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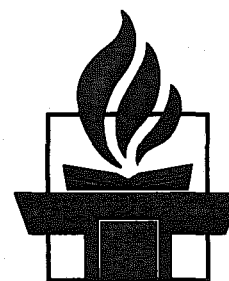
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Reformation  
& Revival



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What are the distinguishing marks of God's saving work in the soul? How do we become children of God, and how can we be assured of our standing before Him? Such questions, always important to theologians and to individual sinners, achieve public prominence during times of revival. Neighbors discuss them over the back fence; families and churches divide over different answers to them; and even secular society opens its sleepy eyes to note briefly the fundamental issues of vital religion. During the Great Awakening all of New England woke up to attend to the burning question, "What makes a person a Christian?" As the most intellectually gifted spokesman for the revival party, Jonathan Edwards articulated the evangelical position in terms that still attract serious students of the grace of God.

What makes a person a Christian? From the time of Luther onward, Protestant orthodoxy has struggled to define and maintain the biblical relationship between three doctrines which answer that question from different perspectives. They are (1) Regeneration by the Holy Spirit, (2) Justification by faith alone, and (3) Sanctification, or the Christian's life of love. Sometimes this had been viewed as a balancing act in which divergent doctrines act as counterweights to each other's excesses. Thus, the doctrine of Regeneration balances our tendency to take credit for justifying faith because supernatural Regeneration is the cause of faith. Likewise, a biblical emphasis on loving obedience keeps us from thinking that justified sinners may live for the Devil and still go to heaven. Finally, the doctrines of Justification by faith and Regeneration counteract our natural inclination to think that we can earn our Salvation by a life of love. Balance, balance, balance. But balancing acts are inherently unstable, so the church has tended to lean (or fall) in one direction or the other.

It is the genius of Edwards that he was able to see the organic unity which binds these three doctrines into a harmonious and intrinsically balanced whole. At the same time

Edwards' formulation of these doctrines avoids the twin pitfalls of sterile rationalism and irrational enthusiasm, pitfalls which have continued to trap many from his day to ours. According to Edwards the key to a unified understanding of Salvation is the believer's new sense of divine and spiritual realities.

#### What Is the New Sense?

Jonathan Edwards was not the only seventeenth-century clergyman to speak of Salvation in terms of a new sense. Preachers commonly exhorted sinners to look to Jesus because a new sight of the Savior is an especial mark of converted people. We must, however, distinguish the teaching of Edwards from two competing interpretations of a new sight of Christ. During the Great Awakening Edwards found it necessary to defend evangelical doctrine against the attacks by the rationalists (such as Charles Chauncy) and distortions by the enthusiasts (such as James Davenport).

Charles Chauncy taught that the new sense of spiritual truth possessed by the Christian does not involve a new, creative action by God, but only a heightening of the natural powers of the soul. Edwards, on the other hand, insisted that a divine light must be supernaturally imparted to the soul. Whereas Chauncy said that the sinner needs new glasses, Edwards responded that the sinner is blind and needs new faculty of sight.

In part, Chauncy's position was a conscious reaction to the other major threat to evangelical doctrine during the Great Awakening—enthusiasm. Although the enthusiasts properly looked for a direct act of God in the conversion of sinners, they misunderstood the nature of the new sense. Many subjects of the awakening reported unusual experiences, which Edwards both reported and critiqued in *Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* and *Religious Affections*. Some saw visions of Christ or of heaven; others heard a voice reassuring them

that they were truly children of God. Were such experiences revelations from God or delusions of the Devil? Were they the result of the Christian's new sense, or was Satan masquerading as an angel of light?

As an astute student of religious psychology, Edwards refused to endorse either horn of the dilemma. He said that the heightened sense of joy described by many converts could result either from a genuine experience of God's grace or from a superficial assurance of Salvation. Great joy in Christ is normal for the true child of God, but unconverted sinners who are falsely persuaded that they are saved will also feel a natural sense of relief and happiness. How then shall we explain the visions, the voices, and the other unusual phenomena of the revival? They are not necessarily, said Edwards, either from God or the Devil. Such phenomena are natural productions of the human imagination under the influence of great religious excitement regardless of whether or not the excitement was a truly spiritual joy. People who have a strong impression on their imaginations of a warm and welcoming Christ, should neither fear their experiences (as if they were satanic), nor trust in them (as if they came directly from God), because the Christian's new sense of divine and spiritual realities differs greatly from any production of the imagination.

