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# A Lutheran Perspective on the Influence of *Life of Brainerd* on the Church's Understanding of and Approach to Missions since Its Publication in the mid-Eighteenth Century

Vernon E. Wendt Jr.

**Abstract:** The popularity of David Brainerd's personal journal, published by Jonathan Edwards in the mid-eighteenth century, greatly influenced the revivalistic understanding of and approach to Christian missions. We can only imagine how the history of missions for the past several centuries might have been different had a journal as influential as *Life of Brainerd* been published at the same time, portraying a missionary faithfully proclaiming the Gospel message in all its truth and purity and rightfully administering the sacraments, instead of adhering to the principles of Jonathan Edwards' theology.

*An Account of the Life of the Late Reverend Mr. David Brainerd, Minister of the Gospel, Missionary to the Indians, from the honourable Society in Scotland, for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, and Pastor of a Church of Christian Indians in New Jersey. Who died at Northampton in New England, Octob. 9<sup>th</sup> 1747, in the 30<sup>th</sup> Year of his Age: Chiefly taken from his own Diary, and other private Writings, written for his own Use; and now published, by Jonathan Edwards, A.M. Minister of the Gospel at Northampton in 1749<sup>1</sup> significantly influenced others in their missionary endeavors. This paper offers a Lutheran perspective on the impact Brainerd's journal has had on the church's understanding of and approach to missions since its publication.*



Rev. Dr. Vernon E. Wendt Jr. has a PhD in Missiology from Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne (2000), and is currently serving as Pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church in Chicago. He has been an adjunct online instructor for Concordia University Portland's EdD program, and is an adjunct Professor of Theology at Concordia University in Chicago. [vernwendt@aol.com](mailto:vernwendt@aol.com)

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter referred to as *Life of Brainerd*

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## **Influence on Missions**

Ultimately published in at least 54 editions, *Life of Brainerd* became a source of inspiration for countless missionary careers. As William Warrant Sweet once remarked, “David Brainerd dead was a more potent influence for Indian missions and the missionary cause in general than was David Brainerd alive.”<sup>1</sup>

John Wesley was among the first to recommend *Life of Brainerd* as a source of inspiration for evangelicals, observing in 1767, “Find preachers of David Brainerd’s spirit and nothing can stand before them.”<sup>2</sup> Between 1768 and 1835, Wesley went on to produce several abridged versions of *Life of Brainerd*, advising that the diary be used to revive evangelical commitment.<sup>3</sup> “Let every preacher read carefully over the life of ‘David Brainerd,’” encouraged Wesley. “Let us be followers of him, as he was of Christ, in absolute self-devotion, in total deadness to the world, and in fervent love to God and man.”<sup>4</sup>

Brainerd’s popularity accelerated with the advent of the first half of the nineteenth century. Protestant leaders held up Brainerd as a model of self-denying piety, as well as a rare example of a successful (if only momentarily so) American Indian missionary.<sup>5</sup> *Life of Brainerd* became the first biography written in America that was well received both abroad and at home. It was published in Dutch in 1756, in French in 1838, and in German in 1851.<sup>6</sup> Published materials by and about Brainerd helped him to attain a prominent place among evangelical circles. Ministers would recount his life from the pulpit, and parents would describe his self-denying exploits during devotions with their children.<sup>7</sup>

The diaries and memoirs of evangelicals are replete with references to Brainerd’s life as an aid to their piety.<sup>8</sup> Brainerd was so respected and idealized that in 1822 Sereno Dwight remarked that “the veneration felt for his (Brainerd’s) memory, by the church approaches that with which they regard the early Evangelists and Apostles.”<sup>9</sup>

As impactful as Brainerd’s journal was on Christian piety, Brainerd’s influence on missions is even more remarkable. Even though his missionary career spanned less than five years, *Life of Brainerd* inspired many to choose missionary careers as a means of manifesting a similar spirit.<sup>10</sup>

Among the more prominent missionaries influenced by Brainerd’s life were William Carey and Henry Martyn. To Carey, one of the first Baptist missionaries in India, *Life of Brainerd* was almost a second Bible.<sup>11</sup> Carey, William Ward, and Joshua Marshman, colleagues in the Serampore Mission in India, affirmed a covenant three times a year that

