

“Jonathan Edwards’ *Religious Affections* remains one of the most discerning works of spiritual psychology published in the last several centuries. Dr. Samuel Storms’ unpacking of this significant work, along with his treatment of Edwards’ ‘Personal Narrative,’ reveals once again for a new generation why the old Puritan so much deserves the most careful study today.”

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“Our churches desperately need spiritual discernment, and the *Affections* constitute perhaps the best manual on discernment ever written. But most Christians cannot wade through the immensity or prolixity of the original text. Therefore Storms’ repackaging of this spiritual classic meets a serious need. Storms’ essay on Edwards’ personal spirituality, introducing the “Personal Narrative,” is almost worth the price of the book. It is a marvelous synthesis and analysis. Then his running commentary, interspersed with direct selections from the Narrative, are exceedingly helpful.”

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Roanoke College

“After nearly 300 years, these gems of Edwards continue to sparkle. It is no exaggeration to say that they stand as two of the best, most profound, and practically useful guides to everyday Christian living ever written. Sam Storms has done a superb job interpreting them for twenty-first century followers of Jesus. His vivid paraphrases are easy to read and always edifying. I pray that many will read and meditate upon this labor of love—and then move on to delve into Edwards’ own writings.”

—DOUGLAS A. SWEENEY, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“These texts of Jonathan Edwards have nourished the church for nearly three centuries, rightfully taking their place as classics. In Sam Storms’ capable hands they’ll now speak clearly, plainly, and powerfully to the church today and for generations to come. If you’ve ever wanted to tackle Edwards but have shied away, you no longer have an excuse.”

—STEPHEN J. NICHOLS, author of *Heaven on Earth: Capturing
Jonathan Edwards’s Vision of Living in Between*

“In reading through this book, I feel like I am looking over Sam Storms’ shoulder, reading Edwards together with him. At times, he pauses to interpret Edwards for me, at other times, he places Edwards’ comments in their historical context. On rare occasions, he points out areas of disagreement, and at other times, he simply allows the profundity of Edwards’ own words to speak for themselves. At all times, Sam’s love and respect for Edwards shines through clearly.”

—GLENN KREIDER, Professor of Theological Studies,
Dallas Theological Seminary



SIGNS *of the*
Spirit

AN INTERPRETATION OF
Jonathan Edwards'
RELIGIOUS AFFECTIONS

SAM STORMS



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“Religious Affections”*

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Preface

A BRIEF APOLOGETIC FOR
SIGNS OF THE SPIRIT

ASIDE FROM THE biblical authors themselves, no one has had greater influence on my life than Jonathan Edwards. I first became acquainted with him at the urging of Dr. John Hannah, longtime professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, from which I received my Th.M. in historical theology in 1973. John suggested that I undertake an independent studies course in Edwards and that I begin by reading his treatise on the *Freedom of the Will* (which eventually led to my writing a master's thesis on that volume). My first exposure to Edwards' *Religious Affections* came when John also insisted that it be included in the list of readings. I will forever be grateful for his wise counsel!

Because of the profound and truly life-changing influence that Edwards has exerted on me, I am quick to recommend his works to others, indeed, to everyone. This brings me to my defense of this interpretation of his treatise on the *Affections*. If people heeded my advice, I would hardly have undertaken this project. Nothing grieves me more than to hear that yet another has started reading Edwards only to give up, frustrated by his style or overwhelmed by the complexity of his argumentation.

I can't begin to count the number of times I've been asked for recommended reading and have suggested Edwards (specifically the *Religious Affections*), only to be greeted with a contorted face or an embarrassed evasion that goes something like this: "Well, I tried reading Edwards. I really wanted to read the *Affections*, but after about fifteen or twenty pages into it, I just quit. For whatever reason, I couldn't

follow him. His style was aggravating and, well, to be honest, I just couldn't understand what he was saying."

Such confessions have come not only from average lay folk, but from well-educated seminary graduates as well. Edwards' penchant for torturously complex sentence structure, together with the abundance of theological "bunny trails" that, at least initially, don't seem to contribute to the point he is making, have tested and all too often triumphed over the determination of even the most avid and intellectual of Christians.

For years I have taken the high ground when it comes to the reading of Edwards, refusing to yield to the insistent demand that someone "tweak his prose" or paraphrase his theological concepts. I have faithfully exhorted countless men and women, again and again, to renew their commitment to working through some of Edwards' more daunting treatises. "Your patience and perseverance will reap a bountiful harvest," I have said again and again, to little (or no) avail I've come to discover. Sure, there are a few, here and there, who've made their way through the *Affections* and were (justifiably) proud of their journey. But even in the majority of these cases, they aren't sure they understood, far less appreciated and embraced, what they had read.

I've worked my way through the *Affections* at least ten times and I still struggle in places to make sense of Edwards. I'm more than happy to attribute this failure to my shortcomings rather than his (indeed, I still hesitate, at times, to acknowledge that he had *any* shortcomings!). But I can no longer escape the conclusion that no matter how passionately I exhort and encourage and rebuke and challenge people to read Edwards, no matter how exuberantly I promise them great treasure at the end of their labors, the vast majority of folk simply won't do it. Or they will read at most a few pages and then set aside the book, forever convinced that Edwards is beyond their grasp. I wish it were otherwise. I pray that it could be otherwise. But it isn't and, I fear, never will be.

