

At the core of the Great Awakening were revivalistic sermons; for this reason, to understand the movement, one must engage with the homiletical practices and innovations of the day.¹ There were expressions of style and rhetorical presentation that shocked and awed the crowds, such as George Whitfield's use of theatrical elements throughout his itinerant preaching ministry.² Likewise, Jonathan Edwards combined his Puritan heritage regarding the absolute sovereignty of God with his preaching of practical personal piety in a manner that made him into a “thinker and an activist”.³ Throughout the Great Awakening, preaching was revolutionized in style, and then fine-tuned toward the heart of the listener. And alongside the giants of the Awakening and their homiletical revolution was Gilbert Tennent and his experiential and piety-driven sermons.⁴

Gilbert Tennent (February 1703 – July 1764) was raised and trained by his father in the pietistic and Puritan tradition.⁵ His preaching was formative in the development and promotion of the Awakening in the Middle Colonies to the degree to which George Whitfield famously wrote, “[Gilbert Tennent] has learned experimentally to dissect the heart of a natural man. Hypocrites must either soon be converted or enraged at his preaching. He is a son of thunder and does not fear the faces of men.”⁶ But what was unique and revolutionary regarding the homiletical method of Gilbert Tennent? It was not simply his passionate delivery, even though

¹ Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: That is Reformed According to Scripture*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 2002), 84.

² Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 5-9.

³ George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 4-5.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from sermons, letters, pamphlets, and denominational records appear in their earliest or original form.

⁵ Archibald Alexander, *The Log College: Biographical Sketches of William Tennent and His Students* (Port St. Lucie, FL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2008), 34.

⁶ George Whitefield, *George Whitefield's Journals* (London, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 438.

his first biographer would write, “No one could hear him without being convinced that he was deeply earnest.”⁷ What set Gilbert Tennent’s preaching apart was his application of pietistic theology and his view of the experiential role preaching played in conversion, especially considering the conviction of sin and fear of damnation.⁸ And there is no clearer homiletical principle in Gilbert Tennent’s sermons that illustrates this than his use of the “preaching of terrors.” Hughes Oliphant Old defined the preaching of terrors as “nothing more than the hellfire and damnation approach of frightening people in conversion.”⁹ For Tennent, the preaching of terrors was essential to evangelistic preaching because conversion could not be genuine without the very real experience of fear and utter conviction of sin, and, for Tennent, any preaching that did not include the terrors was incomplete and could signal an unconverted or ineffective preacher.

While there is much written about Gilbert Tennent’s life and historical significance during both the Great Awakening and burgeoning Presbyterian Church, there has not been a treatment of the underlying theology and practice of his preaching.¹⁰ This paper aims to fill that gap by examining the theological framework of Tennent’s “preaching the terrors” and how this homiletical technique influenced and formed his evangelistic preaching, and how it functioned in practice. To accomplish this, I will examine three areas: First is the theological development of

⁷ Alexander, *The Log College*, 25.

⁸ Dennis Barone, “James Logan and Gilbert Tennent: Enlightened Classicist Versus Awakened Evangelist,” *Early American Literature* 21, no. 2 (1986): 105–6.

⁹ Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church: Moderatism, Pietism, and Awakening* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 106.

¹⁰ The consummate biography was written by Milton Coalter, *Gilbert Tennent, Son of Thunder: A Case Study of Continental Pietism’s Impact on the First Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986). This book details the events surrounding Tennent’s preaching, but does not go into detail about the application of his theology in his sermons. In Old, *The Reading and Preaching of Scripture*, 107–110, there is a solid treatment of the philosophy of Tennent, but there is no analysis of either individual or groupings of sermons.

Tennent's homiletics through his friendship with Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen and how Tennent learned to preach the terrors.¹¹ Second, this paper will provide an overview of several of Tennent's sermons and the ways he practiced the preaching of terrors throughout his pastoral career, as well as the impact it had on his understanding of piety, revival, conversion, and evangelism. And third, the reception of this method in the Presbyterian church will be examined to show the newness and concern of Tennent's method in his tradition. This would inevitably result in a breakdown of fellowship.

Gilbert Tennent, Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen, and Pietism

Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen was born in the Netherlands in 1691. He was raised by his father, who pastored in the Reformed Dutch tradition and had embraced Spener's German Pietism.¹² Frelinghuysen would move to the Raritan Valley near New Brunswick in 1720 at the request of the local Reformed church.¹³ In this area, there were only two other Dutch Reformed pastors, Guiliam Bartholf and Joseph Morgan, both of whom would clash with Frelinghuysen due to his views on piety and harsh critique of anyone who disagreed.¹⁴ At the core of Frelinghuysen's understanding of piety was experience, in his words,

“Do you know experimentally the ways of the covenant? Have you already entered into the covenant? Baptism and the Lord's Supper bring no one into the covenant... Do you know experimentally the singular, hidden, grace transactions between the Lord and your

¹¹ See also: Milton J. Coalter, “The Radical Pietism of Count Nicholas Zinzendorf as a Conservative Influence on the Awakener, Gilbert Tennent,” *Church History* 49, no. 1 (1980): 41-42. And Coalter, *Gilbert Tennent*, 16-18.