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included the following statement:

Let us often look at Brainerd . . . in the woods of America pouring out his very soul before God for the people. Prayer, secret, fervent, expectancy, is at the root of all personal godliness.<sup>12</sup>

Henry Martyn claimed that he was drawn into missionary work through reading *Life of Brainerd*.<sup>13</sup> His missionary motto: “Let me burn out for God” was paraphrased from a line in Brainerd’s diary.<sup>14</sup> He once wrote, “I long to be like him” and like Brainerd, he ended up dying of tuberculosis, while serving in India with Carey.<sup>15</sup>

Brainerd also inspired Samuel J. Mills, considered the founder of American foreign missions. Mills reflected that he was first attracted to his religious vocation by the stories of David Brainerd and John Elliot that his mother told him in his youth.<sup>16</sup> Francis Asbury, the first missionary of Methodism to America, referred to Brainerd as “that model of meekness, moderation, temptation, and labor, and self-denial.”<sup>17</sup> Thomas Coke, another Methodist and founder of missions throughout the world, wrote of Brainerd on coming to America in 1749: “his humility, his self-denial, his perseverance and his flaming zeal for God, are exemplary in deed.”<sup>18</sup> Robert McCheyne, who organized missions for the Church of Scotland, wrote of Brainerd in 1832:

Most wonderful man! What conflicts, what depressions, desertions, strength, advancements, victories, within thy torn bosom! I cannot express what I feel when I think of thee. Tonight, more set upon missionary enterprise than ever.<sup>19</sup>

Also, included in the long list of missionaries who were inspired by Brainerd are David Livingston, missionary to Africa; Samuel Marsden, missionary to Australia and New Zealand; Robert Morrison, Scottish missionary to China; John Wilson, missionary to Western India; Andrew Murry, missionary to South Africa; Sheldon Jackson, missionary to Alaska; and Christian Frederick Schwartz, a German Lutheran missionary to India.<sup>20</sup>

Missionaries regularly took the work into the field, where it became part of their devotional exercises. Gideon Hawley, a missionary protégée of Edwards, carried in his saddlebag a copy of *Life of Brainerd* to which he referred to whenever under duress. In 1753, he wrote, “I greatly need something more than humane to support me. I read my Bible and Mr. Brainerd’s life, the only books I brought with me, and from them have a little support.”<sup>21</sup> Pliny Fisk, a missionary in Egypt, also drew comfort from Brainerd’s diary while in the field.

In 1822, Fisk noted in his diary that one Sabbath, while reading *Life of Brainerd*, he was led to contrast Brainerd’s character and accomplishment with that of the pharaohs. He concluded that “All their cities, mausoleums, temples and pyramids,

seemed insignificant compared with the crown of glory which Brainerd won.”<sup>22</sup> Also, when he was seriously ill, Fisk wrote in his diary, “What must not Brainerd have suffered, when sick among the Indians?”<sup>23</sup>

Memoirs of the graduates of Andover Seminary, the institutional center of the missionary movement in nineteenth-century America, contain direct testimony of *Life of Brainerd's* influence. Before sailing from Andover to Bombay, missionary Gordon Hall wrote to his parents: “It will be trying to your parental tenderness to see your son leaving you to live and die in a foreign land. But have you not given me away in covenant to God?”<sup>24</sup> Hall went on to remind his parents “that death will separate us whether we consent or not.”<sup>25</sup> Levi Parsons, the first American missionary to Palestine, declared in his farewell address, after citing Brainerd’s example, “Better, my brethren, wear out and die within three years than live forty in slothfulness.”<sup>26</sup>

*Life of Brainerd's* influence on twentieth-century missionaries can be found in Jim Elliot’s writings. Inspired by Brainerd, Elliot flew with four companions to share the Gospel with the Auca Indians in South America. Shortly before he was martyred in 1956, Elliot wrote, “Confession of pride—suggested by David Brainerd’s Diary yesterday—must become an hourly thing with me.”<sup>27</sup>

*Life of Brainerd's* continued influence on the twenty-first century can be seen in the 2009 publication of *David Brainerd: A Flame for God* (2009),<sup>28</sup> the 2009 publication of *The Lives of David Brainerd*,<sup>29</sup> and the 2011 children’s book *David Brainerd: A Love for the Lost*.<sup>30</sup> In addition, a documentary on David Brainerd,<sup>31</sup> along with a companion devotional book,<sup>32</sup> are being marketed both to foster Christian piety and to spur others on to mission work.