The theology of Jonathan Edwards and his insight into the nature of religious experience are simply too important, too relevant, and too enriching to sacrifice on the altar of some lofty ideal that it is beneath his (and our) dignity to make his work accessible to a more general audience. I suppose I could go to my grave proudly congratulating myself for not having yielded to the temptation to do what this book

proposes. But I'd go there with the disturbing realization that other people are likewise going there without having reaped the eternal benefits of what Edwards had to say.

Let's be clear about something. I'm not advocating the "dumbing down" of Jonathan Edwards (or any aspect of the Christian faith). Yes, I would much prefer the "smarting up" of the Christian public, equipping them for the task of wrestling with this magnificent theological mind (and others as well). And I will continue to challenge believers of every age and educational background to think and dig deeply into the rich treasures of Christ, his Word, and the resources made available to his church throughout the last two millennia. My prayer is that *Signs of the Spirit* will be a helpful tool in the pursuit of that goal.

Nevertheless, I suspect that on reading this many will come to me, protesting, "Sam, you're wrong! I read the *Affections*. I loved it. Yes, it was really hard, but my perseverance paid off." Praise God for every one of them. But for every one of them there are one hundred others who tell a different story, whose encounter with Edwards was frustrating and embarrassing. It is for the latter that I wrote this book, not the former.

In my decision to write this book, I also had to overcome the comments of John E. Smith, who edited *Religious Affections* for the Yale University Press edition of Edwards' works (which is now at twenty-five volumes). In his editorial introduction, Smith wrote:

In directing attention to his style, we cannot overlook the fact that many readers have found the *Affections* difficult going, nor should we ignore what is implied in the activity of the many editors who thought it necessary to rewrite the text. It is admittedly an exacting work; it calls for a reader's best effort. But there are rewards if we are willing to raise ourselves to the level of Edwards' austere standards; nothing is to be gained by bringing him down to a more facile plane in order to make him say what we would like to hear.¹

"So, what say ye, Sam?" For the most part, I agree with Smith, at least with his conclusion that it is "difficult going," "an exacting work," shaped by "austere standards." But it would be a mistake to think that this book is an effort to bring him down to a "more facile

¹John E. Smith, "Editor's Introduction," in Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith, vol. 2 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1969), 8.

plane in order to make him say what we would like to hear.” My goal is to enable the reader to hear only what Edwards himself intended to say. I’m simply attempting to bridge a rather cavernous gap between *how* Edwards said it in the eighteenth century and how I believe he would say it were he alive in the twenty-first century.

It would be easy to read Smith’s words, nod our heads in agreement, and walk away with a smug complacency for having heeded his warning. But that wouldn’t result in more people reading Edwards! Or at least not enough people would read him to justify that sort of well-intentioned but idealistic response.

Many of you will contend that I’ve done a disservice to Edwards, that I’ve failed to honor him for all that he has meant to me personally. I hope that’s not true. I would rather think that I’ve honored him in the way he deserves by laboring to make accessible to as many people as possible his marvelous insights into the Christian faith. So what exactly have I done in this book? What is *Signs of the Spirit*?

As the subtitle indicates, this is an *interpretation* of the *Religious Affections*. When it comes to Edwards’ *Personal Narrative*, it is more an *application*, but to include that in the subtitle would make it impossibly cumbersome. So why do I call it an *interpretation*?

I had considered describing it as a *contemporary rendering*, but that strikes me as a bit dishonest. The fact is, I *have* interpreted the *Religious Affections*. To think otherwise would be both naïve and a failure to recognize that I am rendering his work through my own theological and personal grid. Every time I choose to omit a particular paragraph, I am making an interpretive decision that inescapably reflects what I regard as most important in the treatise. There are *reasons*, both personal and philosophical, that govern my choices as to what is central and controlling in Edwards’ work as over against what is secondary and peripheral. Every time I rewrite a paragraph or paraphrase an argument or summarize a theological point, my own convictions are in evidence. I think it’s important that the reader understand this.

Of course, I wouldn’t have undertaken this task if I didn’t believe that I truly understood what Edwards was getting at in his argument. But I leave it to scholars more adept in Edwards than I to render a judgment on my success. I’m certain that some readers who are familiar with Edwards will object to editorial decisions I’ve made as well as

theological interpretations that are reflected in my effort to make his lofty ideas not more “facile” but hopefully more intelligible. That’s the risk one takes when writing a book like this.

The strategy I followed is simple. I sat down over several months and read and reread the *Affections*, each time rewriting or articulating in a more understandable way the substance of Edwards’ argument. I would determine, as best I could, what sections to omit, believing them to be tangential to the main argument or perhaps repetitive in a way that would only bog down the average reader (such as Edwards’ many extended citations of supporting scriptural texts and extensive comments thereon). On many occasions, however, I have kept intact substantial portions of his work. These are indescribably rich and, yes, readable. There are, in fact, places where I quote Edwards at great length, with only an occasional attempt to interpret his comments. You should have no problem in recognizing the difference between Storms and Edwards, for direct citations together with an occasional colorful and vivid term of his are in quotation marks.