¹² James Tanis, *Dutch Calvinistic Pietism in the Middle Colonies: A Study in the Life and Times of Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen* (The Hague: Martinus Mojhoff, 1967): 18-21. An overview of the influence of Spener on Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen and his piety is far outside of the scope of this paper. To see Spener's influence in the Dutch Reformed tradition and Frelinghuysen see: Randall Herbert Balmer, “The Social Roots of Dutch Pietism in the Middle Colonies,” *Church History* 53, no. 2 (1984): 187-99. For an overview on how Spener's thought was applied in the New World, see: Martin E. Conkling, “Pietism on the American Landscape,” *Concordia Journal* 41, no. 3 (2015): 220-35.

¹³ Tanis, *Dutch Calvinistic Pietism*, 46.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 47-48.

soul, whereby you forsake everything, you give yourself over completely and for all time (not just for once), to God and his service? *And daily renew the surrender?*”¹⁵

This statement is the “kernel” of Frelinghuysen’s understanding of piety.¹⁶ C.N. Wilborn summarized this as “conversion-based Christianity.”¹⁷ And that the Dutch preacher “placed every Christian testimony under the scrutiny of his pietistic conversion paradigm.”¹⁸ This testimony and pastoral had a procedural flow. The first step was the personal testimony of knowledge of their personal sin and need for the new birth.¹⁹ This was often described as “law work” and “here the individual Christian recounted his misery at the consciousness of his violation of God’s law.”²⁰ Second, was the testimony of “his conscious experience of the new birth, which freed him from the misery of the 'law work.’”²¹ After sharing these testimonies, according to Frelinghuysen, “the pietistic conversion resulted in the pious acts of a truly converted soul. One had to possess this testimony in order to be considered credible and communing.”²² It was the solemn duty of the minister to evaluate these testimonies.

Frelinghuysen practically worked out that theology in his Homiletical approach by developing three corresponding aspects of evangelistic preaching: First, to preach evangelistically, one must preach the terrors. This involved showing the true terror of hell and damnation, as well as the very real consequences of disbelief. Second was “holding the mirror to the hearer’s soul.” This involved personalizing the guilt of the individual and why they truly

¹⁵ Emphasis added. Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen, *A Small Selection of His Sermons* (New York: Board of Publication of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church, 1856), 183.

¹⁶ Tanis, *Dutch Calvinistic Pietism*, 105.

¹⁷ C. N. Wilborn, “Gilbert Tennent: Pietist, Preacher, and Presbyterian,” in *Colonial Presbyterianism: Old Faith in a New Land*, ed. S. Donald Fortson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007), 146.

¹⁸ Wilborn, *Gilbert Tennent*, 146.

¹⁹ Tanis, *Dutch Calvinistic Pietism*, 105.

²⁰ Wilborn, *Gilbert Tennent*, 147.

²¹ Wilborn, *Gilbert Tennent*, 147.

²² Wilborn, *Gilbert Tennent*, 148.

deserved damnation. And third, the searching method. This involved answering any personal objections, rationalizations, and removing obstacles so that one could hear the Gospel and truly believe.²³

After Frelinghuysen had already established and fine-tuned his preaching method, Gilbert Tennent was called to serve in the Raritan Valley in 1726. This followed a brief controversy where Tennent had accepted a call to a church in New Castle, Delaware, and only served there for a few weeks.²⁴ After he left for the Raritan Valley, he was publicly admonished by the Presbyterian Synod's moderator and urged to seek counsel before making hasty decisions.²⁵ It was in that context that Tennent saw the effect of Frelinghuysen's preaching. Tennent would later write,

When I came there, I had the pleasure of seeing much of the fruits of his ministry: divers of his hearers with whom I had the opportunity of conversing, appeared to be converted persons, By their soundness in principle, Christian experience, and pious practice... This, together with a kind letter which he sent me respecting the necessity of dividing the Word aright, and giving every man his portion in due season, through the divine blessing, excited me to greater earnestness in ministerial labors. I began to be very much distressed about my want of success; for I knew not for half a year or more that anyone was converted by my labors.²⁶

Following his recovery, "Gilbert Tennent began urging his congregation to serious spiritual examination and explaining to them the necessity of the new birth. Frelinghuysen and Tennent started conducting worship services together in Dutch and English."²⁷ This would anger both the

²³ Martin E. Lodge, *The Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1964), 117–20. See also Coalter, "Nicholas Zinzendorf and Gilbert Tennent," 41–42.

