

# Religious Fanaticism

by Ian Murray

---

*Fanaticism is a destructive and highly injurious force in the church, characterized by mistaken and wrong emotion, and must be carefully distinguished from true Christianity.*

**Duration:** 54:07

**Scripture:** James 3:13-15, James 3:17

**Topics:** "Biblical Balance", "Spiritual Discernment"

---

## Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the dangers of fanaticism in the church. Fanaticism is characterized by an exaggerated and distorted focus on one biblical truth, often severed from other truths. It can occur in different cultures and centuries, but the characteristics remain similar. The speaker emphasizes the importance of being held under the control and understanding of scripture, guarding against the excitement of the imagination in times of revival.

---

## Transcript

The third chapter from verse 13, James 3 and verse 13. Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? His works with meekness of wisdom. But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not and lie not against the truth.

This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.

And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace to them that make peace. I want to speak to you this morning on religious fanaticism and understanding religious fanaticism. And I must begin by attempting to define what I mean by the word fanaticism.

We all use the word and it's quite probable that we use it in different senses. It has different meanings. And it has to be essential that we commence by some definition.

I think it's interesting to note the origin of the word. That much is clear. It arose for the first time in the 1640s.

And it arose in circumstances when Puritanism was coming to its hoped for climax in the reformation of the land. And just at that point there broke out all kinds of divisions and sectaries as they were then called,

appeared. Men who were called sometimes, well they were different parties, 5th monarchy men, levelers, ranters, quakers, seekers and others.

And it was to these groups that the word fanaticism was first applied. Persons, says one dictionary, affected by excessive and mistaken enthusiasm. And Thomas Fuller who wrote in the 1640s, he says a new word is coined within a few months called fanatics.

And it seemeth well proportioned to signify the sectories of our age. Let me give you a few examples of what I mean by fanaticism. The first example, the well known history of James Davenport, minister in Long Island at the beginning of the great awakening.

Earnest evangelist, used to the conversion of many souls. And then at apparently the height of his usefulness in the great awakening, Davenport gradually diverged and became, I think one can only say, and as he himself later would have said, a fanatic. He began to encourage excitement.

He not only, says one writer, gave unrestrained liberty to noise and outcry, both of distress and joy in time of divine worship, but he promoted both with all his might. He came to believe in the immediate and direct guidance of God. He left his congregation under such an impression, became an itinerant.

And at the height of his influence, many of his followers in March of 1743 gathered and they brought together many articles which they considered were to be burned, including many Puritan books, the works of John Flavel among them. The immediate and direct teaching of the Holy Spirit had become, as they thought, such a reality that they were set free from the bondage of these old traditions. Davenport recanted, as I'm sure you know, but alas, many of his followers never did.

Now at the same time in England, there were many occurrences of fanaticism among John Wesley's societies, for example. And I mention these not in any criticism of Wesley, because I do believe that studying Wesley and the Christians that were with Wesley is a very beneficial and edifying thing. There were many godly people among the Methodists, as I'm sure you know.

But there, as elsewhere, there were cases of fanaticism. One man by the name of James Kershaw, in the year 1777, a Methodist, prophesied in England that all the Methodists in England were to go over to America in the belly of a whale. Wesley said that he was stark, staring mad.

But there were other men among the Methodists who weren't so. George Bell, class leader in London, a man who, Wesley says, no man was more profitable to me than George Bell, while he was simple of heart. Bell became exceedingly zealous.

In 1762, when Wesley was in London and attending a meeting where Bell was presiding, he tells us that Bell prayed with much zeal for over an hour. And there were other things in the society meeting that troubled Wesley. He said, I had to speak my mind concerning five or six honest enthusiasts, as he calls them.

