

EDWARDS AND THE NEXT GENERATION OF EVANGELICALS

Piper is coming to Sydney this year, and will draw massive crowds. Driscoll isn't coming to Sydney this year, but it is estimated that a million of his sermons will be downloaded in Australia anyway. Many of us would like Keller to visit, but he is not especially the travelling sort. These men, the Holy Trinity (as they have been called) of neo-Calvinist church-planting energy, are getting our attention, and redrawing the map of contemporary evangelicalism, not just in Australia but all around the world. Of course, they are just the tip of the iceberg. We don't hear as much in Australia about CJ Mahaney, or Ligon Duncan, or Mark Dever, or Ed Stetzer, or Josh Harris, or Rick Holland, but they are all influential in Reformed circles in the US, and represent what Collin Hansen, journalist for *Christianity Today*, has dubbed the young, restless and Reformed generation. Their mega-conferences which go under the titles of "Together for the Gospel," or "Resolved," "Passion" or "Next," bring together thousands of pastors and lots of wannabes to hear expository preaching and to sing contemporary music with seriously theological lyrics. What is perhaps more significant, they all drink at the same well: Jonathan Edwards.

I am unabashed apologist for Edwards, a great enthusiast for understanding the eighteenth century revivals, and especially the impact those revivals have had on the foundations of Christianity in Australia, but I am nevertheless amazed by the resurgence of interest in Edwards amongst Gen Y believers. I came to Edwards by reading about Methodism and Pietism. Many of my students come to Edwards through a desperate desire for something deeper to ground their faith, which Piper et al seem to offer. Word gets out, and hyperlinks do the rest. These preachers of the digital age are so respected, that naturally others scratch to find whom they count as their heroes, and the name of Edwards often appears. The "Resolved" Conference in California deliberately bases its name on the resolutions which Edwards as a teenager drafted to guide his life, ministry and ultimately his sanctification.

The Jonathan Edwards Center website at Yale has a quarter of a million hits annually, representing some hundreds of nations, and giving leverage to worldwide interest in the last Puritan pastor-theologian. Indeed, Australia is in the top ten of nations accessing this extraordinary resource (www.edwards.yale.edu). Why are Edwards and his fans so important to understand? What does this resurgence of interest in Reformed theology say about contemporary evangelicalism in Australia? What can we learn?

In short, there is massive reaction underway to the seeker-sensitive, dumbed-down pragmatism of the Baby Boomers. I often hear in Melbourne the lament of young adults who grew up in evangelical churches but never heard the Bible preached systematically or with intelligence. They complain that they weren't taught to think theologically. They can't believe that no one ever told them about the rich resources of Christian history. This reaction is fed by disappointment that leaders of churches are so preoccupied with pastoral crises that they have failed to cast a bigger vision for engagement with the world, or to generate more proactively new evangelistic opportunities. At heart, these concerns reflect the more searching critique that *leaders have failed to be leaders*. The push for church-planting is a *cri de coeur* that something needs to be done, and done quickly, to stop the rot. This is of course not to say that an angry attitude of 'kill the elders' ought to go without rebuke. These young movers and shakers have a revivalist frame of mind, which has all too often in the last couple of hundred years downplayed the importance of nurture and has amplified the importance of decisive preaching and experimentation in ministry practice, sometimes damaging the church in the process. However, for good or for ill, at heart the new Calvinism is a protest movement, as it has often been, to grab attention and to organise resistance.

Reformed faith is particularly well suited to express counter-cultural assumptions. In fact, this has set it apart since the sixteenth century. While the Lutheran Reformation depended on princes and supportive governments to

flourish, the movement coming out of Zürich and Geneva thrived where there wasn't necessarily any encouragement from ruling authorities to make a difference. The Lutherans found a toe-hold in Scandinavia under friendly monarchs, but beyond this their reach was meagre, not least because there were so many disputes internal to the heirs of Luther. On the other hand, the Reformed movement could plant hundreds of churches in France where the King was no friend, or prosper in the Netherlands under Spanish Catholic control, or organise in Scotland where Queen Mary was implacably opposed. Even in New England, the Reformed faith took root in the seventeenth century without any government to lean on. The Puritans created their own government in opposition to the disdain and persecution of Kings James and Charles in Old England. Perhaps it is not surprising that for the Reformed who appealed to the teaching of Calvin, which stressed the majesty and sovereignty of God, the very foundations of their theological system stood above and apart from appeals to governments for validation. Bottom line, the Reformed have been mobile and agile, not dependent on state approval or friendly sponsors, with soaring theological convictions, and therefore with confidence to stand out in a crowd. They do particularly well on secular campuses and in big cities.