²⁴ Guy S. Klett, ed., *Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1706–1788* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1976), 68.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Thomas Prince, ed., *The Christian History: Containing Accounts of the Revival and Propagation of Religion in Great Britain and America for the Year 1744* (Boston, MA, 1745), 292–93.

²⁷ Nathan P. Feldmeth, S. Donald Fortson III, Garth M. Rosell, and Kenneth J. Stewart, eds., *Reformed and Evangelical across Four Centuries: The Presbyterian Story in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2022) 170.

Dutch and more conservative anti-revivalist Presbyterians as they saw their denominational connectionalism as the binding agent, whereas the revivalists carried a more ecumenical spirit with the “new birth” being the linchpin of unity.²⁸

Tennent wrote about the change in his church following his new method of preaching, “Frequently at Sacramental Seasons in New-Brunswick, there have been signal Displays of the divine Power and Presence,” which resulted in conviction “of Sin by the Sermons then preached, some converted, and many much affected with the Love of God in JESUS CHRIST. OH, the sweet Meltings I have often seen on such Occasion among many!”²⁹ And in another case, they “fell upon their Knees in the Time of the Sermon, in order to pray to God for pardoning Mercy.”³⁰ Without the influence of Frelinghuysen’s method, Gilbert Tennent’s preaching would not have developed in the same manner. His brother, William Tennent, spoke of the success of his brothers preaching, “Such of them as were converted were everyone of them converted by means of sharp-law work of conviction, in discovering to them in a heart-affected manner, their sinfulness both by nature and practice, as well as their liability to damnation for their original and actual transgressions.”³¹

He was already a pro-revival pietist, but the preaching of terrors would come to define his preaching and later cause major division in his denomination. Nevertheless, with his newfound technique sharpened, Tennent was prepared to join the ranks of the preachers of the Great Awakening.

Sermon Analysis

²⁸ James Tanis, *Dutch Calvinistic Pietism*, 67–79.

²⁹ Thomas Prince, *Christian History*, November 10, 1744, quoted in Kidd, *The Great Awakening*, 30.

³⁰ Coalter, *Gilbert Tennent*, 40.

³¹ Prince, *Christian History*, 302.

Gilbert Tennent would preach regularly in his home church in the Raritan Valley, but he would also go on to preach in Boston, Philadelphia, across New Jersey, and other colonies during the Great Awakening. He wrote to Whitfield after one such trip, “In my return homewards, I have been preaching daily, ordinarily three times a day, and at times oftener (a few days in the aforefaid fpace excepted) and thro' pure grace I have met with fucces much exceeding my expectations.”³² During Tennent’s itinerant and local church career, four key sermons highlight his use of the preaching of terrors: *The Espousals*,³³ *The Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry*,³⁴ and *A Preparatory Sermon Concerning the Wrath of God*.³⁵ These three sermons cover the period in which Tennent was most involved in the Awakening, and therefore provide a good base to examine his method.

The Espousals (1735)

Tennent preached the Espousals to his home church on June 22nd, 1735.³⁶ His goal in this sermon was to “treat upon the grand Scope of the whole Gofpel, and the great Errand of the

³² John Gillies, *Historical Collections Relating to Remarkable Periods of the Success of the Gospel and Eminent Instruments Employed in Promoting It* (Glasgow: Robert and Andrew Foulis, 1754), 131.

³³ Gilbert Tennent, *The Espousals* (New York: Printed by J. Peter Zenger, 1735).

³⁴ Gilbert Tennent, *The Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry* (Philadelphia: Printed by Benjamin Franklin, 1740).

³⁵ Gilbert Tennent, *A Preparatory Sermon Concerning the Wrath of God* (1744). This text was rediscovered in the middle 1980s, See: Hughes O. Old, “Gilbert Tennent and the Preaching of Piety in Colonial America: Newly Discovered Tennent Manuscripts in Speer Library,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 10, no. 2 (1989): 132. It is a handwritten manuscript that was first preached in 1744, and again several times in 1746, 1749, 1750, and 1756 (according to dates in the margins). It is maintained by the Presbyterian Historical Society. This gives the text weight in understanding Tennent’s style as it was preached both before and after his frustrations with Whitfield’s working with the Moravians and other groups Tennent disagreed with, and during the period in which Tennent focused on reuniting the Presbyterian Church. See: Gilbert Tennent, *Letter to Jonathan Dickinson 1742*, in *A History of Presbyterian Church in America with Biographical Sketches of its Early Ministers*, ed Richard Webster, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, 1857, 189. And D. G. Hart, “Old Side New Side Schism and Reunion,” in *Colonial Presbyterianism: Old Faith in a New Land*, ed. S. Donald Fortson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007), 157–80.

³⁶ Gilbert Tennent, *The Espousals*, 1.