Then in the months that followed in this same class meeting, there were dreams and visions and impressions, and it came to a height when Bell solemnly prophesied that on the 28th of February, the following year, 1763, the world would end. Wesley was in London that night of February the 28th, and he was preaching amongst the Methodists, and he says during his sermon, I largely showed the utter absurdity of the suggestion that the world was to end that night, but, notwithstanding all I could say, many were afraid to go to bed, and some wandered about in the fields, being persuaded that if the world did not

end, at least London would be swallowed up of an earthquake. I went to bed at my usual time and was fast asleep, he says, about ten o'clock.

But George Bell's influence, his prophecies, were a great disturbance at that date among the Methodists. Then another example of fanaticism, the case of Charles G. Finney. Finney first appeared as a young man in the so-called Western revivals in New York in the late 1820s.

He had the support and sympathy of a great many of the best-known evangelical preachers, but then after a few years, these leaders who had been preaching in terms of revival for over 20 years, many of them, they began to speak with great concern regarding Finney, and Gardner Spring, whose name is known I'm sure to many of you now who reprints, Gardner Spring in his autobiography, a most valuable book, has a chapter entitled Fanaticism in Revivals, and in that chapter he gives particular attention to Charles G. Finney. Now Finney held, I believe, two errors that were significant and characteristic of his fanaticism. One was a wrong view of prayer.

Finney taught that if we pray in faith, God cannot be faithful to his word unless he gives us what we ask. If we pray in faith, God must honor his word. Now Gardner Spring opposed that vehemently, and others of course with him, pointing out that believing prayer is always submissive prayer.

Spring says, the prayer that God's will may be done, and not our own, is always answered. But that wasn't what Finney meant. Finney meant that by praying in faith, we actually identified in advance God's will, and therefore we could be certain that so praying in faith, God would hear us.

To which Gardner Spring says that this error would sanction every species of wildness and enthusiasm, and it did. Take this example. Spring is writing, he says, I have known some persons in our own city, that is in New York, who have acted under the influence of this delusion.

There are men and women still alive and among us, who remember the circumstances of the death of Mrs. Pearson, around whose lifeless body her husband assembled a company of believers, with the assurance that if they prayed in faith, she would be restored to life. Their feelings were greatly excited, their impressions of their success peculiar and strong. They prayed, and prayed again, and prayed in faith, but they were disappointed.

There was none to answer, neither was there any that regarded. She slept the sleep of death, and they were constrained to follow her to the grave. The so-called prayer of faith.

If we pray for healing in faith, we will get healing. If we pray for 50 converts in faith, we will get 50 converts. That delusion began at this period.

But then the other error of Finney, which I touch upon briefly, and which I am sure is familiar to us all, is the error that true converts can be identified on the spot. If people publicly resolve to be a Christian, then it is enough for us to regard them as Christian. The invitation system, the altar call, the whole public call for decisions, which had its origin there in the 1820s.

Now another example of fanaticism, Edward Irving. Edward Irving, eloquent, mighty preacher of the word of God, something of an Old Testament prophet in the wider sense of that word prophet. Much used in London in the 1820s.

Minister of the National Scotch Church in London. Then towards the end of the 1820s we read, he was impatient of a lifeless religious routine. He dreamed of apostolic methods and a new style of preaching.

And he came to believe that the great need of the hour, and the great promise of the hour was the restoration of spiritual gifts. He says, we cried unto the Lord, for apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, anointed with the Holy Spirit, the gift of Jesus. Because we saw written in God's word, that these are the appointed ordinances for the edifying of the body of Christ.

And Irving on April the 30th of 1831 came to believe that God had answered their prayers. Mrs. Cardale began to prophesy and to speak with tongues. Others soon followed her.

The whole Catholic Apostolic Church, as it came to be called, was surrounded. Irving himself dying, you remember, at the early age of 42 in 1834. But a very striking and sad example of fanaticism.

Now, I pass on then, I hope I've given you some idea of what I mean to speak about. I pass on to a second heading, which is to underline the truth that this is a subject exceedingly difficult to handle. And I want to give you some reasons for that.

The first, of course, is because of the difficulty of determining when the charge of fanaticism is valid and justified. We all know that true religious experience is very often characterized as fanaticism. Our Lord Jesus Christ himself was said to be beside himself, by his own family.

