

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_sbct-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php)

# JONATHAN EDWARDS' *RELIGIOUS AFFECTIONS* AS A PARADIGM FOR EVANGELICAL SPIRITUALITY<sup>1</sup>

IAIN D. CAMPBELL, BACK FREE CHURCH, ISLE OF LEWIS

If justification is needed for the appearance of an article on an American theologian in a Scottish journal, then the fact that 5 October 2003 marks the three hundredth anniversary of the birth of Jonathan Edwards is probably sufficient. Lloyd-Jones' assessment that Edwards 'stands out... quite on his own among men'<sup>2</sup> is itself an indicator of his stature and significance. Indeed, for Lloyd-Jones, 'no man is more relevant to the present condition of Christianity than Jonathan Edwards'.<sup>3</sup>

Paralleled with this is the fact that America's premier theologian was not American at all but, as George Marsden is at pains to point out, 'an elite male colonial British citizen'.<sup>4</sup> Living in pre-revolutionary New England, Edwards' interest in British affairs was the interest of a member-citizen in his own country. Indeed, it is arguable that he regarded Scotland with particular affection. When his supporters in Scotland discussed with him the possibility of a Scottish pastorate in 1750, there is every indication to suppose that he found the prospect inviting.<sup>5</sup>

But the Scottish connection goes deeper. Both during and after the Great Awakening of 1740-44, contact between Edwards and Scottish ministers – not least over the contents of the *Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections* – was frequent. Among his correspondents was the Revd William McCulloch of Cambuslang. In a letter from 1743, Edwards was urging continued dialogue across the Atlantic:

---

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Dr Samuel T. Logan, President of Westminster Theological Seminary, and acknowledged expert on Edwards, for comments and suggestions on this paper.

<sup>2</sup> D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors* (London, 1987), p. 355.

<sup>3</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans*, p. 367.

<sup>4</sup> George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, 2003), p. 259.

<sup>5</sup> Marsden, *Edwards*, p. 362.

## A PARADIGM FOR EVANGELICAL SPIRITUALITY

I should be glad, dear Sir, of a remembrance in your prayers, and also of your help, by information and instructions, by what you find in your experience in Scotland. I believe it to be the duty of one part of the church of God thus to help another.<sup>6</sup>

There was good reason for such dialogue, not least the fact that 'during the 1740s both New England and Scotland underwent religious awakenings with all the attendant excesses, controversies and eschatological interpretations'.<sup>7</sup> The spiritual experiences which attended such awakenings were similar in both countries. Edwards shares the following observation with the Revd James Robe of Kilsyth regarding such experiences:

Many among us have been ready to think that all high raptures are divine; but experience plainly shows that it is not the degree of rapture and ecstasy (though it should be to the third heavens), but the nature and kind that must determine us in their favor.<sup>8</sup>

Common to both Edwards and his Scottish colleagues was a conviction that genuine piety must be distinguished from its counterfeit. If it was true that 'Edwards and his Scottish company... presupposed the primacy of the heart' in religion,<sup>9</sup> then such a distinction was necessary. The observation that the heart of man is deceitful (Jer. 17:9) is frequently noted by Edwards, both in his personal diary<sup>10</sup> and in his sermons.<sup>11</sup> Not least does the *Religious Affections* warn about the deceitfulness of the heart:

---

<sup>6</sup> JE to William McCulloch, 12 May 1743, printed in S. E. Dwight's 'Memoir of Jonathan Edwards', edited by E. Hickman, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (London, 1840), Vol. 1, p. cxv.

<sup>7</sup> H. P. Simonson, 'Jonathan Edwards and his Scottish Connections', *Journal of American Studies* 21 (1987), p. 355.

<sup>8</sup> JE to James Robe, 12 May 1743. This letter was first printed in J. Robe (ed.), *The Christian Monthly History*, Vol. 5, No. 5 (Edinburgh, 1845), pp. 126-31. The quotation is taken from the version of the letter which appears on the CD, *The Jonathan Edwards Collection* (NavPress software).

<sup>9</sup> Simonson, 'Scottish Connections', p. 364.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Diary entry for 9 January 1723: 'How deceitful is my heart! I take up a strong resolution, but how soon doth it weaken.' Dwight, *Memoirs*, p. lxvi.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the sermon on Acts 17:31, entitled *The Final Judgement*: 'Let us pray that he would search us, and discover our hearts to us now. We have need of divine help in this matter; for the heart is deceitful above all things', Hickman, *Works*, Vol. 2, p. 200.

So it is with Christian virtues and graces; the subtlety of Satan, and men's deceitful hearts, are wont chiefly to be exercised in counterfeiting those that are in highest repute.<sup>12</sup>

For this reason, the theme of authentic spirituality occupied both Edwards and his Scottish contemporaries, the latter of whom frequently expressed gratitude for Edwards' contribution. But the Scottish debt was acknowledged long after Edwards' own time. Professor G. D. Henderson, writing on 'Jonathan Edwards and Scotland' cites Thomas Chalmers who, some eighty years after Edwards' death assessed the *Religious Affections* as 'one of the most correct and instructive works in the *Therapeutica Sacra* which has ever been published'.<sup>13</sup>

But if the tercentenary and the Scottish connections are not sufficient to establish a reason for re-visiting Edwards, perhaps another consideration might be suggested. At a remove of three centuries from the context in which Edwards and his Scottish ministerial colleagues lived and worked, the issues facing preachers today are very different to theirs. Contemporary postmodernism means that we have reached a metaphysical point quite unknown to Edwards. To use David Wells' metaphor, the Enlightenment experiment has 'miscarried'.<sup>14</sup> Prior to what Wells calls 'Our Time' was a time of the intellect:

This was a time in which ideas counted. In Our Time they do not. What shapes the modern world is not powerful minds but powerful forces, not philosophy but urbanization, capitalism and technology. As the older quest for truth has collapsed, intellectual life has increasingly become little more than a gloss on the processes of modernization. Intellectuals merely serve as mirrors, reflecting what is taking place in society.<sup>15</sup>

Wells might well be describing the difference between Edwards' world and ours. The Great Awakening was a spiritual movement driven by the impulse of great ideas. But our contemporary context devalues great ideas

---

<sup>12</sup> *Religious Affections*, Part 2, Section VI, in *Select Works of Jonathan Edwards* (London, 1961), Vol. 3, p. 74. Subsequent citations from the *Treatise* will be taken from this Banner of Truth Trust edition.

<sup>13</sup> G. D. Henderson, *The Burning Bush: Studies in Scottish Church History* (Edinburgh, 1957), p. 159.

<sup>14</sup> David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Leicester, 1993), p. 61.

<sup>15</sup> Wells, *No Place for Truth*, p. 61.

## A PARADIGM FOR EVANGELICAL SPIRITUALITY

and universal truth; having done so, 'Our Time' is searching for a suitable replacement.

As Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, Wells is writing from the same geographical locus in which Edwards lived and worked three hundred years ago. On both sides of the Atlantic, Reformed evangelicalism once again finds that it is waging a war on a common front, and it is still the duty of the church in one part to help the church in another.

The literature on evangelical responses to postmodernism is growing rapidly. Edwards' 'great ideas' may well be inimical to postmodernity, but in at least one area he may provide us with a door of opportunity for witnessing to our contemporary world: the area of spirituality.

The reason for this is not hard to find. In an age when absolute truth means nothing, personal experience means everything. And in its efforts to evangelise the world, the evangelical church is increasingly noting that the spiritual element of biblical religion may well prove to be an avenue for approaching contemporary postmoderns. For example, in a recent edition of *Christianity Today*, Professor Alister McGrath answers a question about witnessing to postmodern culture by drawing attention to 'two emphases that postmodernity finds particularly attractive – personal experience and telling stories'.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, theologian Douglas Groothuis speaks of postmodernity's interest in 'spiritualities' as providing a point of contact for evangelism, although he warns that 'a Christian apologetic should emphasize spirituality as set within a framework of objective truth'.<sup>17</sup> D. A. Carson makes the same caveat:

If spirituality becomes an end in itself, detached from the core, and largely without biblical or theological norms to define it and anchor it in the objective gospel, then pursuit of spirituality, however nebulously defined, will degenerate into nothing more than the pursuit of certain kinds of experience.... Spirituality must be thought about and sought after out of the matrix of core biblical theology.<sup>18</sup>

Bearing this in mind, it is possible that for today's Scotland, as well as for today's America, a *radical* spirituality – that is, one whose *radix* is

---

<sup>16</sup> A. E. McGrath, 'The Real Gospel', *Christianity Today*, December 9, 2002, p. 59.

<sup>17</sup> D. Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity against the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, 2000), p. 165.

<sup>18</sup> D. A. Carson, 'When is Spirituality Spiritual?', Appendix to *The Gagging of God: Christianity confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, 1996), p. 567.

grounded in Scripture – may well be a means for the evangelism of our contemporary (postmodern) world.

All of which brings us to a convenient place in which to bring Edwards into play. His *Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections* was nothing if not an attempt to have authentic spirituality rooted in biblical theology. We will look, first, at the context in which this work was written, then the content of the treatise, and finally the paradigmatic element – what the *Treatise* can teach the contemporary evangelical church about *true* spirituality, in a world which is content with *any* kind of ‘spiritual experience’.

## CONTEXT

The context of the *Treatise* was the Great Awakening of the early 1740s; the text arose out of a series of sermons preached by Edwards between 1742 and 1743, with the work appearing in its first edition in 1746. As Iain Murray comments,

While the concerns which gave rise to the book are patently rooted in the Awakening the standpoint in time has changed; it is no longer ‘the present revival’ but ‘the late extraordinary season’ or ‘the late great revival’.<sup>19</sup>

And by any measure the recent ‘season’ had been extraordinary. Edwards’ account of the revival in Northampton to a minister in Boston still makes thrilling reading:

The months of August and September were the most remarkable of any this year for appearances of the conviction and conversion of sinners, and great revivings, quickenings, and comforts of professors, and for extraordinary external effects of these things. It was a very frequent thing to see a house full of outcries, faintings, convulsions, and such like, both with distress, and also with admiration and joy.<sup>20</sup>

The whole movement was, according to Edwards, ‘a glorious work of God’, and was attended by phenomena which Edwards knew to be of God’s Holy Spirit.

---

<sup>19</sup> Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh, 1987), p. 251.

<sup>20</sup> *An Account of the Revival of Religion in Northampton in 1740-42 as communicated in a letter to a minister of Boston*, published in J. Edwards, *A Narrative of Surprising Conversions* (Lafayette, 2001), p. 101.