Ministry thereof.” And he called them to listen to him with a sense of urgency “For Christs fake, I befeech thee to read it thoroughly, without prejudice, examine it frictly by the holy Scriptures, before thou pass thy Judgment, confider it feriously without partiality, and comply with its Defign quickly without delay” for “in fo doing thou wilt honour God, fave thy own Soul, and refresh my Heart, and I fhall neither loofe my poor pains in Writing, nor thou in Reading, which may God grant for Chrif's fake Amen. I conclude and remain thy Servant in the Redeemer Jefus.”³⁷ The text he preached on was Genesis 24:49, where Abraham’s servant was sent to find a wife for Isaac. Tennent’s main charge to his audience was that many had seemingly rejected the marriage to the lamb, and therefore Tennent proclaimed, “My Bufineis with you today is to perfwade you to me speedily and fincerely ef-poufed to the Lamb of God.” And Tennent was indignant with his parishoners, stating that he had “Reafon to ufe as Matter of doleful Complaint and bitter Lamentation over many of you, whom former Attempts have fail'd to perfwade to this Marriage, and alfo as an Excitement to awful fear and paffionate concerns now.”³⁸ Tennent compared himself to the servant of Abraham, stating that as a servant of Christ, it is his and all ministers’ call to bring the lost to union with the Lord. As Tennent preached, “True to his intereft, a Spokefman fhould be a familiar Friend of the Lover, and faithful to his Caufe; Abrabam's Servant was fuch whom he appointed to get a Wife for his Son: And fo muft the Minifters of Chrif be.”³⁹

This introduction confirms that Tennent saw his role of persuading and examining the testimonies of his people in the same manner as Frelinghuysen had shown him in the Raritan Valley. Tennent argued “So a godly Miniſter is not fatiſfy'd with the Performance of Preaching as a Talk, and the Obſervance of Sinners attent upon it, unleſs he can perceive fome Signs of the

³⁷ Gilbert Tennent, *The Espousals*, 4.

³⁸ Gilbert Tennent, *The Espousals*, 5.

³⁹ Gilbert Tennent, *The Espousals*, 5.

Effects of his Preaching, some Signs of Sinners consenting to embrace the Redeemer.”⁴⁰ To draw out the emotions of his hearers, Tennent described Christ as husband in numerous ways, including “A great and glorious husband,” and “An all-knowing... and all-powerful husband.”⁴¹ He continues espousing the wonders of Christ as husband calling him “A beautiful Husband,”⁴² prudent husband... and loving husband.”⁴³

This enabled Tennent to press the hearts of the listeners for failing to heed the call for union with Christ,

Indigent Persons, in Respect of Condition, such as have not a Bit of Bread to eat, nor a Rag of Cloaths to put on, nor a Farthing in their Purse. Those that are rich are wont to be coy in Courtship. But what madness is it for you, Sinners, to be coy, when the rich and all-sufficient Jesus makes Court to you, who are as poor as a beggarly as Sin and Death can make you. Would not you count it a Piece of unaccountable Rudeness and Folly, if a beggarly scullion Girl, who had scarce Cloaths to her Back would show much Coyness: and Backwardness, when a great Prince; of noble Blood and great Wealth, made repeated and earnest Suit to her, offered to advance her to royal Dignity and Cloath her with Cloath of Gold? O unhappy Sinners, this is your foolish Practice! Christ offers you great Things on. Your compliance with the Terms of Marriage. Tho' ye have lain among the filthy Pots of Sin.⁴⁴

This highlights Tennent’s view on the contrasting nature between the converted who see the espousal to Christ as the greatest blessing, and the unconverted who turn him away for the lesser pleasures of this world.⁴⁵ And Tennent saw it as his divinely appointed duty to show the people their sin through the preaching of terrors, and to meet with them to judge whether or not their conversion experience was valid.

From here, in the same way Tennent laid out the beauty of Christ as husband, he used graphic imagery to show the nature of those who rejected Christ and the painful hellfire awaiting

⁴⁰ Gilbert Tennent, *The Espousals*, 8.

⁴¹ Gilbert Tennent, *The Espousals*, 20.

⁴² Gilbert Tennent, *The Espousals*, 24.

⁴³ Gilbert Tennent, *The Espousals*, 25.

⁴⁴ Gilbert Tennent, *The Espousals*, 28.