Festus says to the Apostle Paul, much learning doth make thee mad. The great revivals of the 18th century and other periods were denounced as enthusiasm or fanaticism. Whitefield, Wesley, all the leaders were spoken of in these terms.

And I'm sure it is quite certain that if God is pleased to pour out his spirit in this day and ministers are made a flame of fire, they will very soon be given titles and epithets that are similar to those we find in scripture and elsewhere. So the question is, how do we identify real fanaticism? How do we distinguish it from that which is not fanaticism at all, but which is true Christianity? Can we say, for instance, can we say that real fanaticism is to be distinguished from alleged fanaticism because real fanaticism is only found in non-Christians? Is that a possible distinction to make? To say that where we have real Christians, we don't have true fanaticism but we have something which the world calls fanaticism. Well, of course, I'm sure you agree with me that that is not a possible view.

And it is not a possible view because it is quite apparent that fanaticism is often found amongst true Christians and earnest Christians and people who might be the last to be suspected of being fanatics. I've mentioned a number of names already this morning and I don't doubt for a moment that those men were Christians. I'm sure that is true of Davenport, I'm sure it is true of Edward Irving.

So one cannot possibly say that true Christians are not guilty of this delusion. Samuel Miller says, It seems to have been the lot of the sons of God in all ages that whenever they assemble in greater numbers and with greater zeal than usual to present themselves before the Lord, Satan came also among them. Quoting, of course, from the book of Job.

So the distinction is not easy to make and certainly not to be made in terms of Christian and non-Christian. And then I believe the subject is also difficult because it is easy to draw the wrong conclusions. For example, if we say that fanaticism is an excess of emotion, if that is our definition of fanaticism, then it would be quite simple to argue that the way to prevent the evil of fanaticism is simply to prevent and

restrain all emotion.

If fanaticism is an excess of emotion, if we can successfully debar emotion from our churches, then we will never be guilty of fanaticism. Now that kind of conclusion, you understand, is exactly the sort of conclusion that the devil wishes us to draw. Because true experimental religion, the religion of the Holy Spirit, is always genuinely emotional.

The fruit of the Spirit is love and joy and peace. The Spirit of Christ is a spirit that hates lukewarmness. To say that we must exclude emotion in order to defend ourselves against fanaticism, I say is the very line of argument which the devil would have us pursue.

I do believe that fundamentally, the devil's great purpose in encouraging fanaticism is to discourage, finally, experimental religion. It is to discredit true emotion. But fanaticism is not an excess of emotion.

We cannot love Christ too much. We cannot be too zealous. We cannot have too much of a spirit of thankfulness and praise.

Fanaticism is not an excess of emotion. It is mistaken and wrong emotion. So, let us then understand that wherever the devil is involved, there is great subtlety.

And this is an area in which the devil is certainly involved as an angel of light, as a serpent in evangelical dress. That is the reason, again, why this subject is peculiarly difficult. And yet, although the subject is difficult, and now I move to a third head, although it is difficult, it is a subject of very major importance for us to understand.

And let me give you reasons why I believe it is so important. The first is that as evangelical Christians, I believe we are prone to underestimate the danger of fanaticism and wildfire. And we are prone to underestimate the danger because, if we are Christians, we have an antipathy of indifference and coldness and religious stagnation.

As we see our own hearts, we deplore how unmoved we so often are, how untouched are feelings by the need of men and by spiritual realities. And it is very easy for us to suppose that anything that is going to bring fire and life and enthusiasm, anything that is going to do that, has to be our friend and our ally. And sadly that is not true.

But I say because of our very desire to see warmth and true fire, I say we are prone to underestimate the danger. Now that, of course, often is true in revivals themselves. It is hard for us to imagine.

But when a great awakening has truly begun, and there are many evidences of the Holy Spirit's power in conversion and in reviving Christians and new life, in such a situation, it is very easy for Christians to suppose that everything that is happening is of the Spirit of God and to drop their critical faculties and even to suppose that it is wrong to be critical because we are in a time of revival. And that is also a very great danger. Jonathan Edwards writes, speaking as he looked back on the great awakening, the cry was, Oh, there is no danger.

