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**JONATHAN EDWARDS**  
**and**  
**REVIVAL**  
**PHENOMENA**

**by**

**Barry Chant**

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# PREFACE

Over the last few years, thousands of people who had never heard of Jonathan Edwards have become familiar with his name.

This is partly due to writers like Guy Chevreau whose book *Catch the Fire*<sup>1</sup> argues for the validity of what came to be known in the 1990s as the 'Toronto blessing' by claiming that it was virtually identical to what happened during the eighteenth century Great Awakening in New England, and that the writings of Jonathan Edwards prove this to be so. It became quite common to hear Edwards being quoted as a champion of such phenomena.

Although I had previously studied some of Edwards' works, I realised that I was not familiar enough with them to know whether these claims were right or wrong. So I set myself to read his major works on revival, to summarise them, and to discover his conclusions for myself. I imagined I might finish up with a short paper on the subject. This study is the short paper!

To me, it is plain that to see Edwards as a champion of phenomena such as those evinced during movements like the 'Toronto blessing' is a dubious claim, to say the least. While Edwards was a strong advocate of a faith which stirred the affections, he saw equally clearly the dangers of focussing on the affections, rather than the content of that faith.

While he believed that genuine faith would always demonstrate 'fruit' he also saw the primary importance of the need for a sound 'root.' If the root is unsound, the tree will die, and the fruit with it.

The disappointment of the Great Awakening is that it was so short-lived. In June 1750, less than a decade after its finest hours, and 23 years after he was first engaged as pastor, Edwards was dismissed from his Northampton congregation.<sup>2</sup> Gaustad puts it like this—

The suddenness with which the blessings of heaven fell on New England soil in 1741 is comparable only to the abruptness with which those showers were withdrawn. And the ending appeared as inexplicable as the beginning. But in New England, that flood of religious anxieties, interests, reformations, excesses, exhortings, and conversions known as the Great Awakening lasted something less than two years. Its effects, to be sure, were felt in theology, denominational structure, education, and even

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<sup>1</sup> G. Chevreau, *Catch the Fire*, London: Marshall Pickering, 1994, 77; see also Patrick Dixon, *Signs of Revival* Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1994, 113ff.

<sup>2</sup> I. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: a New Biography*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987:326ff.

politics into the nineteenth century. The ‘great and extraordinary Work of God’ itself, however, was powerfully and speedily accomplished...<sup>3</sup>

It is the cause of Edwards’ dismissal which is surprising. He had come to the point of believing that it was inappropriate for people to be admitted to the communion table if they had not made a profession of saving faith in Christ. The former pastor, his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, had seen the table as a means of introducing people to the gospel and it had been his practice to allow people to take communion, even if they did not claim to be Christians. When Edwards attempted to reverse this policy, he ran into considerable opposition. The details of the church politics involved are not important here. They are not atypical of such matters. What is significant is that his dismissal took place so soon after the Awakening. How could it be that within a few short years, a town so greatly touched by the Spirit could act so strongly against a move to lift the standard of holiness at the table of the Lord?

To the end, Edwards believed that the revival had been genuine. A year after his dismissal, he still described it as a glorious work of God. But he admitted that the number of conversions was not as great as he had first thought.

He also saw that there were reasons why it had gone astray. He clearly nominated spiritual pride as a major factor. The Northampton people, so richly blessed, had become over confident, in view of the gifts and graces bestowed on them by God. They had trusted in ‘their privileges and attainments’ and had nourished spiritual pride, ‘that grand inlet of the devil in the hearts of men’ (I:cxxxi).<sup>4</sup>

There is also evidence that a preoccupation with the physical manifestations and more demonstrative aspects of the revival had been a factor in undermining it. According to Murray, Edwards came to believe that fanaticism was ‘a great stumbling-block to the revival.’<sup>5</sup>

The development of Edwards’ thought and his growing understanding of the nature of revival and the true evidence of Christian living is a fascinating study. In this volume, I have attempted to summarise in as interesting a form as possible, what Edwards wrote on this crucial theme. Certainly, my own understanding of revival and the place of the affections has been greatly enriched as a result, and many of the uncertainties I had have now been dealt with. I hope readers will feel the same.

I have drawn on the 1990s phenomenon of the ‘Toronto blessing’ to illustrate many of the points made, but any similar revival movement of the last three centuries would have done just as well.

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<sup>3</sup> E.S.Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England* Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1965:61.

<sup>4</sup> For simplicity, references to Edwards’ own writings are included in the body of the text. The first number refers to the relevant volume of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1984. The second number is the page number.