⁴⁵ Old, *Reading and Preaching*, 107.

them. What follows is a prime example of preaching the terrors. Tennent called those opposed to Christ “Black and deformed Perfons, lying in the open Field in their Blood, as Spectacles of Shame and Mifery.”⁴⁶ They were “Hateful Creatures, filled with Enmity and Spite againft the Father of Jefus.”⁴⁷ And “Idoletrous Worldlings, whose cheif [sic] Love is fet upon this vain, World, who care for it and purfue after it as your cheif [sic] Good while in the mean Time, you barely trifle with God and your poor Souls.”⁴⁸ He further charged them as being “...fecure and semiconvinced Sinners, either who never have been awakn'd out of your dead Sleep, or but half awakned and relapfed again to your Perdition, who have put your Hand to the Plow, and looked back like Lotts wife to the World or your other Lufts, ye are not fit for the Kingdom of Heaven.”⁴⁹

This was concluded by the warning of where this lifestyle would lead them if they failed to repent and did not experience the new birth. It is a clear example of the preaching of terrors. He preached to his congregation,

O! te wretched, fairfac'd fmuorhtongu'd but foul falfe hearted Hypocrites!: You are the bane and peft of Chriftianitey. O! Ye whited Sepuleres! Its you who under a Pretence of Friend Thjpwound Religion to the Heart, and leavt it bleeding and gafping for Life. Pull of your Paint and Maiks, ye Hypocrites, and. appear like what ye are, incarnate Devils; its better for the. People of God to have roaring, raging Devils, than Devils in difguife; *what can fuch as ye expect, but to be Cut afunder by the Sword of God's Juftice and funk in the Damnation of Hell.*⁵⁰

Gilbert Tennent built up the beauty of Christ throughout the first half of the sermon. This was followed by clear teaching on the depravity of humanity and the consequences of denying such a beautiful bridegroom. This shows that, for Tennent, the preaching of terrors is not only found in detailing the torment in hell and eternal damnation, but also in the agony of missing the

⁴⁶ Gilbert Tennent, *The Espousals*, 29.

⁴⁷ Gilbert Tennent, *The Espousals*, 30.

⁴⁸ Gilbert Tennent, *The Espousals*, 49

⁴⁹ Gilbert Tennent, *The Espousals*, 49-50.

⁵⁰ Gilbert Tennent, *The Espousals*, 51. Emphasis added.

glories of Christ. In other words, for Tennent, a preacher could not accurately evangelize by only promoting or explaining the Gospel, but must also detail the eternal consequences of denial of the Gospel for a real heart change to take place. In his mind, how could one examine their soul if they did not know what they were saved from?

The Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry (1740)

In 1740, following years of debate and frustration regarding the revival in the Colonial Presbyterian Church, Tennent preached his most infamous sermon, *The Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry*. This sermon is important regarding the study of Tennent's evangelistic preaching as it details his theology of preaching through its negative portrayal of his fellow Presbyterians who were concerned about and resistant to pietism and Tennent's use of preaching the terrors.⁵¹ Tennent effectively stated that since the anti-revivalist preachers denied the experiential side of piety and because they did not preach the "correct" homiletical formula, they were "enemies of the Kingdom of God."⁵² During this time in his ministry, Tennent saw these other preachers as nothing more than modern Pharisees, a theme which bleeds through every page of the sermon.⁵³ Since this was a clear polemical sermon directly aimed at his theological adversaries in his own denomination, and considering the imagery he used to describe them, it was called "...one of the most severely abusive sermons which was ever penned."⁵⁴ Tennent's thesis was that unregenerate preachers are seen by the lack of fruit,⁵⁵ their denial of the revival,⁵⁶

⁵¹ Wilborn, *Gilbert Tennent*, 146.

⁵² Alexander, *Bioraphical Sketches*, 54.

⁵³ Wilborn, *Gilbert Tennent*, 146.

⁵⁴ Alexander, *Bioraphical Sketches*, 53.

⁵⁵ Tennent, *Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry*, 12.

⁵⁶ Tennent, *Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry*, 5.

and improper exposition of Scripture (which to him was anything that did not follow the Awakening formula),⁵⁷ and the sorry state of their churches and congregants.⁵⁸

Tennent's attack against the unregenerate ministers began by charging them of not giving weight to the experience of conversion, "Although some of the old Pharisee-Shepherds had a very fair and strict Out-side; yet were they ignorant of the New-Birth" and that "The old Pharisees, for all their long Prayers and other pious Pretences, had their Eyes, with *Judas*, fixed upon the Bag. Why, they came into the Priest's Office for a Piece of Bread; they took it up as a Trade, and therefore endeavoured to make the best Market of it they could."⁵⁹ Seeing that Tennent's model of evangelism includes discerning the testimonies of his people, this is an attack against ministers who did not agree with his view of assurance of faith and conversion experience. To Tennent, if they did not focus on the conversion experience, they were mere professionals and not faithful pastors.

Tennent continued his polemic, "And Pharisee-Teachers, having no Experience of a special Work of the Holy Ghost, upon their own Souls, are therefore neither inclined to, nor fitted for, Discoursing, frequently, clearly, and pathetically, upon such important Subjects" and not only are they unfit but "Their Prayers are also cold; little Child-like Love to God or Pity to poor perishing Souls, runs thro' their Veins."⁶⁰ He seemingly hoped to persuade not only the crowd of the Awakening and conversion experience, but also to discount and dismiss his theological opponents in the eyes of the church.