The new sense of the heart is like the taste of honey; no description of its sweetness can compare with the sensation of a spoonful on the tongue. Perhaps the best way to begin our consideration of it is to distance the new sense from the highest experiences of the unconverted. An unsaved man may find pleasure in the beauty and harmony of well-ordered social relations, and he may concur with the whole law of God. If he thinks that he is saved (either because of a strong impression on his imagination or because of a misapplied text of Scripture), he will rejoice in God's mercy, but if he thinks he is condemned, he may still acknowledge that God is just, even

though he is terrified at the prospect of judgment. No unsaved person, however, is able to delight in the glory of Jesus Christ as He is revealed in the Gospel, and that is the heart of the Christian's new sense. Although the new convert may have known the truths of the Gospel for many years, now they shine with a fresh light and beauty. Once they were dull doctrines which he was required to believe; now they illuminate all of life and bring joy to his heart. The unconverted professor of religion generally wants to talk about his experiences, but the new man in Christ wants to talk about the Savior who has captured his mind and heart.

#### **The New Sense and Regeneration**

How is the new sense related to Regeneration? According to Edwards Regeneration is not an influence of the Holy Spirit acting on the heart from outside. Rather, the new life of the Christian is simply the life of the Holy Spirit who has come to live within him. When the Spirit of God enters a human soul, He does not create any new human faculties. He does not give a new faculty of understanding or a new faculty of loving. Rather, He gives a *new*, supernatural *orientation* to the human capacities we already have; the Holy Spirit creates a *new disposition* of the heart. The unsaved man lives according to the flesh, that is, according to his natural human desires for bodily pleasure, public honor, and so on. The regenerate man has, in addition, a new set of spiritual desires given by the indwelling Holy Spirit. These new desires are centered on Jesus Christ whom he now sees in a supernatural light.

What, then, is Regeneration? It is the work of the Holy Spirit by which He enters the human heart, giving a new sense of the glory of Christ and a new set of spiritual desires centered on Christ.

#### **The New Sense and Justification**

Edwards carefully defined the role and the nature of justi-

fying faith. Justification is God's declaration that the righteousness of Christ has been credited to the account of believing sinners. But why are we justified by faith rather than by love or by some other spiritual grace? Faith, said Edwards, is not merely the instrument by which we lay hold of Salvation; it is the means by which we are united to Christ. Union with Christ is effected on God's part by the Holy Spirit entering our hearts at Regeneration and on our part by faith. For that reason the Scripture defines faith as coming to Christ or receiving Christ. When a sinner is united to Christ, he is, in effect, married to Christ. Just as a husband shares his assets with his wife and assumes her debts, so Christ gives us His righteousness and takes our sins. Neither love nor any other spiritual grace involves this coming to Christ, this reception of Christ, this union with Christ that is the essence of faith. Therefore sinners are justified by faith alone.

But what motivates a sinner to come to Christ? Even though Edwards preached vigorously on the terrors of hell, he insisted that sinners were more often moved to faith when he proclaimed the love and mercy of God. The thought of judgment to come may prepare the heart for Salvation, but it can never by itself produce faith. Faith comes from a new sense of the divine glory of Christ and the Gospel. People come to Christ when they see Him in a new light; they are drawn to Him, not driven to Him. Thus, the new sense, which is the immediate product of Regeneration, is also the immediate source of justifying faith in Christ.