If we are but lively in religion and full of God's Spirit and live by faith, there is no danger of being misled. If we do but follow God, they said, there is no danger of being led wrong. 'Tis the cold and carnal and lifeless, they are the ones that walk in darkness.

This, says Edwards, this was the language of many till they ran on deep into the wilderness and were taught by the briars and thorns of the wilderness. So as evangelical Christians, we can very easily be unwatchful in this area, not suspecting danger. But further, we need to study the subject because fanaticism is destructive and highly injurious in the church of Christ.

And it is destructive, and let me mention at least two subheads. It gives rise to feelings which grieve and quench the Holy Spirit. That is a sure outcome of fanaticism.

The passage we read from the epistle of James is highly relevant. The wisdom that cometh down from above is first pure and peaceable, gentle and easy to be entreated. That is not the spirit of fanaticism.

In Nettleton's biography on page 344, Nettleton's biographer speaking of the fanaticism in the western revivals, he says, those ministers and Christians who have previously been most and longest acquainted with revivals are most alarmed at the spirit which has grown out of the revivals of the west. As we now have it, the great contest is among professors of religion, a civil war in Zion, a domestic gloil in the household of faith. The friends of brother Finney are certainly doing him and the cause of Christ great mischief.

They seem more anxious to convert ministers and Christians to their peculiarities than to convert souls to Christ. The point he is making is that when you get fanaticism, you get dissension and strife, and the work of God thus comes sadly to a conclusion. And fanaticism is also destructive because it encourages a kind of Christianity in which unregenerate people can readily participate.

It may seem to be strange that that is so. But the unregenerate can very well become evangelical or even Calvinistic fanatics. There is nothing incompatible about being unregenerate and being a fanatic.

And this damage, let it be said further, can be done for long periods of time. When fanaticism gets its head, practices and beliefs may be introduced into the church which last for many, many generations. So it has been with the altar call.

Coming as a novelty in the 1820s, it over spread the English speaking world. Or take the supposed secret rapture of the church. Again, an absolute novelty in the 1820s.

Beginning, it is well supposed, amongst the prophecies of Edward Irving's group. And yet that idea spread to millions through the Scofield Bible and is held sadly by so many to this very day. Fanaticism can introduce long term damage into the cause of Christ.

And further, it introduces damage by setting up a reaction to truth. I think a very striking example of this is in the Great Awakening. When it became characteristic of many to denounce the ministry.

Now sometimes that denunciation may have been justified. But it was carried far too far. And language was used that should never have been used.

Orthodox ministers were called letter learned Pharisees and Rabbis. Scribes, censure was applied indiscriminately to anybody who seemed to be the least bit unsympathetic. And then, of course, in due time, people awoke to the fact that that kind of censure was not truly Christian.

It bred a spirit and an attitude which was remote from the New Testament. And that set up a reaction in New England so that 30 and 40 years later, everybody was primarily concerned not to censure anyone.

You could be a Unitarian, an Arminian, a Pelagian.

But this abuse of censure was so much in their memories that they fell into the opposite extreme. And they fell into a kind of, I don't know what you'd call it, but we're familiar with it, aren't we? Nothing is to be censured. Because certain fanatics have used certain language, we must avoid that at all extremes and go to an opposite extreme.

That is a great ploy and strategy of the devil. And similarly, fanatics abuse certain truths. It may be on the Holy Spirit.

It may be on revival. It could be on the doctrines of grace. It could be on any biblical theme.

And they so abuse that truth that again they set up a reaction against it and do thus great injury to the cause of Christ. I proceed then to a fourth heading and this is the main thing that I want to leave with you. The general characteristics of fanaticism.