One more comment: I did not write this book so that people would read it *instead of* Edwards, but so that they might be motivated and better equipped to delve deeply into the original. Some may consider this rather idealistic, but surely it is no more so than disallowing a book such as this in the hopes that people will read the *Affections* in its entirety. In any case, I strongly encourage you to treat this volume as merely *preparatory* to your encounter with Edwards or perhaps as a *companion guide* to be read simultaneously with your reading of the original.

Grammatical and Stylistic Changes

Those who have read Edwards are familiar with his style (or, in some cases, the lack thereof!). He had a long-standing love affair with commas, splashing them pervasively throughout his writing. He used the colon and semicolon in ways that would be inadmissible in an English prose class today. He was no less infatuated with subordinate clauses, often constructing an elaborate sentence with as many as seven or eight of them. It’s not unusual for him to say in five sentences what could as easily be said in one. On a number of occasions I have altered punctua-

tion as well as reduced sentence length for the sake of readability. You will be the judge of whether I have succeeded.

Edwards also employed, as did virtually everyone in his day, certain abbreviations and grammatically incorrect words. For example, he typically uses “an” rather than “a” before a word beginning with “h.” I’ve left these intact. I’ve also left unchanged his use of “’em” for “them,” “’tis” for “it is,” and “no” when we would expect “not.”

Perhaps his most annoying habit is the use of “don’t” when grammatical precision would call for “doesn’t.” However, I have chosen not to change these, for it would require a major reconstruction of the sentences in which they appear that would obscure rather than facilitate his meaning. Soon enough, as you read Edwards, you will become accustomed to this particular issue of his style.

There are also a few distinct words of which you need to be made aware. Edwards uses “wont” (don’t mistake it for “won’t”) when he means something like “inclined” or “disposed to,” and “actings” where we might prefer “actions.” He will often use the word “discovery” when we would expect “revelation.” Thus to have something “discovered” to you is to have it “revealed.” Likewise, the plural “discoveries” is used instead of “revelations.” As for spelling, I changed “Saviour” to “Savior” and “shew” to “show.”

In only a few instances I have inserted a word, always bracketed, to fill out the flow of Edwards’ argument. As noted, his excessive use of commas led me to eliminate many of them to conform to what most today are accustomed to reading. There are a number of places, on the other hand, where I inserted a comma in place of his use of a semicolon, or where I have replaced a colon with a period and then started a new sentence. Most of you, especially those unfamiliar with Edwards, won’t even notice when this occurs.

I also made a decision, when quoting Edwards, not to include page numbers in the text from the many available versions of the *Affections* (all of which I used alternately, depending on which provided the more helpful rendering). See note 1 in the introduction to the *Affections* for a listing of them. I did this simply for ease of reading.

As for biblical texts cited, Edwards consistently used the King James Version, which I retained when citing him directly. In other instances the English Standard Version was used.

My treatment of his *Personal Narrative* followed many of the same principles, although I altered the original text of this short treatise only slightly. I did, however, eliminate certain portions that addressed issues of lesser importance. If you are wondering why I included the *Narrative* in a work that is primarily concerned with the *Religious Affections*, I encourage you to read the introduction to part two of this book.


This, then, is my apologetic for *Signs of the Spirit*. Whether you agree with my editorial decisions or are offended by them, I hope you understand that I did it out of my immense respect for Edwards and my passion that his theological convictions be given a hearing in today's Christian world. We simply cannot afford to live in ignorance of the insights he brought to bear on the nature of spiritual experience. At least, I can't.

Sam Storms
October 2006



PART ONE

Religious Affections



Introduction
REVIVAL:
THE CONTEXT OF EDWARDS’
RELIGIOUS AFFECTIONS

JONATHAN EDWARDS’ treatise *Religious Affections* is, in the opinion of many (myself included), the most important and accurate analysis of religious experience ever written. Edwards’ primary concern in this work was to determine, as much as is possible, “what are the distinguishing qualifications of those that are in favor with God, and entitled to his eternal rewards.”¹ Simply put, he endeavored to identify what constitutes true and authentic spirituality. Or, to put it in the form of a question: Are there certain features or characteristics in human thought and behavior that serve as “signs” of the saving activity and presence of the Spirit of God? Again, is it possible for us to know with any degree of certainty whether or not a person who claims to have experienced the saving grace of God is truly born again?

Edwards is famous for many things, among which was his habit of spending upwards of thirteen hours a day in his study. But it would be a mistake to think that he went about answering the question raised while sitting isolated in a theological ivory tower. Edwards’ conclusions on this matter were forged in the fires of revival in eighteenth-century New England. Therefore, we can hardly afford to interpret this

¹Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith, vol. 2 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1969), 84. Edwards’ treatise has been reproduced and printed in a number of forms, the two most helpful of which are the Yale University Press edition (which is based on the first edition published by S. Kneeland in Boston, 1746); and the Edward Hickman edition of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1979), 1:234–343 (found also in *The Religious Affections* [Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1991]), which is based on the Worcester edition of 1808. There is also available an abridged version, edited by James M. Houston, *Religious Affections: A Christian’s Character Before God* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1996). An online edition is also available at www.JonathanEdwards.com.

remarkable work apart from an understanding of the historical and religious context from which it emerged.