## A PARADIGM FOR EVANGELICAL SPIRITUALITY

But in many ways that was the problem. On the one hand, Edwards knew that the opponents of the revival – such as the Revd Charles Chauncy of First Church, Boston – were putting such experiences down to ‘excesses and extravagancies’, and claiming that much in the Awakening was ‘a dishonour to God’.<sup>21</sup> On the other, he knew that friends of the revival could be deluded into thinking that the presence of these phenomena was sufficient to count as a genuine work of God, and that all that was required to maintain and promote the revival was to encourage the experiences. As a sensitive pastor, as well as a penetrative theologian, he sought to steer his people through these extremes. He had no wish to downplay the significance of spiritual emotions; but at the same time he did not wish anyone to assume that all experiences in times of spiritual awakening were spiritual experiences, nor that it was enough that they were there at all. So the preface to the *Treatise* sets his agenda:

What are the distinguishing qualifications of those that are in favour with God, and entitled to his eternal rewards? OR, which comes to the same thing, *What is the nature of true religion?* And wherein do lie the distinguishing notes of that virtue and holiness that is acceptable in the sight of God?<sup>22</sup>

Realising that ‘it is by the mixture of counterfeit religion with true, not discerned and distinguished, that the devil has had his greatest advantage against the cause and kingdom of Christ all along hitherto,’<sup>23</sup> Edwards is at pains to explore the parameters of authentic spiritual life. Neither the revival nor the effects of the revival could ever be normative for Christian experience; the Bible needed to measure both. For that reason, the whole *Treatise* is an extended treatment of 1 Peter 1:8 – ‘Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see *him* not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.’

As Stephen Nichols writes, one of the reasons why the *Treatise* is a classic is because ‘it addresses numerous problems that, generation after generation, plague Christians and the church’.<sup>24</sup> Where is the locus for the emotions in biblical religion? What are the tell-tale signs of genuine religious experience? How can we test whether our religion is true? I suspect that Edwards’ main concern in the *Treatise* was not the opponents

---

<sup>21</sup> Marsden, *Edwards*, pp. 269-71.

<sup>22</sup> *Treatise*, p.15. (Emphasis mine.)

<sup>23</sup> *Treatise*, p. 17.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen J. Nichols, *Jonathan Edwards: A guided tour of his life and thought* (Phillipsburg, 2001), p. 107.

of the revival, but those who defended it precisely on the grounds that there was evidence of extraordinary spiritual experience. For this reason it is important to note the change evident in Edwards' analyses of the Awakening. The *Narrative of Surprising Conversions* (1737) was a very enthusiastic and uncritical summary of the effects of the revival. His work *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* (1742) offers responses to the critics of the revival, calls on men to promote it (not least on the grounds that the latter-day glory, in Edwards' view, would break forth in the American colonies first of all<sup>25</sup>), and shows that it is possible for supporters of the revival to be misguided in their promotion of it.

By the time the *Treatise* appears, Edwards has been giving careful consideration to the potential for harm which lies with the supporters of the Awakening. The *Treatise* was not just another round in the debate with Charles Chauncy but it did provide a refutation of the primacy which Chauncy gave to the intellect. Professor Marsden is correct to say that

Even though the whole treatise was a refutation of Chauncy's premise of the priority of reason over the affections, Edwards was nearly as critical of the turn the awakening had taken as was the Boston pastor and often in nearly the same ways.<sup>26</sup>

The cumulative effect of Edwards' analyses is to highlight for us that neither description of heightened spiritual experience, nor promotion of spiritual revival, is sufficient to authenticate religious experience. These things are good, Edwards wishes to tell the church, but they are not enough. And for our postmodern culture, they are not enough either. That is why we need to hear Edwards' mature concerns about the 'nature of religious affections'.

## CONTENT

The framework of the *Treatise* is simple: Part 1 explores the meaning of the affections and their importance in religion; Part 2 looks at elements which cannot be taken as a sure sign that affections are genuine or not; and Part 3 looks at elements which demonstrate the genuineness of spiritual experiences.

---

<sup>25</sup> Hickman, *Works*, Vol. 1, p. 383.

<sup>26</sup> Marsden, *Edwards*, p. 290.

## A PARADIGM FOR EVANGELICAL SPIRITUALITY

On the basis of 1 Peter 1:8, Edwards reasoned that 'true religion largely consists in holy affections'.<sup>27</sup> This was in part a declared opposition to rationalism<sup>28</sup> as much as an exegesis of the New Testament, but his point is clear nonetheless: 'religion is not primarily an affair of the intellect, but an affair of the heart'.<sup>29</sup> It was a point which later scholars within the American evangelical tradition would question; according to Professor Brooks Holifield, Charles Hodge, for example, 'felt wary of the assertion – characteristic of Edwards – that religion consisted in holy affections'.<sup>30</sup> But Edwards realised (as indeed, Hodge did also), that it is possible both to have an intellectual grasp of the truth of the gospel, accompanied by experiences and stirrings of a 'spiritual' kind, and at the same time have a heart which has not been genuinely changed and renewed. From that perspective it was true of Edwards that 'only in the heart and will could he locate a kind of religious experience involving both a supernatural transformation and holy action'.<sup>31</sup> For Edwards, the heart of the matter was the matter of the heart.

Yet it is too simplistic to say that Edwards is dealing here with 'heart religion' versus 'head religion'. In exploring the nature of religious affections, Edwards does distinguish between the intellect (the faculty by which the soul 'is capable of perception and speculation'<sup>32</sup>) and the will (by which the soul 'is in some way inclined with respect to the things it views and considers; either is inclined *to* them, or is disinclined and averse

---

<sup>27</sup> *Treatise*, p. 23.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. the comment by Helen Westra that Edwards 'was using every available opportunity to restrain rationalist and Arminian views that he feared detrimental to the orthodox Protestant position that humans cannot attain salvation through their own capabilities', 'Jonathan Edwards and "What Reason Teaches"', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34 (1991), p. 496.