This style of rhetoric continues throughout the sermon. But near the middle, he shifts directly to the congregation. It is important to note that Tennent was preaching in Nottingham;

⁵⁷ Tennent, *Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry*, 16-17. See also: Wilborn, Gilbert Tennent, 146.

⁵⁸ Tennent, *Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry*, 20, 22, 29.

⁵⁹ Tennent, *Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry*, 3.

⁶⁰ Tennent, *Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry*, 7.

this pulpit had been vacant for several years, and five ministers had been assigned to fill the pulpit on rotation until a regular minister could be called.⁶¹ Two of the five were revivalists, Alexander Craighead and David Alexander; the other three were not.⁶² It is in that tense context in which Tennent mourned those who did not have revivalist preachers, saying, “My Brethren, We should mourn over those that are destitute of faithful Ministers, and sympathize with them. Our Bowels should be moved with the most compassionate Tenderness, over those dear fainting Souls, that are as Sheep having no Shepherd.”⁶³ Both pro-revival and anti-revival preachers would be in the minds of the listeners.

Tennent also warned them of the ineffective and unregenerate ministers who denied the Awakening and pietism, “From what has been said, we may learn, that such who are contented under a dead Ministry have not in them the Temper of that Saviour they profess. It's an awful Sign, that they are as blind as Moles, and as dead as Stones, *without any spiritual Taste and Relish.*”⁶⁴ Tennent closed this argument saying for the congregation to call anyone other than a revivalists would be self harm, stating “To trust the Care of our Souls to those who have little or no Care for their own, to those who are both unskilful and unfaithful, is contrary to the common Practice of considerate Mankind, relating to the Affairs of their Bodies and Estates.”⁶⁵ This again shows Tennent’s understanding that the experience of conversion and the new birth was requisite for true evangelistic preaching. For him, if the congregation hired a pastor who was not of the revivalist persuasion, they were hiring an ineffective pastor at best, but it was more than likely to be an unregenerated Pharisee.

⁶¹ Alexander, *Bioraphical Sketches*, 53.

⁶² Klett, *Minutes*, 175. Coalter, *Gilbert Tennent*, 64.

⁶³ Tennent, *Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry*, 10.

⁶⁴ Tennent, *Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry*, 12. Emphasis added.

⁶⁵ Tennent, *Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry*, 15.

It would be the unregenerate pastor who would receive the harshest warning from Tennent. Therefore, one of the clearest examples of the preaching of terrors in this sermon was a warning against the unregenerate ministers. Tennent said,

For surely, these Sins which are committed against greater Light and Mercy, are more presumptuous, ungrateful, and inexcusable; there is in them a greater Contempt of GOD's Authority, and Slight of his Mercy; those Evils do awfully violate the Conscience, and declare a Love to Sin as Sin; such Transgressors do rush upon the Bosses of GOD's Buckler, they court Destruction without a Covering, and embrace their own Ruin with open Arms. And therefore according to the Nature of Justice, which proportions Sinners Pains, according to the Number and Heinousness of their Crimes, and the Declaration of Divine Truth, *you must expect an enflamed Damnation: Surely, it shall be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah, in the Day of the LORD, than for you*, except ye repent.⁶⁶

To call this language harsh would be an understatement. But the fact that Tennent used such language indirectly against other ordained ministers in the Colonial Presbyterian Church would come back to haunt him for the next decade.⁶⁷ Tennent clearly laid out that he believed that the lack of fruit of his contemporaries, the state of their churches, and their own piety was a result of an unregenerate heart, and that their true nature was exposed by their view of piety, the revivals, and the refusal to preach the terrors.

A Preparatory Sermon Concerning the Wrath of God (1744)

The final sermon to be examined was preached by Tennent several times. According to the margins, he preached it first in 1744 when he moved to pastor Second Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia.⁶⁸ He preached it again in 1746, 1749, 1750, and 1756.⁶⁹ This sermon was first written following the New Brunswick Presbytery and Tennent's ejection from the Colonial

⁶⁶ Tennent, *Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry*, 19. Emphasis added.

⁶⁷ D. G. Hart, "Old Side New Side Schism" 157–80.

⁶⁸ Ezra Hall Gillett, *History of the Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Publications, 1864), 95.

⁶⁹ As this was a rediscovered, handwritten manuscript, there are sections that are unclear or have been torn out of the page. I have tried to avoid most of the more damaged sections in favor of the clearer ones. Any areas that include words that are assumed or missing a portion of the word will appear in brackets.

Presbyterian Church.⁷⁰ The sermon is on Exodus 24:8 and focuses on the blood of the covenant poured out for sinners.