Great Awakenings

On May 30, 1735, Edwards wrote a letter of eight pages to Dr. Benjamin Colman (1673–1747), pastor of Brattle Street Church in Boston, in which he described the nature of the revival he was seeing. Colman forwarded a substantial portion of the letter to a friend in London, where news quickly spread about religious events in the Colonies. Edwards was in turn asked to write a more detailed account of what he had witnessed, which he titled, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of many hundred souls in Northampton, and the Neighbouring Towns and Villages of the County of Hampshire, in the Province of the Massachusetts-Bay in New England.*²

Edwards completed work on the document on November 6, 1736. What he describes in this short book is the first wave of revival (1734–1736) that was later followed by what has come to be known as the Great Awakening (1740–1742).

Historical Precedents of the Revival

Revival was nothing new to the people of Massachusetts. Edwards was able to identify five so-called *harvests* under his predecessor and grandfather, Solomon Stoddard (who served as pastor in Northampton for sixty years). During each of these times of revival Edwards heard Stoddard say that “the greater part of the young people in the town, seemed to be mainly concerned for their eternal salvation.”³ The first wave of the Spirit’s movement during Edwards’ pastoral charge in Northampton may have initially been stirred by the unexpected deaths of two young people in a neighboring town, which “seemed to contribute to render solemn the spirits of many young persons; and there began evidently to appear more of a religious concern on people’s minds.”⁴

²The version of *A Faithful Narrative* cited here is found in *Jonathan Edwards on Revival* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1991), 2–74. It is also found, together with relevant correspondence, in the Yale edition of Edwards’ works: Jonathan Edwards, “A Faithful Narrative,” in *The Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen, vol. 4 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1972), 99–211.

³Edwards, *Faithful Narrative*, 9.

⁴*Ibid.*, 11.

Some scholars are inclined to dismiss any supernatural or divine cause for the revival and insist that it can be traced to the fearful reaction of the community to some natural calamity. Whereas it is true that a diphtheria epidemic struck New England from 1735 to 1740, Edwin Gaustad points out that

the epidemic appeared in New Jersey in 1735, long after the revival movement had been under way there; in Connecticut and Massachusetts, the severity of the epidemic in any given area bears no observable relation to the intensity of the revival in that area, either before or after Whitefield; in New Hampshire the epidemic was all over by 1736, making difficult an explanation of the five-year lapse between its terminus and the beginning of the Great Awakening in the Kingston-Hampton Falls area; and finally, while the epidemic was from four to five times as severe in New Hampshire and Maine as in Connecticut and Massachusetts, it was in the latter area that the revival was most pervasive.⁵

Edwards himself connected the outbreak of spiritual renewal to a series of sermons he preached on justification by faith and the unusual conversion of an immoral young lady in the Northampton community (he discreetly referred to her as “one of the greatest company-keepers in the whole town”⁶).

Characteristics of the Revival

Without going into great detail, we should examine a few of the characteristic features of the awakening, as described by Edwards.

Edwards couldn’t help but notice that the revival was, quite literally, the talk of the town: “Other discourse than of the things of religion,” he noted, “would scarcely be tolerated in any company. The minds of people were wonderfully taken off from the world, it was treated amongst us as a thing of very little consequence.”⁷

People were inclined to neglect their daily affairs, or at least subordinate them to the higher interest of the state of their souls. “They seemed to follow their worldly business, more as a part of their duty, than from any disposition they had to it; the tempta-

⁵Edwin S. Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1965), 20.

⁶Edwards, *Faithful Narrative*, 12.

⁷*Ibid.*, 13.

tion now seemed to lie on that hand, to neglect worldly affairs too much, and to spend too much time in the immediate exercise of religion.”⁸ Their primary concern “was to get the kingdom of heaven, and every one appeared pressing into it. The engagedness of their hearts in this great concern could not *be hid*, it appeared in their very *countenances*.”⁹

Edwards was especially impressed by the widespread impact of the awakening, citing more than thirty other communities where signs of renewal occurred. As for Northampton, “there was scarcely a single person in the town, old or young, left unconcerned about the great things of the eternal world.”¹⁰ There was also a remarkable transformation in the worship of God. “Our public praises,” he observed, “were then greatly enlivened. . . . [People] were evidently wont to sing with unusual elevation of heart and voice, which made the duty pleasant indeed.”¹¹ Above all else, the person of Jesus Christ became central in the thoughts and concerns of those involved.

Needless to say, the reaction of outside observers was mixed. “Many scoffed at and ridiculed it; and some compared what we called conversion, to certain distempers.”¹² Others were so impressed that they spread word “that the state of the town could not be conceived of by those who had not seen it.”¹³ There were a number of instances, Edwards said, “of persons who came from abroad on visits, or on business, who had not been long here, before, to all appearances, they were savingly wrought upon, and partook of that shower of divine blessing which God rained down here, and went home rejoicing; till at length the same work began evidently to appear and prevail in several other towns in the county.”¹⁴

Not only were the backslidden convicted and returned to the fold, many were saved. Edwards was confident “that more than 300 souls were savingly brought home to Christ, in this town [Northampton], in the space of half a year, and about the same number of males as females.”¹⁵

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., 14.