<sup>5</sup> Murray, 1987:255

My purpose in writing is to identify and encourage the genuine blessings of God. Many people have been significantly helped through revivalist meetings. But there is a justifiable concern that their experiences may be emotional rather than spiritual, and that, as a result, the benefit may be short-lived. It is crucial that we keep everything consistent with Scripture. It is by every Word of God that we live (Matthew 4:4). The stirring of the affections is exciting and encouraging but we can't live on it. It is the Scriptures that sustain us.

My plea is that we stand firm on the Word of God and evaluate everything in the light of it. When we do that, what Edwards calls truly gracious affections will find their rightful place in our lives.

Barry Chant

## CHAPTER ONE

# MANIFESTATIONS OF THE SPIRIT

Jonathan Edwards has been widely quoted both to justify and to denounce emotional manifestations of revival. Advocates of revival phenomena see Edwards as being very favourable towards them; opponents see him as equally reluctant.

Guy Chevreau, for example, has little hesitation in claiming that emotional phenomena that occurred during the Great Awakening in 1735 and the years that followed, were 'eighteenth century equivalents to the falling, resting and "slain" experiences witnessed at the [Toronto] Airport Vineyard' in the mid-1990s<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, Gary Benfold claims that Edwards is a very cautious advocate of bodily effects<sup>7</sup>.

Of course, as Edwards has been dead for two and a half centuries, what he would have said about current phenomena can only be a matter of conjecture and interpretation. Certainly, there is much in his writings that is relevant to a consideration of contemporary revival movements.

### 1 MANIFESTATIONS

On the surface, there are undoubted similarities between the bodily phenomena that occurred during the Great Awakening and the 'manifestations' that are occurring in so many places today. The hallmark of the late twentieth century 'Toronto blessing', for example, was physical expression. As it was characterised in some places by people laughing enthusiastically, often for a very long time, it was dubbed by at least one journalist 'the laughing revival.'<sup>8</sup> But a more prominent feature was probably prostration or being 'slain in the Spirit,' that is, falling to the floor, usually backwards, and lying there, sometimes for a few minutes, sometimes for hours, often in a trance-like state, 'doing carpet time.'

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<sup>6</sup> Chevreau, 1994:77; see also Patrick Dixon, *Signs of Revival* Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1994:113ff.

<sup>7</sup> G.Benfold, 'Jonathan Edwards and the 'Toronto Blessing,' *The Briefing* No 152, 7 March, 1995, in a reprint from *Evangelicals Now*, October 1994.

<sup>8</sup> eg 'Drunk on God: the Laughing Revival, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 February 1995.

People were also commonly 'drunk in the Spirit', unable to stand unaided, or to speak coherently. Other phenomena included weeping, shaking, jerking, rolling, jumping and animal noises, particularly roaring 'like a lion.'<sup>9</sup>

There is no doubt that some similar phenomena occurred in Edwards' day. In his own life, there were several specific instances of a powerful experience of Christ, although apparently none of the kind of physical demonstrations that attracted such attention in many late twentieth century Western churches. When he was a child, he was part of what he called 'a remarkable awakening' in his father's church. As a result, he was 'very much affected for many months' and experienced 'a delight in religion' that he found hard to explain. He and some friends built a 'booth' in a swamp, where they could pray. He also had a secret place of his own to which he could retire in solitude, and in which he was 'from time to time much affected' (I:xii).<sup>10</sup> At the age of 17, he experienced an 'inward, sweet sense' of divine things and an 'ardour of soul' that he found difficult to express (I:xiiiif). As a youth, he made many resolutions to improve his life, and to deepen his dedication. The 64th, written when he was nineteen years of age, reads—

Resolved, When I find those 'groanings which cannot be uttered', of which the apostles speaks, and those 'breathings of the soul for the longing it hath,' of which the Psalmist speaks, Psalm cxix.20, that I will promote them to the uttermost of my power; and that I will not be weary of earnestly endeavouring to vent my desires, nor of the repetitions of such earnestness. July 23 and Aug. 10, 1723 (I:xxii).

From this distance, it is impossible to know just what Edwards means by these 'groanings' and 'breathings of the soul.' Could it be a reference to glossolalia? There is nothing in his later writings to suggest this. But he certainly experienced an intensity of prayer that was unusual and powerful.

Some years later, at the age of 34, after the first awakening at Northampton, he had a transforming encounter with Christ. Again, his own words describe it best—

Once as I rode into the woods for my health, in 1737, having alighted from my horse in a retired place, as my manner commonly has been, to walk for divine contemplation and prayer, I had a view, that for me was extraordinary, of the glory of the Son of God, as Mediator between God and man, and his wonderful, great, full, pure and sweet grace and love, and meek and gentle condescension. This grace that appeared so calm and sweet, appeared also great above the heavens. The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent, with an excellence great enough to swallow up all thought and conception—which continued as near as I can judge, about an hour; which kept me the greater part of the time in a flood of tears, and weeping aloud. I felt an ardency of soul to be, what I know not

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<sup>9</sup> D.Roberts, *The 'Toronto' Blessing* Eastbourne: Kingsway: 1994:127ff.