#### **The New Sense and Sanctification**

Scripture commands us to "Pursue peace with all men, and the Sanctification without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). This Sanctification, which is necessary for seeing the Lord, cannot be positional Sanctification, because we do not pursue our position in Christ. (Positional Sanctification means that all Christians are set apart by God and are there-

fore called saints or holy ones.) Only an actual Sanctification can be the object of diligent effort. Obviously, since God justifies sinners, holiness is not a prerequisite for Justification, but holiness is a necessary consequence of Salvation. Those who pursue holiness are, in fact, the justified. Those who do not will never see the Lord, no matter how loud their professions may be. But how is the pursuit of holiness related to the other aspects of Salvation? The typical answer is that since Christ has saved us, we are grateful to Him, and our loving gratitude is the motive for seeking to please Him. That is true as far as it goes, but Edwards saw that it is not enough.

Again the believer's new sense of divine things is the clue that enables us to relate Sanctification to Justification and Regeneration. Edwards noted that our actions are always determined by the affection that is strongest at the moment of our choosing. The word affection, in Edwards and other authors of the period, has no modern equivalent. The affections include the emotions along with the other motivating desires and dispositions of the heart. Sometimes we act in accordance with our emotions, as when we run in fear from a charging bull. At other times we act contrary to our emotions; think of the mother who runs towards a charging bull to rescue her child who is in harm's way. Her dominant emotion is fear, but her dominating disposition is love for her child. Affection in the old sense is a very useful word because it fits the rather complex business of loving and hating much better than the more modern term, emotion. (Emotion is a thermometer that measures feeling; affection is a canvas with room to paint and blend feelings, purposes, convictions, desires and dispositions.)

If we always act according to the affection that is strongest at the moment of our choosing, what affections are necessary for holiness, and how are they produced? There is no true virtue, says Edwards, apart from loving God. Love for others and the virtuous exercise of justice and kindness toward them

come from loving God. But what does loving God entail?

There are, according to Edwards (and many other philosophers), two kinds of love. The first is benevolence, or an active desire to do good to others. The second is complacency, which in old English meant delight or enjoyment. The Salvation Army worker who helps an unknown drunk into a rescue mission may be exercising benevolence toward the drunk, but he probably does not delight in the drunk as a person or find pleasure in his company. We exercise benevolence toward God when we seek to promote His glory; we delight in Him when we see and rejoice in His glory. Perhaps you have noticed that we have come around again to the Christian's new sense of divine and spiritual things. To pursue holiness means to seek the glory of God, and the only proper motivation for such striving is the new and attractive sense of His glory which the Holy Spirit gives in Regeneration.

#### Application

Jonathan Edwards did not mean for his teaching about the new sense to be an exercise in speculative theology. Everything he wrote had practical consequences. Therefore I close with a challenge and a caution.

**1) A Challenge.** The Christian's new sense of the glory of Christ and the Gospel was not just a doctrine that Edwards found in Scripture. He also found it in himself. With Edwards Scripture always came first, but experience followed close after. For his own use he penned an intimate account of his walk with God, which was found among his papers after his death. On numerous occasions, as he walked in the woods and meditated on the great doctrines of Scripture, he was overwhelmed and moved to tears by the majesty and grace of God.

In our spiritually schizophrenic age, theology is often dry as dust and every flight of the emotions is suffused with an aura of superficial piety. On the one hand I think of a pastor with whom I wrote some resolutions for our denomination's

annual meeting. He objected to writing that we had *sensed* God's presence in our gathering. *Sense* was too strong a word, too feeling-oriented for his theology. At the other end of the affective spectrum is a Christian vocalist who regularly moves her audiences to tears with syrupy stories about trivial events in the lives of her children.

Now the challenge. Follow the example of Edwards and the teaching of Scripture, and seek to see the glory of Christ and the Gospel. Meditate on the great truths of Scripture: God's sovereign Election of sinners; the amazing condescension of Christ; God's gracious gift of the Holy Spirit and all of the blessings that flow from the life of God in our souls; the beautiful harmony of the Holy Trinity. As these immense truths fill our minds, God may use them to kindle a fire in our hearts. As Edwards insisted, grace in the heart is neither light nor heat alone, but light and heat together.