¹²Ibid., 15.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., 19.

One of the more distinguishing features of the awakening was the acceleration or intensification of God's activity. Edwards described it this way: "God has also seemed to have gone out of his usual way, in the *quickness* of his work, and the swift progress his Spirit has made in his operations on the hearts of many. It is wonderful that persons should be so suddenly and yet so greatly changed."¹⁶ Again, "when God in so remarkable a manner took the work into his own hands, there was as much done in a day or two, as at ordinary times, with all endeavours that men can use, and with such a blessing as we commonly have, is done in a year."¹⁷

The Nature of Conversions

Edwards was reluctant to suggest that true conversions followed a strict pattern or structure. Still, there appeared to be a consistency in that conversion generally entailed two stages.

First, there was typically a *deep and penetrating conviction of sin*. With some this occurred suddenly, whereas others experienced it gradually. The result was that they "quit their sinful practices; and the looser sort have been brought to forsake and dread their former vices and extravagances."¹⁸ This was followed by their seeking the "means of salvation, reading, prayer, meditation, [and] the ordinances of God's house."¹⁹ The "place of resort," Edwards wrote, "was now altered, it was no longer the tavern, but the minister's house that was thronged far more than ever the tavern had been wont to be."²⁰

There was also variation in both the *degree* of fear experienced and the *duration* of it. There were a few instances in which individuals "had such a sense of God's wrath for sin . . . that they have been overborne; and made to cry out under an astonishing sense of their guilt, wondering that God suffers such guilty wretches to live upon earth, and that he doth not immediately send them to hell."²¹

The second dimension in the conversion experience was a *sense of God's love, mercy, and saving grace in Christ*. Again, Edwards explained:

¹⁶Ibid., 21.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid., 23.

¹⁹Ibid., 24.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid., 25–26.

It was very wonderful to see how person's affections were sometimes moved—when God did as it were suddenly open their eyes, and let into their minds a sense of the greatness of his grace, the fullness of Christ, and his readiness to save. . . . Their joyful surprise has caused their hearts as it were to leap, so that they have been ready to break forth into laughter, tears often at the same time issuing like a flood, and intermingling a loud weeping. Sometimes they have not been able to forbear crying out with a loud voice, expressing their great admiration.²²

This overwhelming assurance of saving love had varied effects on the people:

Some persons having had such longing desires after Christ, or which have risen to such degree, as to take away their natural strength. Some have been so overcome with a sense of the dying love of Christ to such poor, wretched, and unworthy creatures, as to weaken the body. Several persons have had so great a sense of the glory of God, and excellency of Christ, that nature and life seemed almost to sink under it; and in all probability, if God had showed them a little more of himself, it would have dissolved their frame. . . . And they have talked, *when able to speak*, of the glory of God's perfections. . . .²³

Many, while their minds have been filled with spiritual delights, have as it were forgot their food; their bodily appetite has failed, while their minds have been entertained *with meat to eat that others knew not of*.²⁴

Edwards was duly impressed with the unparalleled joy of many, which often expressed itself in “earnest longings of soul to praise God.”²⁵ Others expressed a new love for the Bible: “Some, by reason of their love to God's word, at times have been wonderfully delighted and affected at the sight of a Bible; and then, also, there was no time so prized as the Lord's day, and no place in this world so desired as God's house.”²⁶

Edwards observed, “Never, I believe, was so much done in confess-

²²Ibid., 37–38.

²³Ibid., 45.

²⁴Ibid., 46.

²⁵Ibid., 47.

²⁶Ibid.

ing injuries, and making up differences, as the last year. Persons, after their own conversion, have commonly expressed an exceeding great desire for the conversion of others.”²⁷ There was also a noticeable improvement in the physical condition of the community during the revival. “It was the most remarkable time of health that ever I knew since I have been in the town,” Edwards observed. “We ordinarily have several bills put up, every sabbath, for sick persons; but now we had not so much as one for many sabbaths together. But after this [i.e., after the revival ended] it seemed to be otherwise.”²⁸

The End of the Revival

Although the history of revival reveals that no two outpourings were precisely the same, they do share one thing in common: they all came to an end. Edwards noted that “in the latter part of May, it began to be very sensible that the Spirit of God was gradually withdrawing from us, and after this time Satan seemed to be more let loose, and raged in a dreadful manner.”²⁹ One event seemed to Edwards to hasten the demise of religion: a man, from a family prone to depression (what Edwards called “melancholy”), committed suicide by cutting his throat. “The devil took the advantage, and drove him into despairing thoughts.”³⁰ [The man was in fact Joseph Hawley, Edwards’ uncle.] The impact of this on the community was devastating:

After this, multitudes in this and other towns seemed to have it strongly suggested to them, and pressed upon them, to do as this person had done. And many who seemed to be under no melancholy, some pious persons who had no special darkness or doubts about the goodness of their state . . . had it urged upon them as if somebody had spoke to them, *Cut your throat, now is a good opportunity. Now! Now!*³¹

The Spirit of God, “not long after this time, appeared very sensibly withdrawing from all parts of the country.”³² Nevertheless, Edwards was convinced that the vast majority of those who professed to having been saved in the revival “seem to have had an abiding change wrought

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid., 69.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid., 70.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., 71.

on them; . . . they generally appear to be persons who have a new sense of things, new apprehensions and views of God, of the divine attributes of Jesus Christ, and the great things of the gospel.”³³ Following the revival of 1740–1742, with the benefit of hindsight, Edwards appeared less confident.