## **Criticisms of Brainerd as Missionary**

Given *Life of Brainerd's* impact on missions, one might surmise that Brainerd’s missionary career would be unanimously lauded. However, Brainerd’s image as a model missionary has not gone without criticism. Although evangelicals throughout the years have tried to mold Brainerd into the foremost missionary of his time, he made relatively few converts while in the field.<sup>33</sup>

Norman Pettit questions Brainerd’s “calling” to the mission field, evidenced by his lack of joy in his work among the Indians, along with the fact that his diary contains no

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indication that he considered mission work while in college.<sup>34</sup> It wasn't until he was expelled from college that Brainerd was compelled to preach to the Indians.<sup>35</sup>

In addition, there are hints throughout Brainerd's diary that he had taken upon himself (for the wrong reasons) a job for which he was not properly fit.<sup>36</sup> Brainerd disliked the wild and hated the discomforts that went with living in the woods.<sup>37</sup> Protestant missionary leaders sometimes feared that the influence of Brainerd's self-sacrificing zeal could drive young recruits to an early grave.<sup>38</sup> Brainerd's melancholy attitude expressed in his diary led Andrew Crosswell to describe Edward's *Life of Brainerd* as that "long and tedious account we have of his wading through the fogs and mists of vapours and melancholy," which he felt had "a direct tendency . . . to frighten others away from the joyful religion of Jesus Christ."<sup>39</sup>

Crosswell argued that the praising of "such dark and gloomy lives of Christians of the first magnitude, must be doing the Jews and deists a pleasure, whose hearts are gladdened by seeing Christianity represented in such an hideous manner, as if they who knew most of it, were the greatest strangers to peace and comfort."<sup>40</sup> Worse yet, Brainerd's doubt was possible evidence that he questioned Christ's all-sufficiency and free forgiveness, making Jesus "a little Savior." For, in effect, Brainerd was despising the blood of Christ and had "a mean opinion" of His free grace.<sup>41</sup>

Others have criticized Brainerd's demeaning attitude towards the Indians. As one of his journal entries entry reveals:

They are in general unspeakably indolent and slothful. They have been bred up in idleness and know little about cultivating the land, or indeed of engaging vigorously in any other business. . . . They have little or no ambition or resolution. Not one in a thousand of them has the spirit of a man. And it is next to impossible to make them sensible of the duty and importance of their being active, diligent, and industrious. . . . It is to be hoped, that time will make a yet greater alteration upon them for the better.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, Henry Warner Bowden writes, "Holding such convictions about Indians and beset by misgivings concerning himself, it is remarkable that Brainerd contributed anything at all beneficial to missions."<sup>43</sup>

Paul Harris criticizes that Brainerd's diary is concerned with Brainerd himself, and little is said about his dealings with the Indians. Even when he describes his Delaware converts, Brainerd's emphasis is placed upon God's grace communicated through his preaching, while the Indians appear as mere stock figures.<sup>44</sup> Hence, Brainerd gives the impression that missionaries shouldn't concern themselves too much with how they relate to their prospects. What they really needed to worry about was their relationship with God. For if a missionary tried hard enough and demonstrated enough faith, the Holy Spirit would take care of the rest.<sup>45</sup>

Brainerd is also criticized for shying away from confrontation over Indian land rights. According to Harris, “In the end Brainerd did nothing more than turn his back on the efforts of his converts to construct a viable way of life.”<sup>46</sup> His example encouraged later missionaries to overlook the ways in which the process of conversion affected the social structure of the people. “Missionaries were given no incentive to develop more than a superficial understanding of the social context in which they labored.”<sup>47</sup>

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### **A Critique of the Critics**

While there may be some validity in the analysis of Brainerd's critics, they also omit some important points. For example, while it is true that Brainerd had relatively few converts, it is difficult to determine one's “success” as a missionary based on numbers. This is especially true in the case of the American Indians in Brainerd's day, who proved to be a difficult target to reach for numerous reasons. Therefore, it is not surprising that Brainerd had relatively few converts, nor did his contemporaries who also worked among the Indians.