The general characteristics of fanaticism. And it is a remarkable thing that whenever fanaticism occurs in different countries, different cultures, different centuries, the characteristics are extraordinarily similar. Samuel Miller, in the appendix to Sprague's Lectures on Revivals, Miller says, One would think that a series of mischievous disorders strongly marked, exhibited in a day of great public interest, and distinctly recorded, written down, one would think that that would be sufficient to instruct and warn the church in all succeeding times.

But unhappily, this is by no means found to be the case. Human nature being the same in all ages, the tendencies, infirmities, and temptations of men are the same. One generation forgets the experience of that which preceded it.

Few read the record of that experience and fewer still are qualified to profit by it. The consequence is that every few years the same occurrences take place. Good men are ensnared and led astray in the same manner.

Hypocrites manifest the same arts and unhallowed spirits. Similar mistakes are made, similar irregularities are indulged, without recollecting or perhaps even knowing that they were witnessed before. Thus it is that children profit so little by the experience of their fathers.

It were well indeed if the fathers themselves always profited as they ought by their own experience. Well, I am afraid that that is indeed true. But it means, you see, that fanaticism has these recurring features.

The first characteristic I give you is that fanaticism generally and commonly has its origin and its strength among immature, young, and inexperienced, enthusiastic Christians. That has generally been the case. Older Christians, as we know, brethren, are prone to many, many sins.

But it may well be that the sin of fanaticism is not the one to which we are most easily tempted. It is a temptation which is brought generally against young Christians. Now Richard Baxter, speaking of that period in the 1640s that I mentioned at the beginning, and all the divisions that occurred, he says, the remnant of the old separatists and Anabaptists in London was then very small and scarce considerable.

But they were enough to stir up the younger and unexperienced sort of religious people to speak too vehemently and intemperately against the bishops and the church. For the young and raw sort of

Christians are usually prone to this kind of sin, to be self-conceited, petulant, willful, censorious, and injudicious. Now, that is true in other times of revival, in the Great Awakening, in the 1820s, and at other times.

And I'm sure it means that we have to exercise great care in this present day when we actually have a cult of youth in our churches. Where the text in 1 Timothy that he must not be a recent convert left being puffed up, he be led into the snare of the devil, when that text has been almost expunged from our Bibles. When young people are thrust into leadership and positions of responsibility prematurely, we have a situation in which fanaticism is almost bound to get its head.

Of course, young people are to be nurtured and trained. It's very important. The first church I served in London, at Grove Chapel, the deacons were all, I suppose, over 70 perhaps, and they viewed anyone as a young man until he was at least 50.

I'm not encouraging that attitude. Our nursing and leading of young people is a great part of our ministry. They must be brought on, but actually to thrust them into early leadership is doing the very thing that the Apostle Paul forbids in 1 Timothy 3.6. So that's the first thing.

The second characteristic of fanaticism is that it generally concentrates upon phenomena and experiences and feelings and excitement. In other words, it is a movement in which subjective interest takes control. It is not God-centered religion.

Now that does not mean, of course, that fanatics don't speak much of God or the Holy Spirit. But their primary interest is in what is happening to them. The first thing that they speak about is their experiences and what is happening to them.

And their focus of interest lies in the subjective area. That has always been true. Jonathan Edwards deplores in The Great Awakening how in fanaticism everybody became a talker of his or her religious experiences.

You understand Edwards was not against us speaking experimentally of God's dealings with us. Not at all. But he was against that light and easy and universal habit of everybody speaking of their spiritual experiences.

He viewed it as a great disaster when that happened. Because these men believed that in a true work of God the last thing that men want is to give publicity to themselves. Self-centeredness is the opposite of the work of the Spirit of God.

Gardner Spring contrasting two different types of alleged converts, he says, What is that piety that courts observation and wishes to be seen, that obtrudes itself on the notice of others, that talks of its own experiences and attainments, that is bold and assuming, that wishes to be put forward, that unblushingly exclaims with Jehu, Come and see my zeal for the Lord. He says, What is that kind of piety compared with the spirit of a modest, retiring, young convert, who esteems others better than himself, who looks on him whom he has pierced and mourns, and who, instead of being a pompous and splendid professor, goes to the communion of saints, conscious that he is not worthy of the crumbs that fall from the master's table. To this should be added, that not only is fanaticism interested in phenomena and experiences, it is very often interested in physical phenomena.

