



## **Sanctified Eccentricity: Spiritual Renewal Movements as a Challenge for Today's Church**

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**T**wenty years ago, I was foolhardy enough to be both a doctoral student at Princeton at the same time that I was a youth pastor, eighteen miles away in East Brunswick, New Jersey. On Wednesdays, I taught a mid-afternoon church history precept (class) at the seminary and then immediately jumped in my car and drove as fast as I could to an after-school senior high Bible study held at the church. I clearly remember the drive from Princeton to East Brunswick and the switching of roles, from church history professor to youth worker, which symbolized for me the apparent disconnect between the academic aspects of ministry and the practical aspects of ministry. At the time, the two types of work seemed to be completely separate and incongruous.

I was wrong. The pastoring of youth and studying church history are, or at least should be, thoroughly compatible activities. The story of God's action throughout time is directly related to our ministry among youth. The "cloud of witnesses" who walked this way before us (Hebrews 12:1–2) provide us with bold examples of how to run the race of faith with perseverance and courage.

In my first lecture, I applied the history of revivalism and spiritual renewal movements to our understanding of the importance of holy passion among youth. In this lecture, I am going to apply the history of revivalism to our understanding of the importance of holy passion among those who work with youth—for the sake of the whole church. In the earlier lecture, I profiled four youth, two from our contemporary church and two from the nineteenth century. In this lecture, in addition to those four highlighted individuals, I am going to add a new name to the cast of characters—a young Presbyterian preacher from the era of Lorenzo Dow, a man named Cary Allen.

Allen (1767–1795) is considered to be one of the instigators of the second Great Awakening, beginning while he was a student on the campus of Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia.<sup>1</sup> But beyond Allen's significance as an

important figure in American church history, I also want to look at his life and ministry as an example of an effective youth worker.

The consistent testimony of those who knew Cary Allen was that he was a funny guy. “Cary was remarkable from his early childhood,” it was written, for his good temper and amiable deportment.” “The cheerfulness of Cary often approached levity.” The word frequently used for Allen was that he was “droll” (a popular term in the nineteenth century); that is, he was whimsically humorous and amusing—often in an odd way, through jesting or joking. “He was very agreeable, as his eccentric thoughts and speeches had a peculiar drollery of an amusing nature.” I like this guy! “He could make others laugh to excess, without laughing himself, or appearing to know that he had said anything to cause a laugh.”

Cary Allen was not without suffering in his life. When he was seventeen years old, he had typhoid fever. His emaciated limbs required the use of crutches, yet he never complained. Later that year, he entered Hampden-Sidney College. Allen definitely made his mark at the college. “His eccentric mirth was an unfailing source of amusement to the students and the young people of the neighborhood.”

It seems that the college had a practice, twice a year, of requiring the students to give lectures to the townspeople, in order to improve the students’ skills in public speaking. Allen soon became everyone’s favorite.

Choosing subjects congenial with his mirth-inspiring spirit, he deluged the audience with fun. His appearance was the signal for uproarious laughter. [His professors] commonly put [him] last on the [program], because, after his address, the audience was not prepared for serious discussion....Allen’s appearance on the stage was the signal that the exercises were coming to a close, and the fountain of mirth to be opened....He was evidently a man for comedy. He was comedy itself; outwardly all fun and merriment.

Yet, inwardly, Cary Allen knew that he was estranged from God. All of his joking around could not make him content in his inner being. In the fall of 1787, when Allen was twenty years old, a popular preacher spoke in the neighborhood. Allen prayed to God. “He surrendered his heart to God, and found peace in believing on the Lord Jesus.” He was a spiritually transformed person. “In everything but his eccentricity and aptness for drollery, Allen was

a changed man.” Thankfully, he retained his wonderful capacity for humor. God changes us but still uses our native gifts for God’s glory.

Soon, Allen came to the conclusion that he ought to spend his life preaching the gospel. He finished the college course and began to study theology in preparation for the ministry. But “his friends were in great doubt about the propriety of his choice of profession. His way of thinking and speaking would provoke a smile when there was no cause.” “He had no natural or acquired gravity. His acquaintances loved him for his devotion to God, while they feared he would mar his usefulness as a minister by his strange fun-producing ways; and threw many obstacles in the way of his entering the ministry.” When Allen went before the Hanover Presbytery at the age of twenty-one, they, too, were concerned that he was not serious enough to be approved as a minister. “The want of ministerial gravity [troubled] the Presbytery with the fear that the spirit of Theology had not sufficiently imbued his soul.” I am afraid that the mainline church still thinks that if we are properly imbued with the spirit of theology, we will be solemn, somber, and serious.