The New Calvinism is also a *forward-looking movement*. It is not just that it provides resistance to attitudes or forms which are outdated, but more positively sets new agendas. It is comfortable with being socially engaged, and has moved beyond the evangelism vs social justice conundrum of mid-century. It is not merely a movement to preserve society from further deterioration, but is a movement to transform social relationships. Tim Keller's *Generous Justice* exhorts us to engage with justice efforts, even working collaboratively with non-Christians. In days past, John Newton, Anglican pastor and composer of *Amazing Grace*, delighted in his discovery of Reformed thinking, a resource for reconceiving his role in the slave trade. His friendship with George Whitefield encouraged him to believe that Calvinism

was the creed of the progressives. We often assume that young Calvinists will be socially conservative, which may be true when it comes to the issue of gender roles. This ought not to disguise the fact, however, that its heroes, leaders and members are actually adventurous, innovative, and entrepreneurial. Add to this the factor that in Australia, the new Calvinists not infrequently come from working class families, the middling sort of suburbia, or from aspirational electorates, where restlessness for change is applauded.

Furthermore, where the modern exponents of Edwards have demonstrated a *tight commitment to doctrine*, they have done so alongside enjoyment of a *tight community of faith*. The assumption has often been in the past that doctrine divides. The inverse is the case with new Calvinists. They gather in the blogosphere and make friends who share similar convictions. They listen to larger than life preachers who create a following, which is another way of talking about creating a community. The *Gospel Coalition* and *Together for the Gospel* not only create community through their ministries – they flag community in the very title given to their organisation. Driscoll well points out: “There is a wandering generation that is looking for a family and a history and a home.” There have been reform movements in the past, which channel energy into parachurch groups, and create a niche in some area of outreach. How wonderful it is that the new Calvinism values the church, the weekly encounter with God and other believers, and sets up programmes for training leaders and doing outreach, not outsourcing such activities to parachurch networks. It may be that the overzealous concern to plant new churches, and to ignore the possibility of reviving ailing ones, is myopic. We may not like the anti-denominational bias in some of the rhetoric. But from Edwards they have learnt to value pastoral ministry which grounds their theological dreams. Indeed many seminaries are returning to the “pastor-theologian” model for their graduate attributes: many of the young Reformed have taken this quickly to heart (see Hansen, *Young, Reformed and Restless*, 50).

There is an emotional attraction to Driscoll/Piper/Keller as well, and it is more than a passing “bromance.” These preachers recognise the power of emotions in their preaching and the Christian life, but emotions which are fuelled by content and have ethical shape. Just as Edwards managed to stimulate extravagant expressions of the faith coupled with extraordinarily dense Biblical argument, so too the younger crew today aspire to such a balance (probably without always being able to land on precisely the targetted spot). Driscoll has the gift of the gab and a keen sense of humour. Piper tears up in sermons and wants us to enjoy the glory of God. Keller, perhaps the most professorial of the three, through sheer logic and astute shaping of his material, constrains our emotional responses and lifts our sights higher than we were expecting. The view takes our breath away. Yet because most of those who listen have never heard them preach live, only through downloads, another clue to emotional engagement needs to be understood. To listen to a sermon on your mp3 player is an intensely personal, emotional, and perhaps artificial experience. Sermons were never intended to be for private consumption, but rather to build corporate maturity, yet in a wired world we block out all other voices and pretend that our hero is talking personally and directly to me. No wonder (somewhat dangerously) the digital generation defends so keenly their intimate encounter. To my horror, I know guys whose quiet times are listening to downloads, not reading the Bible for themselves.

It is however hard to complain when the young and Reformed are taking theology so seriously. Impatient with superficialities in the culture and in the church, they want heroes. They want theological coherence in life and thought which Reformed faith provides. The evangelical movement had become so large and diffuse that the roof has fallen in, and the poles of Reformed faith or the emergent church appear the only viable options. Many are discovering that Reformed convictions are a powerful and compelling way to summarise and connect the storyline of the Scriptures, in a world

experiencing a famine of the word of God. For many men, who are ensnared in pornography and feel hopeless and helpless, a robust worldview with influential examples of faith gives some sense that there can be a healthy and personally integrated future for those aspiring to be ministers. A desperate desire for compassionate guidance, clear-minded mentors, and well-reasoned faith is satisfied in Reformed conceptions of theology and ministry. Being born earlier at the end of the baby-boom generation, I don't always understand the spiritual path that many who are young, Reformed and restless traverse. But in Edwards I do see some of these concerns embodied in earlier eras of revival, and have learnt to appreciate both their opportunities and their tensions. Timothy George, Dean of Beeson Divinity School in Alabama, has said, "We live in a transcendence starved culture." The neo-Edwardsians are making good the deficit.