When Pettit questions Brainerd's “call” to the Indians due to his joyless determination to persevere, one wonders if Pettit would have questioned Jeremiah's calling or that of Jonah's! It is unfortunate that Brainerd's melancholy spirit seems to overshadow any joy he may have had in his missionary endeavors, but one cannot judge whether someone is “called” or not based upon their lack of joy in the field. Many missionaries have gone through periods of doubt and despair. Also, one cannot discount that it appears that Brainerd was already predisposed to a melancholy spirit due to his background, temperament, and sickly body. In answer to Pettit's allegation that Brainerd only chose to work in the mission field due to his expulsion from college, both Edwards and the SSPCK (The Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge) credit Brainerd with turning down several assignments in comfortable parish churches among the English.<sup>48</sup> Also, in response to Pettit's questioning Brainerd's call to mission work based on his failure to mention his interest in missions in his diary at college, how many other missionaries did not receive a “call” until later in their lives?

In defense of Brainerd's alleged lack of sensitivity to the Indians, it should be acknowledged that Brainerd was a product of his environment. Neither Brainerd nor Edwards appear “intent on belaboring parodies of the conventional images of satanic savagery.”<sup>49</sup> In fact, there are relatively fewer such images in *Life of Brainerd* than in

much of the missionary propaganda before and after.<sup>50</sup> For example, John Elliot, the “great apostle” to the Indians had looked upon his charges as “doleful creatures”—the very ruin of mankind.<sup>51</sup>

In answer to Harris’s criticism of Brainerd’s self-centeredness, given the fact that *Life of Brainerd* was intended to be a personal diary depicting his struggles for holiness, it is little wonder that so much of it is consumed with his personal struggles and feelings towards God rather than focusing on the Indians he worked with.

Finally, Brainerd may have failed to take a stand for Indian land rights, but how many others took such a stand, not to mention a sickly missionary with a melancholy spirit? In fairness to Brainerd, he spent as much time educating his people as he did catechizing them, in hopes that the Indians would improve their status in life.<sup>52</sup> Also, his preaching and teaching tended to focus on Christ crucified as the “man of sorrows” who came to suffer and die that others might be saved, realizing that the Indians who had been cheated out of their land and decimated by the white man did not need to be also told that the white man’s God was angry and vengeful.<sup>53</sup> In addition, Brainerd was careful not to proclaim the superiority of his civilization but sought above all to communicate the essence of the Christian faith.<sup>54</sup>

## **Brainerd as Model Missionary?**

In his four years as a missionary to the Indians, Brainerd experienced only a moderate amount of visible success for all his world-renouncing efforts. He was most effective in his preaching tour to the Delaware Indian village at Crossweeksung, New Jersey, which began on June 19, 1745. Within a year, there were 130 persons in his growing assembly of believers.<sup>55</sup> The whole Christian community moved from Crossweeksung to Cranberry in May 1746 to have their own land and village, but by November, Brainerd was too sick to continue his work.<sup>56</sup> Nonetheless, from the right perspective, Brainerd can be looked upon as a model missionary in the following ways: (1) his love for the people, (2) his Christ-centered preaching and teaching, (3) his emphasis on education, (4) his intercessory prayer, and (5) his sacrificial service.