Allen did not let the Presbytery dissuade him. He kept on preaching and tried again to gain their approval. Finally, in May 1790, when he was twenty-three years old, Allen was licensed to preach the gospel. The sermon preached on the occasion of Allen’s licensing was based on the text: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor” (Luke 4:18 KJV).

Cary Allen was so given over to the message of the gospel that he went against the conventional religious norms of his day. He ministered to the poor and to those laid aside by the culture. For example, in an age when most white ministers accepted the prevailing racism of the society and refused to preach to African Americans, Allen challenged some of those presumptions. To African Americans, he preached:

I can tell you that the blessed Saviour shed his blood as much for you as for...any of the white people. He purchased pardon for you as much as for the white people. He has opened the door of heaven wide for you, and invites you to come in...You may become religious, and find peace with God as easy as white persons, and I think easier too, for you have not half so many temptations in your path.

Allen became a traveling Presbyterian preacher to remote parts of Virginia and Kentucky, which in those days were little more than wilderness. “His whole soul was in his work. The careless and profane would listen to his talk.” His “zeal in the cause of the gospel excited great attention.” Crowds of young people flocked to house meetings where he was speaking. “A large number became deeply interested on the subject of their salvation.” “Allen, by his manner and cheerful speeches, would arrest attention.”

Allen had a particular appeal with two groups of people: youth and those who had been alienated from the church. Among those who had no religious background, he preached in a way that they were “very fond to hear him.” “His frank and open countenance, his polite demeanor, and his cheerfulness tinged with his incredible drollery, attracted attention.... Multitudes under his ministry were turned to God.”

With the youth, Allen used their style of music and their type of humor. He also tracked into the popular culture of the day, which in that time period was Tom Paine’s *Age of Reason*, a book that had been circulating among the youth. Allen read the book, answered questions raised by the young people, and responded to Paine’s cold rationalism with the fervency of faith. His preaching “was remembered through life by the youth—on whom his conversation made the deepest impression. The cheerful man of God fastened their attention, and engraved on their memory the things of religion.”

Cary Allen died at the young age of twenty-nine, but he left an enormous legacy of spiritual renewal. His biographer summed up his career with one simple, yet profound sentence: “His *sanctified eccentricity* made him a useful man” (emphasis added). The lesson for us is clear: spiritual renewal, revival, and awakening will come when youth workers and other Christian ministers model a sanctified eccentricity.

What is sanctified eccentricity? Let me give you an example from the ministry of Lorenzo Dow. While Lorenzo was traveling through Maryland, a poor man who made his living cutting trees came and informed him that someone had stolen his axe and wished Mr. Dow to help him. The man had heard that Lorenzo Dow knew everything.

“Do you suspect any person of stealing it,” asked Dow. “Yes,” said the poor man, “I think I know the very person.” “Will he be at the meeting tonight?” “Yes, sir.” “Dow said no more, but picking up a stone about as large as his two fists, carried it to church with him and

laid it on the pulpit beside him, so that all the congregation might see it. How many inquiries ran through their minds about the stone during the sermon no one knows. But, after he finished preaching, he took the stone in his hand, and, addressing the audience, said, 'some one has stolen an axe.... [I believe that] the thief is here, he is before me now, and I intend after turning around three times to hit him on the head with this stone.' Accordingly, he turned round twice rather slowly, but the third time came round with great fury as if going to throw the stone into the midst of [those] before him, when...the very man who was suspected of the theft, dodged his head behind the pew. 'Now,' said Dow, 'I will not expose you any further, but if you don't leave that axe tonight where you got it, I will [give out your name] tomorrow.' The axe was accordingly returned."<sup>2</sup>

On another occasion, after an evangelistic service, a fellow preacher came up to Dow and asked him "what his motive was in being so eccentric." The other preacher believed that "the ministration of the word of God ought to be with much solemnity." Dow's frivolous actions, he thought, could arouse "a trifling spirit" in the hearers. Dow explained that his strange tactics were an intentional strategy "to impress truth on [the] minds of his listeners in such a manner" that they would never forget it. He promoted the public portrayal of himself as a "crazy" preacher because such a depiction "brought many out to the different meetings."<sup>3</sup> Lorenzo Dow refused to submit to narrowly defined definitions of a person's appropriate sphere. Accordingly, he consciously wore unusual clothing, he urged women to preach, he encouraged lay control of church government, he denounced slavery, and he affirmed the equality of all persons.