The Revival of 1740–1742

The second wave of the Spirit’s work, known to history as the First Great Awakening, can generally be dated 1740–1742. Historians have typically traced the revival’s beginning to the visit of George Whitefield (1714–1771) to America. Whitefield, “The Grand Itinerant,” arrived in the fall of 1740 and “set all New England aflame with a revival compared to which the Valley awakening of 1734–1735 was but a brush fire.”³⁴

After preaching to thousands all along the Atlantic coast, Whitefield arrived in Edwards’ Northampton in mid-October. After one Sunday morning sermon in Edwards’ church, Whitefield wrote in his diary that “Good Mr. Edwards wept during the whole time of exercise. The people were equally affected; and, in the afternoon, the power increased yet more.”³⁵

Sarah Edwards was equally impressed. In a letter to her brother, the Rev. James Pierpont of New Haven, she said:

It is wonderful to see what a spell he casts over an audience by proclaiming the simplest truths of the Bible. I have seen upward of a thousand people hang on his words with breathless silence, broken only by an occasional half-suppressed sob. He impresses the ignorant, and not less the educated and refined . . . our mechanics shut up their shops, and the day-labourers throw down their tools to go and hear him preach, and few return unaffected. . . . Many, very many persons in Northampton date the beginning of new thoughts, new desires, new purposes and a new life, from the day they heard him preach of Christ.³⁶

Benjamin Franklin, although an unbeliever, regarded Whitefield to be his friend and said this of his oratorical gift:

³³Ibid.

³⁴Goen, “Editor’s Introduction,” in Edwards, *Great Awakening*, 48.

³⁵Ibid., 49.

³⁶Cited in Arnold A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield: God’s Anointed Servant in the Great Revival of the Eighteenth Century* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1990), 89–90.

He had a loud and clear voice, and articulated his words so perfectly that he might be heard and understood at a great distance, especially as his auditories observed the most perfect silence. . . . By hearing him often, I came to distinguish easily between sermons newly composed and those which he had often preached in the course of his travels. His delivery of the latter was so improved by frequent repetition, that every accent, every emphasis, every modulation of the voice, was so perfectly well turned and well placed, that, without being interested in the subject, one could not help being pleased with the discourse.³⁷

According to C. C. Goen, “By the time he passed from Connecticut into New York, his journal showed that he had spent 45 days, visited 40 towns, and delivered 97 sermons and exhortations.”³⁸ Whitefield set sail for England on January 16, 1741, after fourteen and a half months of preaching in America. He returned for a brief visit in the fall of 1744.

Whitefield was far from the only participant in this awakening. One must also mention Gilbert Tennent (1703–1764), leader of the Presbyterian revival in the middle Colonies. Goen reports that “after Tennent passed through eastern Connecticut, emotional outbursts in time of worship became common. Preachers sometimes had to stop in mid-sermon, as ‘weeping, sighs and sobs’ mingled with cries of distress: ‘Alas! I’m undone; I’m undone! O, my sins! How they prey upon my vitals! What will become of me? How shall I escape the damnation of hell, who have spent away a golden opportunity under Gospel light, in vanity?’”³⁹ Visions and trances, evidently, were commonplace. Chief among Tennent’s messages was his belief that most ministers of the day were unconverted. Needless to say, this didn’t fare well with the established clergy of New England!

Yet another preacher, of a decidedly different disposition, was James Davenport (1716–1757). Davenport was labeled an “enthusiast” and was in many ways responsible for those excesses that Edwards believed led to the end of the revival. “Enthusiasm,” as Goen defines it, “is belief in God’s immediate inspiration or possession, leading often to claims of divine authority.”⁴⁰

³⁷Cited in Gaustad, *Great Awakening in New England*, 29.

³⁸Goen, “Editor’s Introduction,” in Edwards, *Great Awakening*, 49.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 51.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 62.

Charles Chauncy, principal opponent of the revival (see below), applied the word to Davenport “in a bad sense, as intending an imaginary, not a real inspiration: according to which sense, the Enthusiast is one who has a conceit of himself as a person favored with the extraordinary presence of the Deity. He mistakes the workings of his own passions for divine communications, and fancies himself immediately inspired by the Spirit of God, when all the while he is under no other influence than that of an overheated imagination.”⁴¹

Opposition and Division

Opposition to the awakening was fierce and persistent. Charles Chauncy (1705–1787), pastor of Boston’s most influential church, led the opposition. Chauncy was the acknowledged leader of the “Old Lights,” those who “vilified the whole revival as ‘the effect of enthusiastic heat.’”⁴² Chauncy and his supporters typically preferred the time-honored traditions of the established order of religion in New England and opposed the new measures introduced by the revivalists. For them, conversion was principally a transformation in one’s intellectual convictions. The Christian life, therefore, together with any alleged encounter with the Spirit, must be reasonable, courteous, and not given to visible or vocal displays of emotion.