**2) A Caution.** Edwards knew that a new sense of spiritual things can easily be counterfeited. Unstable people often wrestle this truth to their own destruction. Many people in his day and in ours reassure themselves that they are saved because of certain emotionally charged experiences. If such an experience comes to them when they are not expecting a touch from God, then the very suddenness of it proves its divine origin. On the other hand, if they have been earnestly seeking God, perhaps in prayer, then their sincerity is proof that their experience is genuine. So it is that any powerful emotion provides its own validation. Unless people are well-instructed in the Scripture and humble in heart it is almost impossible to teach them to doubt their feelings.

How, then, may we know if we have been born again? Scripture gives no assurance to people who have not made a personal profession of faith in Christ, but how may we determine if our faith is genuine? We cannot see the new birth directly, but we can observe its effects. First, do we have some

sense of how wonderful Christ and the Gospel are? Second, is our faith in Christ merely fire insurance, or do we long to be made holy as Jesus is holy? Third, do our lives give evidence that we desire holiness, or is our god-talk merely a game? (Remember that according to Edwards and Scripture, our lives clearly indicate the prevailing affection of our hearts.) Since our conduct is the most visible aspect of our lives, Edwards insists that Christian practice is the chief evidence of regeneration, both to ourselves and to others.

One final word of encouragement. We have a tendency, in discussions about the marks of Regeneration, to raise the hurdles so high that only giants can clear them. I sometimes have the impression that the Puritans expected more from hypocrites than we do from our best deacons and elders. Remember that in the parable of talents, the slave who thought his master hard found that indeed he was. God wants us to come to Him with the humility of a child who loves and trusts his father and yet fears to displease him. If we come with the terrified heart of a lazy slave, we can only expect to be crushed. So come in trust; come in hope; come in confidence; come in Christ.

Rest on the promise of Him who said, "All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out" (John 6:37).

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#### Endnotes

- 1 Charles Chauncy, "The Method of the Spirit, in the Work of

- Illumination," in *Twelve Sermons on the Following Seasonable and Important Subjects . . .* (Boston: D. and J. Kneeland, 1765) 286-87.
- 2 This is the title of a sermon published by Edwards in 1734. It may be found in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, with a memoir by Sereno E. Dwight, ed. by Edward Hickman (2 vols.; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust [1834] 1974) 2:12-17.
  - 3 Chauncy, 297-99.
  - 4 Edwards, *Works*, 2:263.
  - 5 Edwards' *Dissertation Concerning the Nature of True Virtue* clearly exposes the shortcomings in the morality of the natural man. See *Works*, 1:122-42.
  - 6 Edwards, *Works*, 2:14.
  - 7 Edwards, *Works*, 1:280.
  - 8 Jonathan Edwards, notes on Galatians 5:17 in *Selections from the Unpublished Writings of Jonathan Edwards, of America*, edited by Alexander Grosart (Edinburgh: Privately Printed, 1865) 163.
  - 9 Edwards, *Selections*, 164. The idea that Adam possessed the Holy Spirit before the fall is new to some people. However, it is supported by the fact that "those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:9). Without the gracious influence of the Holy Spirit, Adam could not have enjoyed fellowship with God. When Jesus "breathed on [His apostles], and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (John 20:22), He was symbolically restoring what God had given to the first Adam (Gen. 2:7). For a further discussion of this important point see George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974 [1889 ed.]), 10-19.
  - 10 Edwards, *Works*, 1:622-54.
  - 11 Edwards, *Works*, 1:625.
  - 12 Edwards, "True Grace Distinguished from the Experience of Devils," *Works*, 2:48.

- 13 Edwards, *Religious Affections* in *Works*, 1:237; *Freedom of the Will* in *Works*, 1:4-8.
- 14 Edwards defends the propriety of benevolence and complacency toward God in chapter 2 of *The Nature of True Virtue* in *Works*, 1:125-27.
- 15 Edwards, *Works*, 2:49.
- 16 Edwards, *Works*, 1:xlvi-xlvii.
- 17 Edwards, *Works*, 1:281.
- 18 Edwards, *Religious Affections* in *Works*, 1:314-36.