Eccentricity was a common designation among revivalist preachers, for they gloried in their peculiarity and scoffed at pretension and ascribed status. Charles Finney warned revivalists that

you will be called eccentric; and probably you will deserve it. Probably you will really be eccentric. I never knew a person who was filled with the Spirit, that was not called eccentric. They act under different influence, take different views, are moved by different motives, led by a different spirit. You are to expect such remarks.

How often I have heard the remark respecting such and such persons, 'He is a very good man—but he is rather eccentric.' I have sometimes asked for particulars; in what does his eccentricity consist? I hear the [list of supposed transgressions], and the [upshot] is, that he is spiritual. Make up your mind for this, to be eccentric. There is such a thing as being so deeply imbued with the Spirit of God, that you must and will act so as to appear strange and eccentric, to those who cannot understand the reasons of your conduct."<sup>4</sup>

We all know people who have a phony or affected eccentricity, or people who are considered eccentric simply because their personality is a bit odd. I am not speaking about this kind of peculiarity. I am speaking about the fact that if we are Christian disciples, we will be different from the prevailing norms of the society. Indeed, if you look up the word "disciple" in the *Random House Dictionary*, some of the synonyms given are "nut" and "freak." The larger culture is not accustomed to the radical nature of the claims of Christian discipleship.

One aspect of nineteenth-century spirituality provided a particularly important grounding for sanctified eccentricity; that is, most antebellum Christians had a clear sense of human sinfulness. The acknowledgment of sin created in each believer a recognition that one was estranged from God. This experience of estrangement dislodged the individual from his or her position of privileged self-centeredness and then, after an experience of spiritual rebirth, re-centered the person in God. The new orientation predisposed the believer to become off-center (literally "eccentric") in regard to the values of the dominant culture and freed him or her to serve others in a disinterested way. Because of the believer's experience of estrangement, every other person who was a "stranger" (whether spiritually, due to sin, or socially, due to oppression) became a fellow seeker after God.<sup>5</sup> We can see such a sentiment represented in the popular nineteenth-century hymn "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing": "Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God."<sup>6</sup> The believer was expected to recognize Christ's presence in all who were alienated, since each person had, at one time, likewise been alienated from God.

An interesting example of this type of spiritual eccentricity was the Reverend Isaac Rice, a Congregational missionary deployed by the American Missionary Association (AMA) in the 1840s to work with African American

runaways who crossed over the Canadian border from Detroit. He worked for years in Chatham, Ontario. But, in 1849, the AMA dismissed Rice from their service because he had spent all of the money provided for his mission on purposes not designated by the home office. Rice spent the money feeding and clothing the destitute fugitives who arrived daily. “Of his piety there could be no question,” wrote the AMA report about Rice’s dismissal, “but he is described as eccentric.” What was it that the denominational agency found so eccentric? One person on the scene said that Rice “has suffered much in silence and given himself up for the good of the slave.... He has lived principally on bread and beans.” It was reported that Rice had “divided his own goods with the fugitives until he is actually suffering for want of proper clothing, that he sold his watch and even his bed to get food, [and] that he clothed 300 fugitives in one year.” From the perspective of the larger society, someone who would sell his watch and his bed to clothe the poor clearly seemed “eccentric,” but we need to ask ourselves, was not Isaac Rice doing God’s work in that place?<sup>7</sup>

Eccentricity refers to something unusual or unconventional, someone who deviates from the established pattern of accepted conduct. An accusation of being “eccentric” was considered a badge of honor among those who saw themselves as challengers of the existing structures.

One contemporary observer noted, for instance, that the disheveled appearance of Lorenzo Dow was not the result of careless slovenliness, but rather exhibited his desire to be “independent from the changeable fashions of this age of superfluities.”<sup>8</sup> Reform-minded revivalists resisted the aspects of modernity that contradicted the gospel as they understood it, such as the modern stress on economic efficiency over interpersonal relationships or the racist notion of social Darwinism over the biblical notion of ethnic equality—in short, any emphasis on progress at the expense of people.

It is typical to dismiss revivalism as outdated and culturally backward, an example of conservative resistance to change. Rather, for many, revivalism was a radical refusal to accommodate the claims of the gospel to the debilitating effects of consumerist culture, which undermined faith in God and community with others by encouraging the sins of envy, greed, pride, and indulgence. Revivalist men and women repudiated what they considered to be anti-Christian aspects of commercialized enculturation.

