

Reformation  
& Revival



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However precious education may be, I see this day by day, that he alone who has experience will preach precious faith. The Spirit makes a minister, and Heaven's unique sound will be heard by none, except by the Spirit. A few warm, lively gifts, and a clear, enlightened experience; Scripture teaching that is true, strong, and cannot be gain-said; a pure willingness to teach; a blameless life, and a passion for men's conversion—these, God says, are His heart's desire, and if it is accompanied by learning and understanding, and talent, like riches to godliness they are all very precious; not making profit of the divine, free Gospel, but by pure love's constraint preaching the efficacy of the Blood.

*William Williams*

... there is an increasing awareness that the Church should have an influence—indeed, an impact—upon society. At the same time there are lamentations that the Church is so ineffective in its witness either as salt or light to the world. Is there a solution? We believe so. We believe that revival supplies the needed dynamic for Christians to become involved in the affairs of the nation with vision and vigor. Out of the eighteenth-century revival in England came dramatic changes in society. Indeed, only that revival that has an ethical dimension expressed in a passion to see society changed parallels the revivals of the Bible.

*Ted S. Rendall*

## *Jonathan Edwards on Revival, Spiritual Discernment, and God's Beauty*

Gerald R. McDermott

The dashing young minister had a captivating personality. Educated at a prestigious college, this brilliant scion of a distinguished family was a magnetic preacher. When spiritual awakening came to his area of New England, he gathered his congregation for a special meeting. Unbelievably, he preached to as many as would listen for twenty-four hours—until he collapsed. From then on he called those he regarded as truly saved “brother” and “sister,” and the rest “neighbor.” When speaking as a guest preacher in a Connecticut city, he concluded his address by sauntering down the center aisle crying out, “Come to Christ! Come to Christ! Come away [from the world]!” Then he went into a pew full of women and sang and prayed intermittently. Women joined in with him, some fainting and others erupting in hysterics. This continued into the evening, when he marched off through the streets singing at the top of his lungs.

After the Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggert fiascoes of the late eighties, American evangelicals shudder when they hear a story like this one. Are they to be subjected to further embarrassment? Has another prominent preacher smeared by association the reputations of thousands of faithful ministers and millions of their parishioners?

American evangelicals in the nineties need not worry. James Davenport's religious antics took place two hundred fifty years ago. But Jonathan Edwards (1703-58) worried. Edwards was a pastor in Western Massachusetts whose theological and philosophical writings have since been recognized as among the greatest achievements in the history of American thought. As a prominent leader of the momentous religious revivals (the Great Awakening) that swept up and down the thirteen colonies in the 1740s, he was deter-

mined that the religious shenanigans staged by Davenport and others like him not be used by those opposed to the Awakening to characterize all those who had been touched by it. Edwards was convinced that the Awakening was a work of the Spirit of God. Its reputation had been sullied by egotistical leaders like Davenport, and many were led astray by false teachings. But the Spirit had moved nonetheless, and thousands were experiencing true and vital religion as a result.

To help protect future generations against similar problems, and to teach spiritual discernment to participants in future revivals, Edwards wrote *Religious Affections* (1746). Harvard historian Perry Miller called this book the greatest work of religious psychology ever penned on American soil. Some consider it the most profound guide to spiritual discernment in the history of Christian thought. Edwards's object in this work was to draw the fine line between true and false religion; he aimed to so describe the nature of genuine religious experience that both outsiders and insiders to evangelical Christianity could distinguish between the Holy Spirit's work and its counterfeits.

Edwards's distinctions are as helpful today as they were during the Great Awakening. Like their eighteenth-century predecessors, American evangelicals at the end of the twentieth century have enjoyed spiritual awakening and renewal as a result of multiplied works of God's Spirit. But "the virtual marginalization of Scripture within power evangelicalism" (Alister McGrath) suggests that evangelicals in the 1990s can be as theologically confused as were Davenport and his followers two and a half centuries ago. *Religious Affections* outlines biblical and theological criteria that can replace confusion with clarity; by use of its distinctions between true and false spirituality, evangelicals can "test the spirits" (1 John 4:1) of what passes for true religion today.

### **Twelve Unreliable Signs**

Edwards first outlined twelve criteria that are typically but wrongly used to determine the validity of a person's spirituality. Each one of these is unreliable, he claimed. The first six involve religious experience: intense religious feeling, many religious feelings at the same time, a certain sequence in these feelings (from conviction of sin to comfort of Salvation, for example), sensing that these feelings are not internally produced, having Scriptures come to mind miraculously, and experiencing physical manifestations. Edwards argued that none of these is a reliable indication of the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Regeneration). Many true Christians have these feelings and experiences, but so do many people who have never been born again.