### **1. Love for the People**

The passages in Brainerd’s diary resonate with his concern for the conversion of the Indians. An example can be found in one of his letters addressed to a “dear friend,” dated July 31, 1744: “But I think I could be content never to see you or any friends again in this world, if God would bless my labours here to the conversion of the pour [sic] Indians.”<sup>57</sup>

Still another example of Brainerd’s passion for the Indians can be seen in the change in his interpreter, as described in his diary. At first, Brainerd describes how



his interpreter, an Indian by the name of Moses Tatamy, hindered his work, because he “addressed the Indians in a lifeless indifferent manner.”<sup>58</sup> Later, however, a great change took place in the interpreter. Not only was he baptized by Brainerd, he is described as greatly assisting Brainerd’s work.<sup>59</sup> This change in Brainerd’s interpreter is evidence that Brainerd’s love and concern for the Indians was contagious.

On another occasion, a convert of Brainerd reportedly told her granddaughter that Brainerd “was the first white man she could ever love, having suffered so much from them . . . but now God sent this man to pay her for all the wrongs which she had suffered.”<sup>60</sup> Brainerd was so moved by her testimony that he “was willing to endure hardships . . . that he might do her people good.”<sup>61</sup> When Brainerd visited his congregation of Indians for the last time on March 18, 1747, he described that the degree of affection among them was more than merely natural.<sup>62</sup> Also, Edwards describes Brainerd’s final prayers as dwelling “much on the prosperity of Zion, the advancement of Christ’s Kingdom in the world, and the propagation of religion among the Indians.”<sup>63</sup>

Finally, Brainerd’s love for the Indians can be seen in his brother John’s appointment as his successor in the mission at Cranberry. Brainerd described his love for John as being more than any creature living.<sup>64</sup> We can infer that he passed his love for the Indians on to his much-loved brother. For if he didn’t love them, he certainly would have dissuaded his brother from working among them.

## 2. Christ-centered Preaching

Brainerd, as a disciple of Edwards, tended to promote what can be described “a more law/gospel/law” message than that of a “law/gospel/gratitude” message,<sup>65</sup> thereby failing to properly distinguish between law and gospel. However, his goal of making Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins as the central theme of all his discourses to the Indians is admirable.<sup>66</sup> His normal path of exposition was as follows:

- a. God’s perfections.
- b. Man’s fallenness.
- c. Self-justification’s utter insufficiency.
- d. Christ’s utter sufficiency to save.
- e. The urgency to respond to Christ by faith without hesitation.<sup>67</sup>

In addition, Brainerd was convinced that morality was best promoted by preaching Christ crucified. As he wrote in his journal:

I never got away from Jesus, and Him crucified, and I found that when my people were gripped by this great evangelical doctrine of Christ and Him

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crucified, I had no need to give them instructions about morality. I found that one followed as the sure and inevitable fruit of the other.<sup>68</sup>

### 3. Emphasis on Education

Brainerd spent as much time educating his people as he did catechizing them, with the hope to improve their status in life.<sup>69</sup> He not only helped inspire others to found schools for Indians, he also was a source of inspiration for the founding of Dartmouth and Princeton.<sup>70</sup>

### 4. Prayer and Fasting

While we should be careful not to make prayer a work to earn God's favor or a tool of manipulation, Brainerd can serve as an example for us in his praying for the unsaved. In his journal, we read of him spending whole days in prayer, sometimes setting aside six times in the day to pray, and seeking out others to pray with him.<sup>71</sup> He prayed for not only his own sanctification, but for the conversion and purity of the Indians and, above all, for the advancement of the kingdom of Christ around the world, especially in America.<sup>72</sup> In addition, his willingness to withhold from eating, in his longing for holiness, guidance, and greater usefulness by God among the Indians is also something we can emulate.

### 5. Sacrificial Service

Like prayer and fasting, acts of service should not be seen as a way to earn God's acceptance and favor. Instead, any sacrifice we make for the Kingdom of God is to be compelled by our love for Him in response to the love He has shown to us in Christ, as the Holy Spirit works in us the will and power to do God's will (Phil 2:13). From this perspective, Brainerd's example of devotion to God and man, despite his physical ailments and hardships, can serve as inspiration for our missionary endeavors.

## **Possible Reasons for the Popularity of Brainerd's Journal**

Given Brainerd's moderate success as a missionary, why then was his journal so influential? I contend that there are two main reasons for his journal's success: (1) Readers can easily relate the sufferings and weaknesses of Brainerd with their own, and (2) the influence of Jonathan Edwards as the editor and promoter of *Life of Brainerd*.