Physical phenomena. And again we have to be careful. We know from the scriptures, Daniel 10 for example, that when a man finds himself amidst the realities of God's presence, he may be prostrated to the ground and overwhelmed with conviction.

And we know also that people may be so filled with God's Spirit, that they may indeed leap for joy and be filled with praise. But, we must never identify anything physical as a proof of the work of the Holy Spirit. That's what fanaticism does.

Whether it's by falling down to the ground, or stretching one's arms to heaven, or any other physical sign, there are in the scriptures no physical proofs that the Holy Spirit is at work. A man may fall to the ground under true conviction of sin, but ten may fall to the ground who have no conviction of sin at all. We must never identify the work of the Spirit with anything physical.

That was the great error of the Shakers. It's a pity that the Shakers are only really remembered as a name today, but there is much in their history that needs to be re-read. Just let me give you a few words from Timothy Dwight, writing about 1800, who met with a number of the Shakers and describes their practices.

He says several of the Brotherhood professed to have gifts, and he says their gifts included censuring others and telling others to go to hell. They had also gifts of trembling, he says, gifts of trembling, shaking, jerking, jumping, rolling on the ground, running with hands outstretched, driving the devil out of their homes, groaning, crying, laughing, shouting, clapping their hands. These and other extravagances.

And as he describes the Shakers, you can see that they were so greatly taken up with physical outward manifestations. A third characteristic of fanaticism is that the area of the personality which is most commonly attacked is the imagination. Now imagination is part of our creaturehood.

It is indeed a gift of God. We have the capacity to imagine. We can imagine in our sleep, we can imagine when we are awake, but imagination, as every other faculty, has to be rigorously held under the rule of the Word of God.

When people become excited, and in times of revival, there is an excitement, the will is excited, the emotions are excited, the mind is excited, the imagination can be excited. And in times of revival, the imagination has to be very carefully guarded by the Word of God. And much damage has been done by failure in that area.

James Davenport, I mentioned, left his parish and became an itinerant, and he became one on the strength of a text in 1 Samuel 14, where the Philistine garrison said to Jonathan, come up unto us. That text, as it were, Davenport believed, came to him with such directness that it was God's very word to him to leave his church, and so he did. George Whitefield, when his first and only son was born, was reading in the scriptures in the beginning of Luke, and read those words of promise to the father of John the Baptist, to Zacharias, concerning John the Baptist.

His name shall be called John. He would turn many unto God. Whitefield read them.

He was absolutely persuaded that they were God's immediate word to him. Without any question, he named his son John. Believed that in years to come, John Whitefield would also be a mighty preacher of the gospel.

But he died within six months. That is the unrestrained danger of the imagination. I think you know the story, perhaps, of how John Newton was looking for a charge when he decided that God had called him to the ministry.

He had some difficulty in finding settlement. And at one point he went to preach in the English town of Warwick. And in going there, he was, as we all would be, concerned and anxious for help.

And there he found, as he believed, some help in the words of Christ to the apostle Paul in Corinth. Not to be afraid, for I have much people in this city. And those words came to Newton with such force that he verily believed that Warwick was indeed to be the place of his ministry.

Here, God was to turn multitudes to Christ. Well, he went to Warwick. Had not a happy Sunday at all.

And when he left, he said, I learned that John was not Paul and that Corinth was not Warwick. Well, it's the same kind of thing. We have to be held under the control and the intelligent spiritual understanding of scripture and not give way to imagination.

Then, fourthly, fanaticism generally concentrates upon one strand of biblical truth which is exaggerated, which is distorted and which is severed from other biblical truths. Always a mark of fanaticism. Now, the truth that it seizes upon may be almost anything in the Word of God.