Edwards said the same about four criteria involving religious behavior: talking a lot about God and religion, frequent and passionate praise for God, the appearance of love, and zealous or time-consuming devotion to religious activities. None of these is a sure sign of true spirituality. Finally, even assurance of salvation is an unreliable sign. Some are convinced that they are going to heaven, and others may believe the same about them. But look at the Pharisees, Edwards reasoned. They and their admirers were sure they had found the fast track to glory, but Jesus said they were blind guides to hell.

### **The Twelve Reliable Signs**

Edwards then proceeded to describe twelve reliable signs of true spirituality. They range from a divine and supernatural (rather than natural or psychological) source, and attraction to God and His ways for their own sake, to deep-seated conviction of the truths of Scripture, and humility. They also include a change of one's inner nature, fear of God, a Christ-like spirit, balance, hunger for God,

and "Christian practice" (which involves surrender, perseverance, suffering and obedience).

There isn't space in this article to describe all twelve of these signs in any detail. But I will discuss one that perhaps best illustrates Edwards's distinctive approach to spirituality—life in God in which we enjoy the vision of God's beauty.

### A New Knowing

For Edwards, the heart of true Christian spirituality is a new kind of knowing. It is a knowing of the heart, in which the eyes of the heart are opened to see the beauty of God's holiness. Now it is easy to misunderstand Edwards at this point. By "seeing" he does not mean seeing a mystical vision or hearing a voice. Nor does he mean acquiring intellectual information or doctrine, like the knowledge that a circle is different from a square, or even that Jesus died for our sins.

The knowing that true grace brings is a spiritual and supernatural understanding of divine things. Because it is spiritual, those who don't have the Spirit cannot participate in this knowing. In Paul's words, "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (1 Cor. 2:14).

How are we to understand a knowing that can be experienced by some but not by others? It may be helpful to compare this knowing of divine things to knowing artistic beauty.

Beauty is something that can be known only by those who enjoy it. When I was a high school student, an aesthetically inclined teacher took me to the Whitney Museum of Modern Art in New York City. While he gazed with love and delight at one painting after another, I impatiently looked at my watch, wondering how long I was going to

have to suffer through this boring ordeal. I saw the same paintings my teacher saw, but I did not see their beauty. I could not "see" because my heart and my mind didn't have the aesthetic capacity to enjoy the art. Knowledge of the beauty of divine things is remarkably similar. People without the Spirit don't see the glory of God and Christ because they are not *able* to. Their eyes have not been opened to divine beauty, so they cannot enjoy it, much less see it. The beauty of divine things can be seen only by those who enjoy it, just as the beauty of art can be seen only by those who have the capacity to enjoy it.

### A Seeing

The Scriptures often describe the knowing of the regenerate as a kind of seeing. John writes, "No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him," and "the one who does evil has not seen God" (1 John 3:6; 3 John 11). He says that "everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him, may have eternal life," and records Jesus' suggestive statement that "I came into this world, that those who do not see may see" (John 6:40; 9:39).

I remember that when I first came to a saving knowledge of Christ as a freshman in college, it was "seeing" Christ hanging crucified on the cross that stopped me dead in my tracks. Since I had been raised as a Catholic, I had seen crucifixes before, and even heard homilies on the love of God shown in the cross. But this knowledge had never been "quickened" to me; it had never become real for me. For some reason on that spring night in 1971, the mental image of Jesus hanging on the cross, offering His body for my Salvation, blew me away. What had been simply an intellectual notion suddenly became new supernatural knowledge. I became convinced that this Jesus was real and true, and was overwhelmed by His patient love for me. It amazed me that Jesus had not coerced me into submission, but had

waited patiently—and painfully—for me during the years I was ignoring Him. This was a knowledge that was also a seeing—but a new kind of seeing that made real what had previously been only a lifeless concept in my memory. Christ and His way of Salvation had become real and beautiful to me, and knowledge of this reality melted my heart.

According to the Scriptures, I was given *light* that showed me the glory of Christ. In the beautiful words of 2 Corinthians 4:6, “For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” It is this very light which unbelievers do not have; the absence of this light keeps them from seeing the living God: “And even if our Gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:3-4).

