in cases of this nature, exert His own immediate power. But they who expect this when they have those means, and will not use them, are proper enthusiasts. Such are they who expect to understand the holy Scriptures, without reading them, and meditating thereon; yea, without using all such helps as are in their power, and may probably conduce to that end. Such are they who designedly speak in the public assembly without any premeditation. I say "designedly;" because there may be such circumstances as, at some times, make it unavoidable. But whoever despises that great means of speaking profitably is so far an enthusiast.
- It may be expected that I should mention what some have accounted a Fourth sort of enthusiasm, namely, the imagining those things to be owing to the providence of God which are not owing thereto. But I doubt: I know not what things they are which are not owing to the providence of God; in ordering, or at least in governing, of which, this is not either directly or remotely concerned. I except nothing but sin; and even in the sins of others, I see the providence of God to me. I do not say His general providence; for this I take to be a sounding word. which means just nothing. And if there be a particular providence, it must extend to all persons and all things. So our Lord understood it, or He could never have said, "Even the hairs of your head are all numbered;" and, "Not a sparrow falleth to the ground without" the will of "your Father" which is in heaven. But if it be so, if God preside universis tanquam singulis, et singulis tanquam universis; "over the whole universe as over every single person, and over every single person as over the whole universe;" what is it (except only our own sins) which we are not to ascribe to the providence of God So that I cannot apprehend there is any room here for the charge of enthusiasm.
- If it be said, the charge lies here: "When you impute this to Providence, you imagine yourself the peculiar favourite of heaven": I answer, you have forgot some of the last words I spoke: Praesidet universis tanquam singulis: "His providence is over all men in the universe, as much as over any single person." Do you not see that he who, believing this, imputes anything which befalls him

to Providence, does not therein make himself any more the favourite of heaven, than he supposes every man under heaven to be Therefore you have no pretence, upon this ground, to charge him with enthusiasm.

- Against every sort of this it behoves us to guard with the utmost diligence; considering the dreadful effects it has so often produced, and which, indeed, naturally result from it. Its immediate offspring is pride; it continually increases this source from whence it flows; and hereby it alienates us more and more from the favour and from the life of God. It dries up the very springs of faith and love, of righteousness and true holiness; seeing all these flow from grace: but "God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace" only "to the humble."

- Together with pride there will naturally arise an unadvisable and unconvincible spirit. So that into whatever error or fault the enthusiast falls, there is small hope of his recovery. For reason will have little weight with him (as has been frequently and justly observed) who imagines he is led by a higher guide, -- by the immediate wisdom of God. And as he grows in pride, so he must grow in unadvisableness and in stubbornness also. He must be less and less capable of being convinced, less susceptible of persuasion; more and more attached to his own judgement and his own will, till he is altogether fixed and immovable.
- Being thus fortified both against the grace of God, and against all advice and help from man, he is wholly left to the guidance of his own heart, and of the king of the children of pride. No marvel, then, that he is daily more rooted and grounded in contempt of all mankind, in furious anger, in every unkind disposition, in every earthly and devilish temper. Neither can we wonder at the terrible outward effects which have flowed from such dispositions in all ages; even all manner of wickedness, all the works of darkness, committed by those who call themselves Christians, while they wrought with greediness such things as were hardly named even among the Heathens.

Such is the nature, such the dreadful effects, of that manyheaded monster, Enthusiasm! From the consideration of which we may now draw some plain inferences, with regard to our own practice.

- And, first, if enthusiasm be a term, though so frequently used, yet so rarely understood, take you care not to talk of you know not what; not to use the word till you understand it. As in all other points, so likewise in this, learn to think before you speak. First know the meaning of this hard word; and then use it, if need require.
- But if so few, even among men of education and learning, much more among the common sort of men, understand this dark, ambiguous word, or have any fixed notion of what it means; then, secondly, beware of judging or calling any man an enthusiast, upon common report. This is by no means a sufficient ground for giving any name of reproach to any man; least of all is it a sufficient ground for so black a term of reproach as this. The more evil it contains, the more cautious you should be how you apply it to any one; to bring so heavy an accusation, without full proof, being neither consistent with justice nor mercy.
- But if enthusiasm be so great an evil, beware you are not entangled therewith yourself. Watch and pray, that you fall not into the temptation. It easily besets those who fear or love God. O beware you do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think. Do not imagine you have attained that grace of God which you have not attained. You may have much joy; you may have a measure of love; and yet not have living faith. Cry unto God, that He would not suffer you, blind as you are, to go out of the way; that you may never fancy yourself a believer in Christ, till Christ is revealed in you, and till His Spirit witnesses with your spirit that you are a child of God.
- Beware you are not a fiery, persecuting enthusiast. Do not imagine that God has called you (just contrary to the spirit of Him you style your Master) to destroy men's lives, and not to save them. Never dream of forcing men into the ways of God. Think yourself, and let think. Use no constraint in matters of religion. Even those who are farthest out of the way never compel to come in by any other means than reason, truth, and love.

- Beware you do not run with the common herd of enthusiasts, fancying you are a Christian when you are not. Presume not to assume that venerable name, unless you have a clear, scriptural title thereto; unless you have the mind which was in Christ, and walk as He also walked.
- Beware you do not fall into the second sort of enthusiasm -- fancying you have those gifts from God which you have not. Trust not in visions or dreams; in sudden impressions, or strong impulses of any kind. Remember, it is not by these you are to know what is the will of God on any particular occasion, but by applying the plain Scripture rule, with the help of experience and reason, and the ordinary assistance of the Spirit of God. Do not lightly take the name of God in your mouth; do not talk of the will of God on every trifling occasion: but let your words, as well as your actions, be all tempered with reverence and godly fear.
- Beware, lastly, of imagining you shall obtain the end without using the means conducive to it. God can give the end without any means at all; but you have no reason to think He will. Therefore constantly and carefully use all those means which He has appointed to be the ordinary channels of His grace. Use every means which either reason or Scripture recommends, as conducive (through the free love of God in Christ) either to the obtaining or increasing any of the gifts of God. Thus expect a daily growth in that pure and holy religion which the world always did, and always will, call "enthusiasm;" but which, to all who are saved from real enthusiasm, from merely nominal Christianity, is "the wisdom of God, and the power of God;" the glorious image of the Most High; "righteousness and peace;" a "fountain of living water, springing up into everlasting life!"

Edited anonymously at the Memorial University of Newfoundland with corrections by Ryan Danker and George Lyons of Northwest Nazarene University (Nampa, Idaho) for the Wesley Center for Applied Theology.

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