In the 17th century, it was the truth of the indwelling of the Spirit in believers. That was the great truth of the Quakers. That's why they were to quake.

God's very presence is within us. We are receivers of the divine nature. And the familists and antinomians took that to the point of speaking of being godded with Christ.

There was a real truth in what they were saying. But that truth severed from other truths, exaggerated, taken on its own, became the source of great damage. The Moravians of the 18th century, and this sounds surprising, but if you read Moravian history and read Whitefield and Wesley on the Moravians, the truth that they distorted was the truth of the wounds of Christ of which they spoke.

The truth that Edward Irving and others took, I say truth, it is a truth in the scriptures, that God gave miraculous gifts. That they took, misapplied, misused with such tragic consequences. Other groups take the truth concerning faith.

Faith is a great and glorious reality and gift of the Spirit. We are to live by faith. But one can even take that truth and use it in such a way that it becomes sheer fanaticism.

You've heard of people who have gone to the station because God has called them to make some journey and they have no money in their pocket and they believe that before they get to the ticket office the money will be given to them. And that is then paraded around the world as an example of living by faith, so called. The doctrines of grace can become a means of fanaticism.

The lordship of Christ can become the means of fanaticism. Any biblical truth, severed, exaggerated, distorted, pushed on its own, can become a source of fanaticism. A fifth and last characteristic then.

The spirit of fanaticism is a spirit of pride. It is always a spirit of pride. A spirit of superiority.

A spirit of elitism. Fundamental weakness in the church of Corinth was pride. And this pride shows itself in various ways.

Let me mention them just briefly by headings. It generally shows itself by spiritual ecclesiastical exclusiveness. Fanaticism always denounces contemporary religion and proposes that instead of the contemporary church it is to set up another church.

The ministry particularly is denounced by fanaticism. Invariably. Now don't misunderstand me brethren.

The church may very often be so weak and unbelieving that it may lie under the censure of Christ. I don't question that for a moment. But it is the characteristic of fanaticism that it always majors on denouncing the church, denouncing the ministry and proposing an exclusive alternative.

All fanatics have done that. Combined with that then is contempt for the wisdom of the church. The wisdom of the church.

By which I mean the teaching of the Spirit of God through the ages. Fanatics always speak as though the teaching of the Holy Spirit began yesterday with themselves. And all that the Spirit has taught throughout the ages in creeds and catechisms and confessions and in the great treasures of the church, all these are cast aside.

They're all spoken of as book learning, letter learning, dead orthodoxy and all those other epithets. And all those epithets are to lead us to understand that here at last we have a superior group who have such insight that they no longer need the teaching of the church and of the Holy Spirit through these long centuries. And this spirit of pride is also seen in an inability to receive counsel and warning.

John Wesley speaks of this. He talks about people who he tried to reclaim in George Bell's society. Enthusiasm, he says, pride and great uncharitableness appeared in many cases.

I very tenderly reprov'd them. They would not bear it. One of them, Mrs. Coventry, cried out, We will not be browbeaten any longer.

Sir, she said, we will have no more to do with you. Mr. Maxfield is our teacher. And soon after several others left, saying blind John is not capable of teaching us.

Well, that's typical of fanaticism. And then a final proof of their pride and I suppose supreme proof, and we were reminded of it yesterday morning, the ability to overrule Scripture in the name of the Holy Spirit. Whether in the way of women preaching, or whether in the overruling of some of the Ten Commandments that we should honor our father and mother, or many instances that I'm sure we could all give, fanaticism sets itself even above the Word of God.

Now, I mustn't elaborate on any of those. I want to touch, just before I conclude, on when does fanaticism most commonly occur. And it seems to me that there are two periods when fanaticism is usually found.

Sometimes the church has gone for long, long years with comparatively little evidence of fanaticism. I do believe that in Britain, for example, at the present time, there has never been such fanaticism as there is now since the 1640s. Not since, there were some, as I've said at other times, but sometimes there are long intervals.