## 1. Brainerd's Sufferings and Weaknesses

The fact that Brainerd struggled so much as a person and as a missionary makes him even more relatable, than if he would have portrayed himself as a glowing success in his memoir. Instead, *Life of Brainerd* invites the reader to join him, as a fellow cross-bearer this side of heaven, where the glory of God's Kingdom is often hidden. As John Piper describes, Brainerd's life is "a vivid, powerful testimony to the truth that God can and does use sick, discouraged, beat-down, lonely struggling saints, who cry to him day and night, to accomplish amazing things for his glory."<sup>73</sup>

Those who struggle with sickness and disease can identify with Brainerd's struggle with almost constant sickness; those who experience dark times of depression can identify with Brainerd's recurring bouts of melancholy; those who find themselves separated from loved ones and friends can identify with Brainerd's struggle with loneliness; and those who have had to endure external hardships can identify with Brainerd's many challenges in his missionary endeavors.

Above all, readers can identify with Brainerd's spiritual struggles, such as his struggle at times to love the Indians, his struggle to stay true to his calling when the opportunity for an easier life as a pastor came along, and his many struggles in his pursuit of holiness. Yet, despite all his struggles, Brainerd's diary portrays him as never giving up until his dying breath. The implication for readers of *Life of Brainerd* is that neither should they give up in their dedication to their vocations and to their God, until they join Brainerd in breathing their last and hear the words, "Well, done good and faithful servant."

Since its initial publication in 1749, *Life of Brainerd* has never gone out of print. Because of its honest portrayal of a man's struggles with his own sinful nature, as well as in fulfilling his vocation as a missionary in a challenging field, it remains just as relevant as when it was first published.

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## 2. The Influence of Jonathan Edwards

We cannot underestimate the influence Jonathan Edwards has had on Christianity in America, as well as throughout the world. While George Whitefield is considered the foremost revivalistic preacher, Jonathan Edwards is considered by many to be the foremost theologian of revivalism in America, and there is hardly any

doubt that Edwards' sole motivation for editing and publishing *Life of Brainerd* was to propagate his theology of revivalism. Thus, we are left to speculate on what Edwards chose to leave out of Brainerd's journal, as well as possibly what he may have added or reworded to fit his theological framework. Rather than being an impersonal theological work, *Life of Brainerd* is the equivalent of Edwards' theology taking on flesh in the form of a sickly missionary, prone to a melancholy spirit. In fact, Brainerd's diary led to an important sub-genre of religious biography in America: the missionary memoir meant to inspire others to Christian ideals.<sup>74</sup> Unlike other missionary reports that focused on the missionary endeavor itself, Brainerd's diary primarily focused on the missionary and his personal struggles. This compelled others, who weren't even missionaries, to read and follow Brainerd's example within their own context of life.

As a theologian, Edwards identified with Calvinism, as opposed to Arminianism. These two different theological strands may appear to be markedly different. Calvinism emphasizes God's sovereignty and man's predestination, whereas Arminianism emphasizes man's decision for or rejection of Christ. However, the results of both approaches tend to be a focus on human good works rather than on Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins. For through good works, one must either demonstrate his right to acceptance (Calvinism) or earn his acceptance (Arminianism). This can be seen in Edwards' emphasis on signs or "distinguishing marks" of regeneration to be assured of one's salvation.<sup>75</sup> As John Gerstner states,

The difficulty is in detecting such signs [of spiritual conversion]. Edwards, having taught its possibility, urged the saints to get assurance. However, he raised so many problems that it became a byword that very few of his closest, followers, if any, ever got it.<sup>76</sup>

Hence, *Life of Brainerd* resonates not only with those who hold to such a works-centered understanding of the Christian life, it also has served to reaffirm such a position.

Finally, because Edwards, as "America's theologian" put his "imprimatur" on *Life of Brainerd* as an example of Christian piety, others, who admired Edwards, were persuaded to do the same. This has resulted in a domino effect, as prominent Christian leaders in successive generations have continued to persuade others to read *Life of Brainerd* as an inspiring example of Christian devotion.