<sup>29</sup> Ola Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards 1703-1758: A Biography* (New York, 1940), p. 232.

<sup>30</sup> E. Brooks Holifield, 'Hodge, the Seminary, and the American Theological Context', in J. W. Stewart and J. H. Moorhead (eds), *Charles Hodge Revisited: A Critical Appraisal of his life and work* (Grand Rapids, 2002), p. 108. Although cf. Hodge's assertion that 'the faith which is connected with salvation is not merely an intellectual exercise, but an exercise of the affections as well', E. N. Gross, *Charles Hodge: Systematic Theology, Abridged Edition* (Grand Rapids, 1988), p. 448.

<sup>31</sup> W. Breitenbach, 'Piety and Moralism: Edwards and the New Divinity', in N. O. Hatch and H. S. Stout (eds.), *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience* (Oxford, 1988), p. 184.

<sup>32</sup> *Treatise*, p. 24.

from them'<sup>33</sup>). Edwards acknowledges that he is struggling with language, but wants to identify the whole man with the heart, which is characterised both by the ability to consider certain things and to be either drawn to them or repelled from them. As John Smith puts it in his introduction to the Yale Edition of the *Treatise*,

The essential point is that the affections manifest the center and unity of the self: they express the whole man and give insight into the basic orientation of his life.<sup>34</sup>

Edwards recognises a fundamental continuity between the role of the affections in the matters of everyday life and their role in the supreme matters of religion. They become 'very much the spring of men's actions',<sup>35</sup> we apprehend certain things, and we are either drawn to them or away from them. We cannot remain indifferent. Religion is the same; and with a myriad Scripture quotations, Edwards demonstrates that

they who would deny that much of true religion lies in the affections, and maintain the contrary, must throw away what we have been wont to own for our Bible, and get some other rule, by which to judge of the nature of religion'.<sup>36</sup>

And on this basis he makes three fundamental inferences: that to discard all religious affections as insubstantial is a great error, that our desire ought to be for the things that will move our affections, and that we should be ashamed at how few true religious affections we so often have.

The second part of the *Treatise* is a development of the first. In demonstrating that religion consists largely of spiritual affections and inclinations, Edwards was aware of the temptation to conclude that all such experiences were positive signs. But he insists that

as we ought not to reject and condemn all affections as though true religion did not at all consist in affection; so, on the other hand, we ought not to

---

<sup>33</sup> *Treatise*, p. 24.

<sup>34</sup> J. E. Smith (ed.), Editor's Introduction to *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 2 (New Haven, 1959), p. 14.

<sup>35</sup> *Treatise*, p. 29.

<sup>36</sup> *Treatise*, p. 35.

## A PARADIGM FOR EVANGELICAL SPIRITUALITY

approve of all, as though every one that was religiously affected had true grace.<sup>37</sup>

So Edwards adduces twelve points which may well be true in human experience, but which of themselves demonstrate neither that these affections are gracious, nor that they are not. This is a ground-clearing exercise, an attempt to pave the way for a discussion of the characteristics of genuine religious experience in Part 3. To summarise, Edwards is saying that it is possible for all the following to be true of us, without any of them being a sure guarantor that our heart is right with God:

1. Our experiences may be very great and our affections very 'high';
2. They may have physical manifestations;
3. They may cause us to speak much about religion;
4. They may have a cause external to ourselves;
5. They may be accompanied with texts of Scripture;
6. They may lead to feelings and expressions of love;
7. They may be very varied;
8. They may follow a particular order;<sup>38</sup>
9. They may lead to much zeal in the performance of our duties;
10. They may lead to praise and worship;
11. They may produce great assurance;
12. They may lead to many interesting and moving testimonies.

Edwards is not saying that the presence of any of these phenomena demonstrates the invalidity of our experience. His point is that they may be present as a result of genuine spiritual experience (and often are); but

---

<sup>37</sup> *Treatise*, p. 54.

<sup>38</sup> Edwards concedes that true conversion experiences usually do follow a particular order of conviction followed by conversion followed by assurance, but his point is that 'as a seeming to have this distinctiveness as to steps and method is no certain sign that a person is converted, so a being without is no evidence that a person is not converted' (*Treatise*, p. 88). It is going too far to say with Smith in the Yale edition that 'Edwards is denying the validity of many Puritan descriptions of salvation as involving a sequential process' (Yale edition, Vol. 2, p. 20). On the contrary; his discussion of Part 2 assumes the validity of this position and raises the possibility that it may be counterfeited in human life. The sequentiality of the process may or may not be a sign of the genuineness of the affections (as with all the other signs in this section).

they may also be present as a result of other factors. So, for example, regarding the third of the points above, Edwards says:

that persons are disposed to be abundant in talking of things of religion may be from a good cause, and it may be from a bad one.<sup>39</sup>

The abundance of the talk of spiritual things is in itself neither a positive nor a negative sign. The genuineness of the true religion requires to be tested by some other standard. So Edwards wishes to press the point that there is all the difference in the world between the confidence of the 'evangelical hypocrite' and the assurance born out of true grace. And, interestingly, he argues that the former may be more immovable than the latter; Christians may lose their assurance from time to time, but hypocrites rarely lose their misplaced confidence. This, as Stephen Nichols puts it, is not a call for 'an attitude of suspicion', but simply a reminder 'of the difference between *professing* Christ and *possessing* Christ'.<sup>40</sup>

The third, and most extended part of the *Treatise*, concerns the positive signs of genuine gracious affections. As in Part 2, so here, he lists twelve different elements. John Smith is correct to point out that Edwards does not make it clear whether every gracious affection exhibits all twelve of these signs, or what the relationship between them is; the common ground which they all occupy is simply the saving work of the Holy Spirit in the heart: 'all signs as positive indications of gracious affections point back to the saving operation; if this indwelling fails to take place, no genuine signs can appear at all'.<sup>41</sup> What Edwards does is to caution the reader against imagining that he – or anyone else – is qualified to make a definitive judgement on the true state of those who profess the faith. Nor is it possible for backslidden Christians to discern their true condition from the signs he gives (since they are genuinely regenerated although fallen into sin). And nor will his list of signs shake certain kinds of hypocrites out of their false confidence. Permeating the list of signs which distinguish genuine spiritual affections are the caveats of earlier Parts of the *Treatise*.