In the opening statements, Tennent reminds the congregation that the people entered willingly into a covenant with God based on the revelation given through Moses who served “as mediator between god & israel having received diverse laws & ordinances from god privately in the three forgoing chapters, came down to the people acquainted them with those Laws” Moses then “takes their consent to them engrosses the laws reads them to the people who repeat their consent & then by Sacrifice & the Sprinkling of blood ratif[ies] the covenant between god and them moses did not lead them blindfold[ed] into the covenant but told them all the words of the Lord.”⁷¹

After explaining the ceremonial aspect of the law, Tennent reminds them they, too, participate in a covenant renewal; he connects the ceremonies in the passage with the sacraments.⁷² There remains in his preaching at this time the experiential aspects of his earlier homiletical, he wrote “The holy Sacrament being a Seal of the new Covenant, it must, of consequence, be our duty to renew the covenant when we partake of that Seal, without which it is like to be of no Service to us.”⁷³ He shows the glory that awaits those who hold fast to the covenant by comparing them to Judah’s return from captivity and the promises fulfilled. He continued,

[The covenant] promises still fullfilling, more especialy at tymes of general awak[e]ning, the surely poor Convinced Siners [Sinners] ask the way to Zyion, set their faces thitherward & weep, as they go! O may the good god send such tymes again amongst us, for Jesus Christ his sake! But this promise shall have its full & final accomplishmt.t, when the flourishing state of the church commenses, when them mountain of Zyion shall be exalted above every mountain, & the Kings & nations shall flock unto it, when gods

⁷⁰ Klett, *Minutes*, 178.

⁷¹ Tennent, *A Preparatory Sermon*, 1.

⁷² Tennent, *A Preparatory Sermon*, 3-4.

⁷³ Tennent, *A Preparatory Sermon*, 3.

viols [vials?] shall be poured out upon euphrates & upon the Seat of the Beast & the way of the kings of the Earth is prepared, when nations shall learn war no more, but beat [their] spears into pruning hooks.⁷⁴

Even so, the only ones to experience this are the truly penitent who “is one who confesses his sins with their aggravations--laments [them] with his heart from love-- [ashamed] of them hates them unversaly [sic] ingenuosly implacably resolves to leave [them] imediatly[sic] & impartially & puts his purpose in practise.”⁷⁵ He further warns that “unless we give our hearts our whole hearts to god, we do but lie to him & flatter him with our tongues with all our profession, Sirs, without this our pretenses stink in his nostrils.”⁷⁶ This, again, shows that Tennent contrasted positive and negative examples as a method of preaching the terrors. In this case, if you don’t embrace piety, you stink in God’s nostrils.

The preaching of terrors begins in earnest near the second half of the sermon, wherein Tennent wrote,

...It is an evil thing & a bitter to depart from the living god the fountain of Blessedness & to pursue broken cisterns that can hold no water, they find that earthly good does not answer its fair promises & their fond & foolish expectations, but deceivs [sic] them with disapointment, vexation & very vanity while in the mean tyme god to chastise their ingratitude hides his face from their souls to chastise their ingratitude & leaves them to wander in the dark.⁷⁷

And when that man wanders his

guilt torments his consience leaness invades his soul, the former sweetness of his dutys & enjoymts [enjoyments] is fled away, the sense of the divine Love w:c [which] is the life of his life is lost, his vius [views] of divinethings are darkned [darkened] & his hopes of Heaven shaken; he can neither take comfort in god or in the world & thus he pines away and languishes tho in the midst of outward affluence, in the fullness of his sufficiency he is in want.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Tennent, *A Preparatory Sermon*, 7.

⁷⁵ Tennent, *A Preparatory Sermon*, 10.

⁷⁶ Tennent, *A Preparatory Sermon*, 14.

⁷⁷ Tennent, *A Preparatory Sermon*, 17.

⁷⁸ Tennent, *A Preparatory Sermon*, 18.

To avoid such a fate, the hearers were encouraged to “joyn ourselves to the lord in a perpetual Covenant that shall never be forgotten.”⁷⁹ His final charge before his closing Gospel call was to not “stupidly neglect a proper means of quickening & growth. Has not our dear Redeemer told us that such as are ashamed of him in this wicked & adulterous generation of them will he be ashamed when he comes.”⁸⁰ The essence of preaching the terrors is to frighten the lost to respond to the Gospel call. The main point of this sermon was to come into the covenant, or be damned. Even as this was in the latter half of Tennent’s ministry, his use of preaching the terrors continued. Albeit with toned-down rhetoric.⁸¹

Critical Response to Tennent’s Preaching the Terrors

The main critics of Tennent’s preaching and ministry were his fellow Presbyterians. On June 1, 1741, at 3 P.M., Robert Cross presented a protest⁸² against the Revivalists, and particularly against Gilbert Tennent.⁸³ There were several charges against the group, but in regards to homiletics, the preaching of terrors was disputed and rejected by the Synod. Cross began with a strong condemnation of the style, practices, and attitudes of Tennent and the revivalist party,

Their adherents wore the direct and proper cause thereof, by their unwearied, unscriptural, anti-Presbyterian, and uncharitable, divisive practices, which they have been pursuing, with all the industry they were capable of, with any probability of success, for above these twelve months post especially, besides too much of the like practices for some years before, though not with such barefaced arrogance and boldness.⁸⁴

Cross also directly referenced their itinerant preaching,

⁷⁹ Tennent, *A Preparatory Sermon*, 23.