## Conclusion

Although *Life of Brainerd* was never intended to be a guide for missionary methodology, its content promoted the Jonathan Edwards' idea that if one had a vibrant vertical relationship with God, then their horizontal relationship with others

would take care of itself. Consequently, sociological and cultural considerations were deemed unimportant. All that was needed was a pure heart for God.<sup>77</sup> Thus, *Life of Brainerd* significantly contributed to the “revivalistic” understanding of missions that emphasizes that the success of one’s mission endeavors is dependent on the purity or accomplishment of the missionary who can persuade sinners to believe and be saved, rather than on the mighty act of God who turns and transforms people.<sup>78</sup>

Brainerd’s love for the Indians, Christ-centered preaching, emphasis on education, prayer and fasting, and willingness to give up all for Jesus are commendable. However, by implying that “success” in missionary endeavors is solely dependent upon the piety of the missionary, rather than on the faithful proclamation of God’s Word and rightful administration of the Sacraments, the influence of *Life of Brainerd* may have inadvertently distorted the Church’s understanding of and approach to missions.

We can only imagine how the history of missions for the past several centuries might have been different had a journal as influential as *Life of Brainerd* been published at the time, but rather portraying a missionary faithfully proclaiming the Gospel message in all its truth and purity and rightfully administering the Sacraments, instead of adhering to the principles of “Edwardsianism.” As Dan Saunders asserts,

Implying that “success” in missionary endeavors is solely dependent upon the piety of the missionary, rather than on the faithful proclamation of God’s Word and rightful administration of the Sacraments, the influence of *Life of Brainerd* may have inadvertently distorted the Church’s understanding of and approach to missions.

Edwards’ doctrine of assurance is like the naughty child climbing up the slide rather than taking the stairs. He confuses the locus of assurance and bases his doctrine in union with God and Christian practice which can only lead to the subjective errors of unhealthy introspection and legalism. Rather, assurance should ultimately be based in objective sources, coming from God. The promises of God in Scripture, the finished work of Christ, the indwelling of His Spirit from these spring the fountain of assurance, the certainty of regeneration producing faith, the certainty of a God transformed life, the certainty and hope of glory.<sup>79</sup>

While journals, letters, and biographies of Lutheran missionaries have certainly been published throughout the years, e.g., *The Autobiography and Chronological Life of Reverend Paul Henkel (1754–1825)*,<sup>80</sup> “The Life and Labors of Friederick Schmid,”<sup>81</sup> *Nau! Mission Inspired: The Story of Henry Nau*,<sup>82</sup> none has had such an influence as *Life of Brainerd* in motivating its readers to sacrificial living. This may

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be due to the simple fact that these works have tended to focus more on the mission work itself rather than the piety of the individual missionary. Still another possible reason is that an influential figure like Edwards has yet to endorse such a Lutheran writing as “a remarkable instance of true and eminent Christian piety in heart and practice, tending greatly to confirm the reality of vital religion, and the power of godliness.”<sup>83</sup>

This lacuna certainly doesn’t preclude the possibility of publishing a portrayal of a life of sacrifice that is more in keeping with our understanding of theology and ministry. In contrast to Jonathan Edwards’ version of piety portrayed in *Life of Brainerd* that emphasizes God’s sovereignty and the sanctification of one’s will, such a work would emphasize the cross of Jesus and a complete dependence on God for one’s faith and holiness. Hence, such a work would offer readers an affirmation of their identity in Christ rather than a subjective proof of their possible election. Ideally, such a portrayal of Lutheran piety would prove to be as influential to others in sacrificial living and missionary zeal as *Life of Brainerd* has, in addition to being a leavening influence of orthodoxy.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Conforti, “Jonathan Edward’s Most Popular Work: ‘The Life of David Brainerd’ and Nineteenth-Century Evangelical Culture,” *Church History* 54 (June 1985): 189–190.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Jackson, ed., *Works of John Wesley*. 14 vols. (repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), vol. 8:328.

<sup>3</sup> Conforti, *Church History*, 190.

<sup>4</sup> Jackson, *Works of John Wesley*, 328.

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