The twelve signs are worth pondering in turn.

### ***1. Gracious affections are from divine influence***

That is to say, they are 'spiritual', simply because they are the product of the saving activity of the Holy Spirit. Edwards places this in apposition to

---

<sup>39</sup> *Treatise*, p. 63.

<sup>40</sup> Nichols, *Edwards*, p. 118. My italics.

<sup>41</sup> Smith, Yale edition, Vol. 2, p. 24.

what is 'natural' and to what is 'carnal'. The principle on which Edwards operates is that the Holy Spirit both *resides* in the heart of the true believer, and *influences* the heart of the believer:

From hence it follows, that in those gracious exercises and affections which are wrought in the minds of the saints, through the saving influences of the Spirit of God, there is a new inward perception or sensation of their minds, entirely different in nature and kind from anything that ever their minds were the subjects of before they were sanctified.<sup>42</sup>

Closely related to this is Edwards' insistence on the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures. Again Edwards has to proceed cautiously, since many can claim to have heard Scripture words speaking to them who have never been truly born again. But, according to Edwards, 'God's manner is not to bring comfortable texts of Scripture to give men assurance of his love and of future happiness, before they have had a faith of dependence'.<sup>43</sup> When the Spirit works through the truth, the words of Scripture become the foundation of the hope. The genuineness of spiritual experience can be tested, in Edwards' view, by whether or not it is oriented to one's dependence on the Word of God. 'Spirituality' is not enough.

## **2. Their object is the excellence of divine things**

For Edwards, neither love of self, nor love of the benefits of Christ's salvation, are sufficient in themselves to validate our spiritual experience. The hallmark of genuine spirituality is its discovery of how excellent God is in himself: 'the first foundation of a true love to God is that whereby He is in Himself lovely, or worthy to be loved, or the supreme loveliness of His nature'.<sup>44</sup> Whatever advantages the gospel may yield are secondary in consideration: it is God's intrinsic perfections that are the object of genuine religious affections. The hypocrite's source of love and joy is self-love, while the true believer finds in God himself reason enough to love him.

This has important consequences for any spiritual experience. The authenticity of such experience is grounded for Edwards not in its ecstatic nature or even in its therapeutic qualities. It is grounded in what is *objective*, rather than in what is *subjective*; in what it *seeks* rather than in what it *gains*.

---

<sup>42</sup> *Treatise*, pp. 132-3.

<sup>43</sup> *Treatise*, p. 150.

<sup>44</sup> *Treatise*, p. 168.

**3. They are founded on the moral excellency of divine things**

At first glance this seems to be simply a restating of the previous sign, except that an aesthetic element is introduced. A positive response to the things of God comes from an appreciation of their innate beauty and loveliness. Further, Edwards is widening his circle: it is not simply God in himself and his own innate perfections that is regarded as attractive, but the holiness that attaches to all that is his – his angels, his saints, his Word, his law, his gospel.

The reason for this attraction is a change of appetite on the part of the renewed man – ‘there is given to those that are regenerated a new supernatural sense, that is as it were a certain divine spiritual taste’.<sup>45</sup> If the Bible is true in stating that natural man sees no beauty in God to desire him (Isa. 53:2), then the regenerated man, having been changed from within, has a holy love which focuses on holy objects. Edwards thus makes it clear that it is possible for the majesty of God to impress itself in various ways on those who are not born again; but once again he insists that such effects are no sign that hearts have been changed. Changed hearts are characterised by a love for the things of God, in the absence of which the spiritual experience is demonstrably deceptive.

**4. They arise from divine illumination**

Or, in Edwards’ words, they are not ‘heat without light’.<sup>46</sup> The illumination and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit are necessary if we are truly to experience the excellence of God for ourselves. Ignorance is no barrier to strong affections; but the affections of which Edwards is speaking do not arise from ignorance, but from a supernatural knowledge supernaturally given. This is not to be equated merely with the imparting of new information or doctrine, nor with a new explanation of Scripture passages, nor with a new insight into Bible types and allegories. ‘It is possible’, after all, ‘that a man might know how to interpret all the types, parables, enigmas and allegories in the Bible, and not have one beam of spiritual light in his mind’.<sup>47</sup> The evidence of a true spirituality is a new manner by which the Scripture comes to the mind:

Spiritually to *understand* the Scripture, is to have the eyes of the mind opened, to behold the wonderful spiritual excellency of the glorious things contained in the true meaning of it, and that always were contained in it,

---

<sup>45</sup> *Treatise*, p. 185.

<sup>46</sup> *Treatise*, p. 192.

<sup>47</sup> *Treatise*, p. 204.