⁸⁰ Tennent, *A Preparatory Sermon*, 32.

⁸¹ Old, *Reading and Preaching*, 109.

⁸² Robert Cross, “1741 Protestation”, in *A Collection of the Acts, Delieverances, and Testimonies of the Presbyterian Church*, (Presbyterian Board of Publication, Philadelphia, 1855)

⁸³ Klett, *Minutes*, 174.

⁸⁴ Cross, *Protestation*, 597.

[They are] making irregular irruptions upon the Congregations to which they have no immediate relation, without order, concurrence, or allowance of the Presbyteries or ministers to which Congregations belong, thereby sowing the seeds of division among people, and doing what they can to alienate and fill their minds with unjust prejudices against their lawfully called Pastors.⁸⁵

There were other polity concerns in the Protestation, but Cross's scathing review of Tennent's "preaching of terrors" is the most important for this study. The complaint opens with Cross' frustration of Tennent's sermon *The Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry*, Cross wrote, "Their principles and practice of rash judging and condemning all who do not fall in with their measures, both Ministers and people, as carnal, graceless, and enemies to the work of God, as appears in Mr. Gilbert Tennent's sermon against unconverted Ministers."⁸⁶ But even more than the intemperance charge, Cross accused the method underlying the sermon as being unbiblical and dangerous; he wrote, "Their preaching the terrors of the law in such a manner and dialect as has no precedent in the word of God."⁸⁷

For Cross and his party, the preaching of terrors was simply emotional manipulation, saying it was "so industrious working on the passions and affections of weak minds, as to cause them to cry out in a hideous manner, and fall down in convulsion-like fits, to the marring of the profiting both of themselves and others" and that when they are in this state they "are so taken up in seeing and hearing these odd symptoms, that they cannot attend to or hear what the Preacher says; and then after all, boasting of these things as the work of God, which we are persuaded do proceed from an inferior or worse cause."⁸⁸ The preaching of terrors was to be rejected, according to Cross, because it had absolutely no biblical or historical warrant, it was

⁸⁵ Cross, *Protestation*, 598.

⁸⁶ Cross, *Protestation*, 598.

⁸⁷ Cross, *Protestation*, 598.

⁸⁸ Cross, *Protestation*, 598.

manipulative, it was out of order, and it burdened people with the assurance of salvation being guaranteed for the pietist.

The rejection of Tennent's "preaching the terrors" by the anti-revivalist party is a sign that the method itself was new and unknown. Tennent did not do his homiletical innovation any favors, however, by pointing the "proverbial cannon" at his denominational leaders. Regardless of where one stands on the preaching of terrors, modern or historic, Tennent was one of the best to do it during the times of the Great Awakening, and would continue to promote it through his career. To his credit, Tennent would learn from his rashness and work to reunite the Presbyterians. And while it is outside of the scope of this paper to detail the schism and reunification of the Synod, it is important to note that Tennent would be elected moderator by the reunified group.⁸⁹

Conclusion

The preaching method of preaching the terrors was integral to Gilbert Tennent's success as a revivalist in the Middle Colonies. It would enable him to join Frelinghuysen in ministry at the Raritan Valley, and Whitfield across the Middle and Upper Colonies. His innovations and rhetorical expertise on this front were unmatched. But at the same time, it was the method that would cause him much grief in his denomination.

Tennent viewed the preaching of terrors as necessary for true evangelistic preaching to take place. He showed this in his sermon "*The Espousals*" by comparing the worth of knowing Christ versus the suffering of rejecting Him as Lord. The blessings that flowed out of having Christ as husband far outweighed the damnation and suffering of rejecting him. Tennent showed in "*A Preparatory Sermon Concerning the Wrath of God*" that the true new birth would be tied to conviction of sin following hearing the terrors, and that the experience and gratitude of covenant

⁸⁹ Klett, *Minutes*, 305.

blessings flowed from knowing the suffering and damnable consequences of denial. What better covenant could there be? And what fools would his audience be for denying it! And finally, he viewed the preaching of terrors as necessary for ministers by arguing that ministers who fail to do so are failing their charge and are ineffective at best, and unregenerate at worst.

While preaching the terrors was, and is, controversial, there is no denying that mastering it brought Gilbert Tennent to national and historical prominence. Just as one cannot study the Great Awakening's impact apart from dissecting the preaching of the day, it is not possible to study the life and ministry of Gilbert Tennent without seeing the impact of preaching the terrors.

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