### An Experience

If supernatural knowledge of the things of God is a seeing, according to Edwards, it is also an experience. The Scriptures represent it as a knowing that one can relish, taste and feel. To illustrate the difference between mere intellectual knowing and this experiential knowing, I'll use the illustration of knowing what a mango is like. Someone who has tasted a mango knows far more about it than someone who has just looked at it or felt it. Similarly, knowing God is an experiential knowing. Paul likens it to smelling an aroma: “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place” (2 Cor. 2:14), while Peter and the Psalmist compare it to tasting food: “Like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the Word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have

tasted the kindness of the Lord” (1 Peter 2:2-3); “O taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps. 34:8). To know the beauty of Christ is to smell His aroma and to taste His love.

That knowing the living God is far more than just knowing things about Him was made real to me shortly after my conversion by watching my friend Sandy. During a church service she was often moved to tears of joy. When I asked her what was going on, she smiled through her tears and said, “He’s just so good, and so beautiful!” Sandy was experiencing deep feelings of joy and delight from knowing God. She was tasting the glory of God.

Edwards didn’t mean to imply that faith is not genuine unless it is accompanied by feelings. After all, Paul warned us that “we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7). Even the greatest saints in the history of the church found that most of the time God’s presence is *not* made tangibly evident. Nevertheless, they have testified that knowing God is also, at times, enjoying God. True grace gives one knowledge of God that is experienced as well as received by faith.

### The Content of This Knowing

For Edwards, then, the new knowing is a kind of seeing and tasting. But what does the saint see? *What* does the saint know that is new?

The answer is the glory or beauty of divine things. This is what sets the saint apart from all others. Others may also see divine things, but they don’t see their beauty or glory. Just as I saw the paintings at the Whitney Museum but didn’t see their beauty, the unregenerate may see or know divine things (some don’t ever see divine things at all) but they never see their beauty—which is the beauty of holiness. According to Edwards, this is the glory that the Bible says is the central thing that makes God and His ways attractive—that lures humans in love to Him. This is the light that makes the person of Jesus so ravishingly beauti-

ful, that has drawn the hearts of millions to Himself for the last two millennia. This is the brightness that all saints see in comparison to which their own hearts appear filthy.

But it is not just the beauty of God Himself that the saint knows and sees. Once he has caught a glimpse of the beauty of the Godhead, everything else in life—all the world and all of existence—takes on a new color. Everywhere one looks, there is beauty.

When I came home from college one warm spring night, my brother met me at the door. John had been a cynical intellectual in the years before this. But as soon as I opened the door and looked into his eyes, I knew something was different. There was a light in John's eyes that had never been there before. He had seen something that now *changed his vision of everything*. "Gerry, it's hard to explain," he told me, "but this changes everything. I can't see anything now the way I used to." Over the next few weeks I saw the change in his heart and life, and he told me of the new love that he had experienced in Christ. Since that evening more than twenty years ago, his life has been transformed; his approach to life, and the way the world looks, have changed because of this new vision.

C. S. Lewis had a similar experience. During the months when he was being drawn to Christ, he read a book by George MacDonald that for the first time in his life gave him a glimpse of holiness. This glimpse made everything else in his world look different.

Up till now each visitation of Joy had left the common world momentarily a desert—"The first touch of the earth went nigh to kill." Even when real clouds or trees had been the material of the vision, they had been so only by reminding me of another world; and I did not like the return to ours. But now I saw the bright shadow [of holiness] coming out of the book into the real world and resting there, trans-

forming all common things and yet itself unchanged. Or, more accurately, I saw the common things drawn into the bright shadow.<sup>1</sup>

Edwards said that because they have seen the beauty of God, saints see a certain beauty or attractiveness in the ways and acts of God. The Word of God becomes sweet and at times even beautiful; the way of Salvation through the life, death and resurrection of Christ appears incomparably wondrous; the evil of sin seems deeper and darker than ever imagined before conversion. The world of nature takes on a new beauty.