## A PARADIGM FOR EVANGELICAL SPIRITUALITY

ever since it was written; to behold the amiable and bright manifestations of the divine perfections, and of the excellency and sufficiency of Christ, and the excellency and suitableness of the way of salvation by Christ, and the spiritual glory of the precepts and promises of the Scripture, etc., which things are, and always were in the Bible, and would have been seen before, if it had not been for blindness, without having any new sense added, by the words being sent by God to a particular person, and spoken anew to him, with a new meaning.<sup>48</sup>

For all of Edwards' anti-rationalism, he never decries the use and place of the mind in spiritual life and experience. He disclaims rationalism precisely because it is the philosophy of a dead and darkened mind; what he urges is the need for a renewed and enlightened mind. His perspective is anti-rationalistic, but not non-rational; his purpose was 'to retain understanding in religion as furnishing a rational criterion... a *sensible* light involving direct sensible perception and the inclination of the heart'.<sup>49</sup>

### ***5. They are attended with a conviction of certainty***

Edwards adduces certain Scriptures to demonstrate that authentic spirituality is characterised by 'a conviction and persuasion of the truth of the things of the gospel'.<sup>50</sup> In analysing this proposition, Edwards argues that it is possible for someone to be convinced that the Scripture is true, but only because he accepts those passages which seem to confirm his own security. The kind of affections Edwards is speaking about are willing to embrace the veracity of the whole Scripture.

But the conviction of which Edwards writes is not merely an assent to the truthfulness of the Bible; it is also the persuasion of its historical outworking, and, indeed, of the historicity of God's work in the church, through the gospel, in successive ages. Such a perspective is necessary if we are to 'venture our all' on the persuasion that the Bible is true. Thus it is not simply a new view of things; it is a persuasion that the truth of the Christian faith deserves the response of whole-person commitment.

### ***6. They are attended with evangelical humility***

Here Edwards wishes to contrast 'legal humiliation' – which he says has in it 'no spiritual good'<sup>51</sup> – with 'evangelical humiliation', whose essence is 'such humility as becomes a creature in itself exceeding sinful, under a

---

<sup>48</sup> *Treatise*, p. 206.

<sup>49</sup> Smith, Yale edition, Vol. 2, p. 33.

<sup>50</sup> *Treatise*, p. 219.

<sup>51</sup> *Treatise*, p. 238.

disposition of grace'.<sup>52</sup> God's gracious provision is, says Edwards, *calculated* to produce such humility. It cannot sit easily with pride or self-satisfaction. The practical point is that genuine spiritual experience is intimately related to the 'Christian duty of self-denial', which for Edwards consists of two principal elements: 'first, in a man's denying his worldly inclinations, and in forsaking and renouncing all worldly objects and enjoyments; and, secondly, in denying his natural self-exaltation and renouncing his own dignity and glory'.<sup>53</sup>

It is impossible, therefore, to speak of genuine experiences of God's grace which are not in some way related to the awareness of sin and corruption in the heart. Indeed, Edwards says, the increase of grace tends 'to cause the saints to think their deformity vastly more than their goodness'.<sup>54</sup> Any religious experience which leaves a person content that his sin is gone is, for Edwards, highly spurious.

### ***7. They are attended with a change of nature***

'All spiritual discoveries are transforming',<sup>55</sup> Edwards says. This point is obvious both from what he has already said about changed hearts, perceptions and inclinations, and also from what he will say at last, that the great mark of genuine spirituality is habit, practice and tendency of life. But this seventh sign is a treatise on conversion, which is defined as 'a great and universal change of the man, turning him from sin to God'.<sup>56</sup> Edwards, with the insight of a pastor, concedes that man's pre-conversion inclinations may trap him subsequently; but having become a new man in Christ, the natural temper of his soul comes under the modifying and correcting influence of grace.

### ***8. They beget and promote the temper of Jesus***

Following from this is the fact that conversion leads to Christlikeness. Edwards picks up on the Bible's teaching that the Spirit transforms us into the image and likeness of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18), and demonstrates that whatever else genuine spirituality does, it leaves us walking in the footsteps of 'our great Leader and Example'.<sup>57</sup> Throughout there is the insistence that genuine religious affections are characterised not by feelings

---

<sup>52</sup> *Treatise*, p. 238.

<sup>53</sup> *Treatise*, p. 241.

<sup>54</sup> *Treatise*, p. 252.

<sup>55</sup> *Treatise*, p. 267.

<sup>56</sup> *Treatise*, p. 267.

<sup>57</sup> *Treatise*, p. 278.

of wellbeing or self-assurance, but by a particular lifestyle which mirrors that of Jesus.

**9. *Gracious affections soften the heart***

This, again, is a development of points 7 and 8, and arises out of the Bible's distinction between hearts of stone and hearts of flesh. Hard hearts are characterised by spiritual sloth and self-assurance; flesh hearts are characterised by quietness and tender consciences. The greater our 'holy boldness', the less we will have of self-confidence, and the greater will be our modesty.<sup>58</sup>

**10. *They have beautiful symmetry and proportion***

While hypocrites are like meteors which flash across the sky, momentarily dazzling in their brilliance, true believers are like the stars which are firmly fixed in the firmament, and radiate their beauty.<sup>59</sup> Just as Edwards raises the aesthetic excellence of divine things in point 3, so now he argues that the experiences and affections of the true believer are proportioned and ordered. How can they not be when there is always 'symmetry and beauty in God's workmanship'?<sup>60</sup> While hypocrites may have a confident hope, they are lacking the reverence and caution that characterise genuine spiritual experience. That is, there is a disproportion to their attitudes and experiences.