Chauncy’s principal objections to the revival were published in September 1743, in a work entitled *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England* (Boston, 1743). Among other concerns, he cited the ill effects of itinerant ministry, especially among those not ordained to the task of preaching. “Besides creating jealousies and threatening prerogatives,” said Chauncy, “itineracy flaunted the Congregational theory of the ministerial office.”⁴³

He also objected to “lay exhorters.” One critic wrote, “There is a creature here whom perhaps you never heard of before. It is called an Exhorter. It is of both sexes, but generally of the male, and young. Its distinguished qualities are ignorance, impudence, zeal. Numbers of these Exhorters are amongst the people here. They go from town to town, creep into houses, lead captive silly women, and then the men.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., 63.

⁴³Cited in Gaustad, *Great Awakening in New England*, 70.

Such of them as have good voices do great execution as they move their hearers, make them cry, faint, swoon, fall into convulsions.”⁴⁴

Chauncy was especially offended by what he perceived to be fanatical excess in the behavior of those who participated in the revival. True religion, Chauncy said, was primarily a matter of the mind, not the affections, and was characterized by self-control, cultural sophistication, and strict moral propriety. “The plain truth is [that] an *enlightened mind*, and not *raised affections*, ought always to be the guide of those who call themselves men; and this, in the affairs of religion, as well as other things.”⁴⁵ One should not conclude from this that Edwards denigrated the mind, as will become evident in the subsequent analysis of his treatise. George Marsden is quick to point out that “as any perusal of Edwards’ sermons will confirm, Edwards’ exaltation of the affections was never at the expense of reason.”⁴⁶

By the end of 1743, Gaustad observes, “all the principles, even most of the details, of criticism of the revival had been established. The Great Awakening was dead, although many were trying to force air into its lungs while others were still hacking at the corpse whenever possible.”⁴⁷

Numerous explanations for the diminishing influence of the revival have been suggested, and Edwards had his own opinion. But Gaustad looks at what happened with the common sense of a historian:

From our vantage point, no special perspicacity is required to conclude that the religious intensity of 1741 could not long be maintained. The dreadful concerns, the traumatic awakenings, the accelerated devotion—these by their nature are of limited duration. The fever pitch must soon pass, else the patient dies. . . . The ebb of this flood of revivalism would seem then to require no elaborate explanation: it declined simply because it had to, because society could not maintain itself in so great a disequilibrium.⁴⁸

Gaustad may be right, but one cannot ignore the devastating effects of unbridled fanaticism and emotionalism (see below).

⁴⁴Ibid., 72.

⁴⁵Cited in George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 281.

⁴⁶Ibid., 282.

⁴⁷Gaustad, *Great Awakening in New England*, 79.

⁴⁸Ibid., 61–62.

Edwards' Defense of the Awakening

Throughout the revivals and well into their aftermath, Edwards consistently defended the work as being, in general, of divine origin. He disapproved of “enthusiasm,” subjectivism, and those excesses which Davenport insisted were sure signs of the Spirit’s work, but did not believe these peripheral problems invalidated the legitimacy of what God was doing.

In hopes of putting an end to what they deemed extravagant and “enthusiastic” behavior on the part of a number of students, the administration at Yale invited Edwards to deliver the commencement speech on September 10, 1741. What they heard instead was a spirited defense, in general, of the spiritual authenticity of the revival.

Edwards later expanded on the work and published it that same year with a preface by the Rev. William Cooper of Boston. The complete title is:

*The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God, Applied to that Uncommon Operation that has lately Appeared on the Minds of Many of the People of This Land: With a Particular Consideration of the Extraordinary Circumstances with Which this Work Is Attended.*⁴⁹

Edwards’ design was “to show what are the true, certain, and distinguishing evidences of a work of the Spirit of God, by which we may safely proceed in judging of any operation we find in ourselves, or see in others.”⁵⁰

His approach was twofold. He began with what we might call “Negative Signs,” or events, experiences, and religious phenomena from which we may conclude *nothing*. One is not free to deduce from the presence of these occurrences either that the Holy Spirit produced them or that he did not. They may well be the fruit of the Spirit’s activity, but then again they may just as easily be the result of human weakness or emotional instability or the product of a manipulative evangelist. Scripture simply doesn’t provide explicit guidelines by which we may know.

⁴⁹The version of *Distinguishing Marks* used here is found in *Jonathan Edwards on Revival*, 75–147. See also Edwards, “The Distinguishing Marks,” in Goen, ed., *Great Awakening*, 213–288.

⁵⁰Edwards, *Distinguishing Marks*, 87.

Edwards then turned to those signs which are sure and certain evidence of the Spirit's work. He proceeds "to show positively what are the sure, distinguishing Scripture evidences and marks of a work of the Spirit of God, by which we may proceed in judging of any operation we find in ourselves, or see among a people without danger of being misled."⁵¹ Here Edwards based his argument on principles gleaned from 1 John 4:1–6.

Responding to the Revival

The revivals surfaced an acute problem, with both theological and pastoral implications, that ultimately accounts for Edwards' writing of the *Religious Affections*. The problem is actually twofold. First, what is the nature of true religion? What constitutes the essence of that life which is pleasing and acceptable to God? Second, are there criteria by which we can differentiate between true and false religion, between the holy and the hypocrite, between authentic and spurious piety? How does one determine, if at all, who has been the object of the Spirit's saving work? Can we, with any degree of confidence, distinguish between the gracious presence of the Spirit on the one hand, and his more common, non-salvific, activity on the other?