Because we have been accepted by God, the revivalists declared, then we are called to accept others. The converts at nineteenth-century camp meetings

welcomed the strangers in their midst—those left aside by the larger society. They were able to be so open-hearted because their spiritual union with Christ impelled them to move beyond themselves toward others. Just as Christ does not exist merely for himself but extends himself for the sake of human beings, so Christian believers are truly human when we move outside of our own self-centeredness.

Theologically, this self-limiting vulnerability becomes evident initially in the life of Jesus—what Karl Barth intriguingly calls Christ’s “eccentric” existence—and is then mirrored in our own human eccentricity. Through our self-limitation, we are set free to love the Other. “The human person,” Barth writes, “experiencing the power of the divine...cannot exist for [self alone]...but...awakened rather to genuine humanity,...also exists eccentrically.”<sup>9</sup> To be fully human, we step outside of the circle of ourselves in order to bring others into the larger circle of reconciliation. Eccentricity is the very nature of Christ, and thus, it should be so of us.

Seen from this perspective, the sanctified eccentricity of Cary Allen and many of his late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century associates offers us a living tradition from which to draw, one that is particularly well suited for the postmodern world in which our youth live and breathe. Those who were transitioning from a premodern to a modern society provide examples for us as we struggle with the transition from a modern to a postmodern society. That is, we share with our friends from two hundred years ago a suspicion that modern assumptions have their limitations. We suspect that quality of life in the postmodern world will no longer depend solely on the modern capacity to build bigger or to produce more without considering those who are left behind.

As postmoderns who acknowledge continuity with our past, we can strip away the modern blinders that have prevented us from seeing clearly our need for genuine connectedness with God and one another. In so doing, we will be able to re-create the experiences of women and men who promoted a holy passion for the sake of God’s world—a sanctified eccentricity. It is in the recovery of this ethos that our revivalistic forebears can help us the most.

From the ministry of Cary Allen and other antebellum revivalists, we can derive four characteristics of sanctified eccentricity that can assist us in the enterprise of becoming more effective youth workers. First, similar to Allen, *youth workers need to evidence a love of life and a sense of humor*. Allen was referred to as “the cheerful man of God” who was renowned for his “strange,

fun-producing ways.” One account said that Allen “was the personification of fun”—certainly a commendable description for any youth pastor.

Such levity is what youth will remember all of their lives. Former youth group members of mine—from twenty years ago—still recall, with irrepressible glee, how four rolls of Saran Wrap can fully envelop a car and how watermelons cut in half and placed carefully under jacked-up tires can keep someone’s wheels spinning for a very long time. We experienced a lot of laughter together, and it made a difference in the youth ministry of that place.

But more than simply being a means to win the hearts of young people, maintaining a sense of humor is a way of being renewed within our own selves as youth workers, a way to experience God’s joy. That is, the sanctified eccentricity of laughing with others and at ourselves results in *the spiritual renewal of one’s self*. We ought not to have rollicking times only with our youth! The message of Cary Allen to youth workers is not to compartmentalize but to have fun in all aspects of our lives.

Second, *youth workers should foster personal evangelism*. Allen’s hearers were “arrested by his intense earnestness.” He was known for his “zeal in the cause of the gospel” and, consequently, “multitudes turned to God” under his preaching. Both then and now, a direct appeal to repentance and new birth is often regarded as eccentric by the prevailing culture; nonetheless, such an emphasis on the immediate experience of God is sought out by youth of every age. Therefore, the sanctified eccentricity of encouraging spiritual transformation will result in *the spiritual renewal of individual youth*—the holy passion that I spoke about earlier.

As a complement to this emphasis on personal renewal and conversion, *youth workers must also offer youth a vision of God’s reign on earth*. The youth of today who I run into express two objectives in regard to their religious life: to experience a vital, present encounter with God and to make a difference in the world. What they do not want and will not tolerate are the polarities of personal faith versus social justice that described the mainline divisions of the last century.