There is an implicit reference to the Great Awakening in this discussion, not least in the charge that some who have made great noises about the way the gospel has influenced them, have at the same time failed to be strict concerning their duties towards their neighbours. Related to this is the symmetry which Edwards observes must be present between public and private religion:

If persons appear greatly engaged in social religion, and but little in the religion of the closet, and are often highly affected when with others, and but little moved when they have none but God and Christ to converse with, it looks very darkly upon their religion.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> *Treatise*, p. 292.

<sup>59</sup> *Treatise*, p. 300.

<sup>60</sup> *Treatise*, p. 292.

<sup>61</sup> *Treatise*, p. 302.

**11. False affections rest satisfied in themselves**

The more spiritual experience a person has, the more he longs after God. Edwards' language is very careful here; he does not say that increased spiritual sense and experience leads to a longing for more such experience, but for more of God. It is characteristic of the false emotionalism that he is distinguishing from the true that it is content with itself and content with the enjoyment of the experience. Edwards concludes: 'this is the nature of spiritual affections, that the greater they be, the greater the appetite and longing is after grace and holiness'.<sup>62</sup> Undergirding this is a suspicion that those who felt that continued heightened experiences were a sign that the revival was ongoing may well have been deceiving themselves. Such experiences are good, but if our desire is simply for 'spirituality', of whatever form, then it is insubstantial. Genuine spirituality produces a thirst for God.

**12. Religious affections have their fruit in Christian practice**

Edwards reserves the largest space for this final sign. The chief characteristic of genuine spirituality is continued Christian practice and a habitual Christian lifestyle. The spirituality of which Edwards has been speaking is born out of a new relationship with Christ, whose presence in human life is motivating, energising and encouraging. 'Christ is not in the heart of a saint as in a sepulchre, or as a dead Saviour that does nothing; but as in His temple, and as One that is alive from the dead.'<sup>63</sup> On the other hand, 'false discoveries and affections do not go deep enough to reach and govern the spring of man's actions and practice'.<sup>64</sup> This leads to an extended discussion on the saints' perseverance and their life of fruit bearing.

Equally important is his reference to backsliding. Although Edwards consistently applies the principle that grace is never inactive, he knows that sin is not inactive either. And while consistent Christian practice remains a sign both to ourselves and others that we have the life of God in our soul, it is still possible for Christians to slip into ways of sin and worldliness. This, however, has to be contrasted with the hypocrite who may follow the things of religion for a little while, then fall away permanently. Where genuine spirituality exists, it co-exists with sin. There may be times when 'universal obedience' to God is lacking, but the falling

---

<sup>62</sup> *Treatise*, p. 305.

<sup>63</sup> *Treatise*, p. 315.

<sup>64</sup> *Treatise*, p. 315.

## A PARADIGM FOR EVANGELICAL SPIRITUALITY

away can never be so permanent as to lead to a habitual neglect and dislike of true religion.

For the true child of God, therefore, it is not enough that religious life be couched in negatives. Christians are to be exemplary in the positives of Christian service as well. Such practice, says Edwards, 'is the greatest sign of grace'.<sup>65</sup> In John E. Smith's words, Edwards 'was taking a long look at Protestantism's sacred domain – the inner life – and demanding that it be subjected to a public test'.<sup>66</sup>

### PARADIGM

Is there a paradigm here for evangelical spirituality? I think there is, and I think that Edwards' discussion directs us in this whole area. That is to say, Edwards' discussion is as relevant for our contemporary church in its contemporary cultural context.

First, we might note Edwards' insistence throughout the *Treatise* on the use and place of the mind. It is true, as the *Treatise* makes plain, that Edwards rejects both a rationalistic basis for religion and an intellectualism that does not move the heart. His insistence is on a whole-person transformation by grace, and a whole-person consecration to Christ. For that reason, he also remains suspicious of a spirituality which does not engage the mind. As Samuel Logan puts it,

Edwards sought more than anything to make Christ a totally engaging Person for his people. But this is not to say that Edwards repudiated logic or that he ignored the importance of propositional understanding. Again the *Religious Affections* serves as a model. Carefully reasoned and rigorously logical, Edwards therein presents a full-blown analysis of an essential part of the Christian life, a part which must be thoroughly and propositionally known if the individual's spiritual life is to be full, complete, and true.<sup>67</sup>

The role of the mind is twofold. First, it receives the propositional truth of the gospel, and second, it measures experience against that truth. In neither case is experience sufficient. If there are religious affections at all, then they are inextricably linked to the truth of the gospel, and they are subject to scrutiny and testing by the Scriptures themselves. They are never self-validating.

---

<sup>65</sup> *Treatise*, p. 327.

<sup>66</sup> Smith, Yale edition, Vol. 2, p. 43.

<sup>67</sup> S. T. Logan, Jr, 'The Hermeneutics of Jonathan Edwards', *Westminster Theological Journal* 43 (1980), p. 91.

Any 'spirituality' which fails to engage the mind fails to engage the whole person, and anti-intellectual spirituality is as inimical to the evangelical church as to the postmodern world. David Wells is right: 'meaning is what religion is about'.<sup>68</sup> For that reason, his call to ministers is to place theology, and not spirituality, at the core of the Church's life and work. Wells contrasts an older model of ministry, rooted in Reformed and Puritan ideology (which saw the whole of Church life as a theological practice) with a newer model in which theology and practice have been disengaged. If we are to avoid the trap of merely using evangelicalism as a guise with which to pander to the requirements of religious consumers,<sup>69</sup> then we need to bring an evangelical mind to bear on all our spiritual experiences. Perhaps the greatest service we can do our postmodern society is to remind it that all spirituality is vacated of meaning the moment it is divorced from the life of the mind.