Edwards' answer to the first question, contra Chauncy, is that "true religion, in great part, consists in holy affections."⁵² His answer to the second question comes in the form of twenty-four "signs" by which we may discern the difference between true and false spirituality. There are twelve signs that prove nothing either way. They neither demonstrate that one *has* been a recipient of the Spirit's saving work nor that one *has not*. They are experiences that could as easily come from the flesh as from the Spirit. They require no supernatural or divine source to account for their presence and are thus a poor standard by which to judge the state of one's soul.

There are twelve additional signs, however, that point us to the presence of saving grace and the essence of what it is to be a child of God. As John E. Smith has pointed out, not only are these twelve signs "tests or standards of genuine piety, but they are themselves the very substance of the religious life."⁵³

⁵¹Ibid., 109.

⁵²Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 95.

⁵³Smith, "Editor's Introduction," in Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 11.

Again, “Edwards never lost sight of the twofold task that followed: on the one hand, to defend the central importance of the affections against those who would eliminate them from religion; and on the other, to provide criteria for testing them lest religion degenerate into emotional fanaticism and false enthusiasm.”⁵⁴ Thus Edwards’ treatise “brings together two lines of thought: it identifies the activity of the Holy Spirit with the affections in the soul and at the same time shows how these same affections when properly tested enable us to discriminate genuine from false piety.”⁵⁵

Many, such as Davenport and his followers, claimed that they were recipients of the Spirit’s grace because they experienced a wide range of physical phenomena, whether shaking or shouting, laughing or weeping, or other overt displays of what they considered genuine religious zeal. Edwards himself was witness to folk who “lost their bodily strength” (i.e., fell to the ground), including his own wife, Sarah. Others testified to seeing visions, hearing voices, or otherwise feeling “impressions” on the “imagination.” At times, some would fall into a trance-like state and would remain therein for twenty-four hours or longer.

Were such physical manifestations and convulsions a sure sign of the Spirit’s work? Or were they in every instance the product of manipulative ministers who excelled in unleashing the emotions of unsuspecting sheep? Neither, said Edwards. Such physical phenomena *may* be the result of the Spirit’s encounter with the frailty of human nature. But maybe *not*. In any case they are insufficient grounds on which to base one’s assurance of salvation and by no means constitute the essence of the religious life.

As we work our way through the *Affections* we must keep in mind that Edwards will argue, against Chauncy, that true religion consists not merely of a “notional” understanding and cognitive acquiescence to truth, but of a “sense of the heart” in which lively and vigorous affections of love and delight and joy and peace and yearning are in evidence. Such affections, said Edwards, *may* be accompanied by physiological phenomena, but the presence of the latter was no sure proof of the reality of the former. We must also remember that Edwards will argue, against Davenport, that physiological phenomena, in and

⁵⁴Ibid., 17.

⁵⁵Ibid.

of themselves, prove nothing about the reality of spiritual experience. We should not be surprised, Edwards said, if the body reacts in strange and manifest ways to what the mind perceives, but bodily actions can as easily be the result of any number of purely natural (not to mention demonic), physiological, and psychological factors that have nothing to do with the special saving grace of the Holy Spirit.

Yet, in spite of the undeniable excesses and emotional extremes to which Davenport and others took the revival, Edwards saw in the midst of it a genuine work of God. He was not in the least inclined to throw out what he regarded as a live baby simply because some had dirtied the bathwater with the soil of their religious delusions.

With hindsight Edwards acknowledged that he had been somewhat naïve in his belief that as many had been saved as had claimed to be. In the aftermath of revival he had witnessed and worked with far too many folk who quickly fell away from their initial zeal and profession of faith. Without dismissing the revival altogether, he became ever more convinced that the subjective experiences and physical manifestations on which many based their assurance of salvation were a poor and misleading foundation on which to build. As Michael Haykin has pointed out, “Much of the problem lay in the fact that many of the congregation had wrong notions about the way of ascertaining a genuine conversion. Too much weight was placed upon ‘impressions on the imagination’ and specific experiences, and not enough consideration given to what Edwards calls ‘the abiding sense and temper of their hearts’ and ‘fruits of grace.’”⁵⁶

What, then, is the nature of a genuine and saving encounter with the Spirit of God? What are the criteria by which we might determine if we have been the recipients of his redemptive grace? This was the question to which Edwards applied himself in his treatise on the *Religious Affections*.⁵⁷

⁵⁶Michael A. G. Haykin, *Jonathan Edwards: The Holy Spirit in Revival* (Webster, N.Y.: Evangelical Press, 2005), 48.

⁵⁷Although there have been countless articles in scholarly journals analyzing the *Affections*, there have been few attempts to explain this remarkable work for a more popular audience. The best, in my opinion, is still that of Gerald R. McDermott, *Seeing God: Twelve Reliable Signs of True Spirituality* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995). It has been released in a second edition by Regent College Publishing under the title *Seeing God: Jonathan Edwards and Spiritual Discernment* (2000).