Antebellum revivalists did not separate faith and action. Cary Allen, for instance, was “anointed to preach the gospel to the poor.” He preached an egalitarian message to African Americans and all others who were on the edge. Likewise, the young people who I profiled in the first lecture were enabled by their youth leaders to move from the spiritual margin (due to their alienation from God) to the social margins of their respective societies, serving those in

need. Laura Haviland's conversion led her to accept others and to spend her life identifying with the oppressed. David's conversion has led him to a ministry of advocacy against racism. Matt's transformation was so overwhelming that, when he graduated from high school, he wrote to his youth pastor: "I want to remind you that anything can be done with God's help. There is more we can and will do. God's kingdom will be on earth, if we have anything to do about it." In each case, the sanctified eccentricity of an outwardly focused youth ministry resulted in *the spiritual renewal of God's mission in the world*.

Finally, *youth workers should support innovation and adaptability*. In order to stimulate revival, it is often necessary to challenge the hallowed traditions of conventional churches. Such a challenge may be considered eccentric, but such a sanctified eccentricity will result in *the spiritual renewal of the forms and structures of the Church*. Howard Snyder states that "any traditional form, structure, or practice that helps us be alive and faithful should be kept and improved, [but] any that insulate us from the fresh fire of the Spirit should be modified or retired." "Structural renewal is key to extending [spiritual] renewal beyond the passing moment. Structural renewal is simply finding the best forms, in our day and age, for living out the new life in Christ." According to Snyder, "church structures must be culturally viable."<sup>11</sup>

Cary Allen would have agreed. As he directed his message to the concerns of the young people of his time, Allen used (for example) their style of music—even when it caused disapproval. Allen's "zeal in the cause of the gospel excited great attention; and the use of [Isaac] Watts's psalms and hymns provoked opposition. Many refused to hear them. He was refused admittance to the church, but crowds of young people flocked to the house meetings where he was speaking. A large number became deeply interested on the subject of their salvation." It is astonishing to realize that the hymnody of Isaac Watts (such as "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross") was the music of choice for the young people of Allen's day—the hip-hop of the late eighteenth century! To use such music was controversial, yet it was highly effective in the spiritual lives of youth. Every era has its new forms and styles that will seem improper to a previous generation, and every period has old structures that have outlived their usefulness.

The tension that must be faced by youth workers is that we are called simultaneously to be responsive to the culture, yet not captivated by it. We are "sent . . . into the world," but we are "not of the world" (John 17:18, 16 KJV). In our renewal of forms and structures, we must walk the fine line between

cultural stagnation and irrelevance on the one hand and cultural relativity and faddishness on the other.

The sanctified eccentricity of today's youth workers—those with a sense of humor, a commitment to evangelism, a vision of God's reign, and a willingness to try new ecclesial structures—will invigorate the holy passion of youth, of youth pastors, and of the entire church. I am convinced that there is the possibility of a contemporary spiritual renewal movement—a religious transformation for the twenty-first century. It will be passionate about experiencing God; it will be engaged in reshaping society; and it will be multicultural in a way never before seen in the history of Christendom.<sup>12</sup> There is hope for a new Awakening. Our task is to recognize the sparks of life already present in the church and to fan them into flame.

## Notes

1. The information and quotes regarding Cary Allen come from William Henry Foote, *Sketches of Virginia, Historical and Biographical*, 2nd Series (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1855), pp. 223–235.

2. Lorenzo Dow, *History of Cosmopolite: Or the Writings of Rev. Lorenzo Dow* (Cincinnati: H. M. Rulison, 1855), p. 18.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 60; Marilla Marks, ed., *Memoirs of the Life of David Marks, Minister of the Gospel* (Dover, N. H.: Free-Will Baptist Publishing Establishment, 1846), pp. 110–112.

4. Charles Grandison Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 115.

5. For examples of the term “stranger” applied to those who were both socially and spiritually estranged from God, see Levi Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin* (Cincinnati: Ayer Co. Pub., 1876), pp. 107, 470. See Matthew 25:35, 38–40.

6. Although “Come Thou Fount” was written in the eighteenth century, it became very popular among nineteenth-century American Christians.

7. American Missionary Association, “Third Annual Report,” 1849, pp. 21–22; *The Western Citizen*, 27 Sept. 1849; *The Liberator*, 23 August 1850, cited in Charles Siebert papers, “Underground Railroad (Canada),” Ohio Historical Society.

8. Marks, *Memoirs of the Life of David Marks*, pp. 110–112.

9. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV, 2 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark), pp. 547–548.

10. Matthew A. Boynton, personal communication to author, June 1984.

11. Howard A. Snyder, *Signs of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), pp. 290–291; Snyder, *The Community of the King* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), pp. 137–142.

12. See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).