Last year I was challenged by one of Richard Foster's books to meditate on the creation. I chose a leaf from a tree in my front yard. I spent a full ten minutes studying the intricate design and delicate coloring of this leaf. What I had previously ignored now appeared beautiful after considering its intricate design, yet simplicity of form. Considering the Mind that created the near-infinite number of leaves like this one, and the obvious physical beauty of nature, filled me with awe. This wasn't a leaf formed like trillions of others by the random forces of nature, but one of the innumerable creations of an infinite Being full of luminous love. To think that the beauty of most leaves is never appreciated by anyone, and yet the God of love had created an unthinkable number of similar leaves—every one beautiful and equally complex—was too much to fathom. I was dazzled by the beauty of it all, and the gargantuan dimensions of that beauty. But I would never have been dazzled by this leaf if I had not first known the beauty of God in His holy love for sinful humanity. Knowing that same God who created this beautiful world makes this world all the more spectacular.

### Is This Only for the Spiritually Elite?

Edwards's description of true spirituality as a new "see-

ing” may lead some to think that he limited this experience to super-spiritual mystics or experts in theology. It may sound like his spirituality is beyond the reach of the ordinary Christian.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Edwards said this is an experience for every saint—that is, every true Christian. No special education is needed. Jesus, he noted, thanked God that He had “hidden infants” (Matt. 11:25). Paul told the Corinthians, “Not many [of you were] wise according to the flesh” (1 Cor. 1:26). It doesn’t take a college degree to see the beauty of God’s glory. Nathan Cole was a simple carpenter and farmer in the mid-eighteenth century. He, too, was overwhelmed by the beauty of Jesus, and this seeing made all the world look different:

I could say, “O my God,” and then I could think of no expression good enough to speak to Him, he was altogether-lovely and then I would fall down into a muse [rapt wonder]. . . . now every thing praised God; the trees, the stone, the walls of the house and every thing I could set my eyes on, they all praised God.

If true spirituality required training in mysticism or theology, then it would indeed be limited to a chosen few. But God in His goodness has made it available to both factory workers and university professors. It is a knowing that does not require a long process of thinking. Since it is something like a taste or disposition—we could also call it a spirit or habit of the mind—it guides one’s behavior easily and intuitively, without requiring elaborate reasoning. The simple Christian can therefore come to a wise decision about behavior (how to act, say, with Christian humility and love) far more readily and precisely than someone without the Spirit who diligently investigates what might be a “Christian response.”

George Gywnn was the janitor who cleaned a school which I served as principal. George never went beyond high school, but he is one of the wisest men I have ever met. He has walked closely with God for many years, spending hours daily in Bible study and prayer. His life radiates with joy and love. On many occasions when I faced a difficult decision concerning a rebellious student, angry parent or cantankerous board member, I asked George for advice. George would usually say that he wanted to pray about the situation. Soon thereafter he would return with a word that was typically simple but incisive. He had a way of seeing clearly, and seemingly effortlessly, Christian principles that applied to complex situations. Following his advice almost invariably brought peaceful resolution to difficult problems.

George didn’t need hours or days to figure out a Christian perspective on a problem. He had a holy disposition that gave him what might be called holy intuition. Like George, every regenerate person has been given a spiritual understanding of divine things. This understanding doesn’t come from months of study and analysis. It may follow months of seeking God through the study of Scripture and Christian literature. That study, however, prepares the soul and mind to receive a knowledge that is not formed by study. This new knowing is a seeing of God and His ways that changes the way everything else in life looks. Now a way of seeing—a holy intuition—is available that is a new source of guidance for living one’s life.

#### An Evangelical Spirituality

Since the televangelist scandals of the 1980s and the Waco debacle of 1993, evangelicals have seen all too clearly that religious deception is not uncommon, and sincere spirituality can degenerate into destructive fanaticism. But the conflicting claims of America’s bewildering tangle of

spiritualities have left many evangelicals confused. Typically narrow analyses of cults and the New Age, and moralistic or sentimentalized books on discipleship, often fail to provide the searching discernment needed to distinguish the bogus from the genuine, shepherds from manipulators, churches from cults. Edwards's *Religious Affections*, on the other hand, is a penetrating manual of discernment the church may need more than ever as it approaches the next century.

But Edwards offers us more than just a tool to discern true from false spiritualities. In a time when evangelicals are looking outside their own traditions for spiritual direction, and when much of what they find consists of simplistic platitudes, easy believism or religious hype, Edwards can provide an evangelical spirituality that is both faithful to Scripture and uniquely attractive. Edwards, perhaps more than any other spiritual master in the history of Christian thought, grounded Christian spirituality in aesthetic experience. True faith, he showed two and a half centuries ago, is enjoyment of God's beauty. Students of Edwards have been enjoying that vision ever since.

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**Endnote**

- 1 C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955), 170-71.