Second, we ought to note Edwards' insistence that it is possible to have heightened, prolonged and enjoyable spiritual experiences that are not genuine. Postmodernism operates on the assumption that all experience is equally valid (which is the very kind of absolute statement that is anathema to postmodernism!). But even granting the validity of making the assumption, is it true? Does it matter what kind of experience I have, as long as I have experiences of some kind? And if, within the evangelical church, I have unusual experiences, is this not a sign that the Holy Spirit is at work? The Reformed church has for long faced the issue raised by the charismatic movement: do not the presence of signs and wonders evidence the presence of the Holy Spirit, and at the same time evidence the deadness of the older Reformed orthodoxy?

Edwards' point is that no religious affection is genuine simply because it is a religious affection. No experience, or gift, or miracle, or wonder is genuine *simply because* that is what it is. It is, after all, possible to go to Christ on the day of judgement with a list of accomplishments which may be true and yet may also accompany a complete ignorance of Christ as Saviour (Matt. 7:21-23). Such phenomena may well accompany the work of God in human life, but must never be necessarily equated with it.

To summarise: 'Edwards insists that being part of the elect can be determined by ascertaining that our religious emotions, producing Christian graces and good works, have their origin in God.'<sup>70</sup> If God's

---

<sup>68</sup> Wells, *No Place for Truth*, p. 253.

<sup>69</sup> See Wells, *No Place for Truth*, p. 256.

<sup>70</sup> R. E. Diprose, 'Grace: What it is, and How it has been understood by the Church', *Emmaus Journal* 10 (2001), p. 266.

## A PARADIGM FOR EVANGELICAL SPIRITUALITY

grace in our heart is our point of departure, and the development of Christian graces in our life our goal and purpose, then we can measure the genuineness of our spirituality. But no spiritual experience can ever be regarded as genuine unless we have been drawn to God and motivated to live for him. The beauty of Christ must remain the anchor of all our experiences and the practice of our life their test. Otherwise spiritual experience will drift in the cross-currents of self and subjectivism. We are to test the affections as we are to test the spirits.

Third, we ought to note Edwards' insistence that genuine religious affections are accompanied by a profound lack of self-trust. The irony of contemporary postmodernism lies in its insistence on spirituality as a basis for self-confidence and self-trust. Yet the *Treatise* might also legitimately be regarded as an expansion of Paul's rhetorical question: 'Where is boasting then? It is excluded' (Rom. 3:27).

For Jonathan Edwards, our religious affections not only require to be tested by the standards of Scripture, but they also require to turn us away from ourselves to the objective reality of what has been done for us in Christ. For today's evangelical church, which has lost its moorings in a sea of contemporary philosophies, as well as for today's postmodern world, roots are desperately needed. The church cannot pride herself in her spirituality any more than the world can. The moment we lose confidence in ourselves, our methods, our programmes, our management, our professionalism, is the moment we begin to engage with what is genuinely 'spiritual', that is, of the Holy Spirit of God. And the moment the postmodernist turns away from imagining that spirituality is enough, is the moment he or she can anchor confidence in something lasting.

### CONCLUSION

Some have read the *Treatise on the Religious Affections* as a tacit admission that the Great Awakening had been one gigantic failure. Edward H. Davidson, for example, described the *Treatise* as 'a narrative of Edwards's mind seeking to discover why God had not fulfilled his purposes, at least as those purposes had loomed so brightly a mere four or five years before'.<sup>71</sup> On this reading, the *Treatise* was reduced to being 'a mournful epilogue to the Awakening'.<sup>72</sup> This is a classic *modernist*

---

<sup>71</sup> E. H. Davidson, *Jonathan Edwards: The Narrative of a Puritan Mind* (Cambridge, MA, 1968), p. 133.

<sup>72</sup> Davidson, *Edwards*, p. 133.

approach to the *Treatise*, which fails to appreciate Edwards' spiritual concern for his people.

To be sure, the *Treatise* was an analysis of the Awakening; but Richard Lovelace is correct to state that Edwards, rather than mournfully wondering why the movement had failed,

spent the 1740s basically responding to the awakening in two ways: defending its genuine center against the attempts to discredit it through guilt-by-association with aberrant forms, and co-opting, improving and intensifying Chauncy's critique of its weaknesses in order to purify the movement.<sup>73</sup>

God's glorious work had not miscarried just because there were aberrations in the movement, any more than religious affections are to be judged spurious just because of the presence of sin in the life. The *Treatise* was an attempt to weigh up the truth of biblical Christianity, both by answering those who said that the phenomena discredited the revival and those who said that they necessarily validated it.

For the evangelical church of our own day, again labouring in similar circumstances in modern Scotland and contemporary New England, Edwards' response is worth careful consideration. In a world chock-full of spiritual experiences, there is always the danger of assuming too much and assessing too little. Edwards is simply engaging us with, and calling us to, the truth of Scripture. Postmodernism neglects that truth at its peril, as does the evangelical church. While we do not want a dead orthodoxy (there *are* genuine religious affections after all), nor do we wish to dress our orthodoxy in the garments of spurious experiences. Some experiences may give the impression that all is well; but if they are self-centred and self-focussed they are a sign of illness, not of health. Both our culture and our churches need Edwards' penetrating insights into what it is that constitutes a valid spiritual experience, as we need to follow his example of putting biblical theology at the heart of all our practice.

---

<sup>73</sup> R. F. Lovelace, 'Evangelical Revivals and the Presbyterian tradition', *Westminster Theological Journal* 42 (1979), p. 140.