But fanaticism comes at particular points. One is this. It often comes after the beginning of a true and powerful work of God.

After the beginning of the Reformation came fanaticism. Just when Puritanism was coming to its heightened strength, fanaticism came in. Exactly the same in the Great Awakening.

When the work of God is beginning and progressing, that is a time when we need to be most watchful against anything that will lead to fanaticism. Or again, fanaticism occurs in order to prevent the beginning of a great revival and awakening. I think that was the case with Edward Irving.

Edward Irving and the confusion of his assemblies was just a few years prior to a period of great revival. And I do believe in the present time that the fanaticism that we are witnessing is partly an attempt to put down the influence of a revived doctrinal Christianity and partly also the attempt to prevent a true Great Awakening. To discredit the idea of revival.

To discredit the idea of being filled with the Holy Spirit of God. Now, I must not elaborate on that. Our time is virtually gone.

It has gone. Give me just a few moments for application. What are the remedies for fanaticism? The great, the first, the supreme remedy is warm, biblical, prayerful churches where experimental Christianity is held in esteem.

Orthodox, dead churches have no remedy for fanaticism. We need balanced, scriptural churches where there is teaching and where there is warmth. And we need great watchfulness.

And in that connection I simply exhort you, urge you to read and re-read the writings of Jonathan Edwards. Edwards speaks so much on the need for watchfulness. No matter what discoveries he says we have of God in this world, it becomes us who are Christians to walk with a careful, watchful spirit, watchfulness.

And then I just throw in, do not be discouraged, brethren, in endeavours to reclaim young Christians who are being led into fanaticism. And in that connection I would point out the June Banner of Truth magazine. I'm sorry it's nearly 3,000 miles away from you at present.

But in this issue there are a series of letters by Christians who have been charismatics. We had a whole spate of such letters and we've printed four of these letters and they're very heartwarming and they will fill your hearts, you men who love the truth. Here are young Christians who have been misled and who have been brought to a clearer understanding.

And therefore we must never suppose that the day is lost because we may sometimes be surrounded with fanaticism. God is able to teach amongst charismatics at the present time and I think that's the first time I've mentioned the word amongst charismatics. We understand there are many true Christians in whom the fear of God is and therefore let them hear the truth and let them hear it with wisdom and with zeal and God may be pleased to grant them further light and help.

And the very final application is that we need above all things not greater abilities, not greater gifts, but the pursuit of holiness. Holiness in the ministry. The graces that we were reminded of yesterday.

We need to be filled with the spirit as Jonathan Edwards as a glass is held out in the sun and filled with light. Ministers need above all things to live closely to God. We are living in a day when great attention is

being given to gifts and on our side of orthodoxy we often give great attention to abilities.

How we may speak of the abilities of this man or that man but the scriptures bid us to pursue holiness. That is the first need. To that we are all called and in that God will preserve us and keep us from these great dangers.

Let us then seek to understand the danger of fanaticism. Shall I pray? Shall we pray? O Lord, our gracious God and our heavenly Father, we thank Thee again for the opportunity to meet together in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank Thee for Thy care over us, for the teaching and the light of Thy word.

Lord, we know that we are poor, frail, fallen sinners. We go wrong at every step unless Thou dost lead us. We pray that Thou wouldst help us and help us to profit from that great instruction which Thou hast given us through Thy people in ages past.

And Lord, we pray at this time that we may go forward with assurance and hope. We pray for those who are presently led astray. We believe many of Thy people who are confused.

Lord, we know that if we have any more understanding than they do it is through Thy grace alone and we pray that Thou wouldst extend Thy grace and magnify Thy holy name and restore Thy holy word in Thy church that in all things the name of Christ may be preeminent. Lord, bless to us Thy truth this morning. Continue with us throughout this day.

Give us open and receptive hearts, we pray through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

---

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/2/SID2975.mp3>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/ian-murray/religious-fanaticism/>

# *Grow in Your Walk with Christ*

---

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

**[www.sermonindex.net](http://www.sermonindex.net)**