<sup>10</sup> It is interesting that Edwards later saw that such affections were not necessarily a sign of grace (I:xii).



otherwise how to express, emptied and annihilated; to lie in the dust, to be full of Christ alone; to love him with a holy and pure love; to trust in him; to live upon him; to serve and follow him; and to be perfectly sanctified and made pure, with a divine and heavenly purity. I have several other times had views very much of the same nature, and which have had the same effects.

I have, many times, had a sense of the glory of the Third Person of the Trinity, and his office as Sanctifier; in his holy operations, communicating divine light and life to the soul. God in the communications of his Holy Spirit, has appeared as an infinite fountain of divine glory and sweetness; being full, and sufficient to fill and satisfy the soul; pouring forth itself in sweet communications; like the sun in its glory, sweetly and pleasantly diffusing light and life. And I have sometimes an affecting sense of the excellency of the word of God as a word of life; as the light of life; a sweet, excellent, life-giving word; accompanied with a thirsting after that word, that it might dwell richly in my heart (I:xlvi)

That Edwards was deeply affected by his revelation of Christ is obvious from his weeping profusely for about an hour. That he was also in control of his faculties is also made plain by the description of his thoughts and feelings during this time.

A year later, when he was meditating one Saturday night on his sermon for the next day, he was moved to such an extent by his sense of the blessing of living according to the will of God that he began to weep aloud so passionately that he closed the doors to prevent interruption (I:xlvi). On another occasion, George Whitefield recorded that Edwards wept the whole time he was preaching.<sup>11</sup>

In the 1735 visitation, Edwards notes how people whose eyes had been opened would experience such 'joyful surprise' that they would break forth into laughter and crying at the same time, their tears 'issuing like a flood, and intermingling with loud weeping.' Others would burst forth in a loud voice (I:354).

Describing events in 1741, Edwards wrote—

The whole room was full of nothing but outcries, faintings and the like. Others soon heard of it in several parts of the town, and came to them, so that many of them were overpowered in like manner, and it continued thus for some hours...

It was a very frequent thing, to see a house full of outcries, faintings, convulsions, and such like, both with distress, and also with admiration and joy. It was not the manner here, to hold meetings all night... nor was it common to continue them till very late in the night; but it was pretty often so, and there were some that were so affected, and their bodies so overcome, that they could not go home, but were obliged to stay all night where they were...

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<sup>11</sup> Murray, 1987:162.

There were very extraordinary effects of Mr Buell's labours; the people were exceedingly moved, crying out in great numbers in the meeting-house, and a great part of the congregation commonly staying in the house of God, for hours after a public service... there was indeed a very great revival of religion (I:lviiiif).

It is easy to come to the conclusion that these phenomena were of the same nature as those being experienced in some contemporary charismatic gatherings. The terminology is similar and the reported behaviour seems identical. The only notable exceptions are laughing, animal noises and glossolalia.

But there are also some very important distinctions.

## 2 CONVERSIONS

Firstly, and most importantly, the Great Awakening was marked primarily by conversions. This is indicated in the title of Edwards' first major work on the revival—*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 New Hampshire in New England in a letter to the Rev Dr Colman of Boston*—which he wrote at the age of 33. The title makes it plain where his focus lay. The original volume was actually written as a letter to Benjamin Colman, a ministerial friend in Boston. Colman was so impressed, he arranged for a copy to be sent to two noted English Conformist leaders, John Guyse and Isaac Watts who ultimately published it there.<sup>12</sup> In his preface to the English publication, Isaac Watts, refers to 'the conversion of a great multitude of souls in a short space of time, turning them from a formal, cold, and careless profession of Christianity, to the lively exercise of every Christian grace, and the powerful practice of our holy religion' (I:344).

Edwards goes to great pains to point out that both in 1735 and 1741, conversion to Christ was the primary feature of the Awakening. The first visitation began in the small New England community of Northampton in late 1734. There were only 200 families in the town which was less than 100 years old (I:346).

And then it was, in the latter part of December, that the Spirit of God began extraordinarily to set in, and wonderfully to work amongst us; and there were, very suddenly, one after another, five or six persons, who were to all appearances savingly converted, and some of them wrought upon in a very remarkable manner (I:348).

Edwards goes on to detail examples of what he means. A profligate young woman experiences 'a glorious work of God's infinite power and sovereign grace.' Soon the whole town is talking about the things of God. Christianity takes precedence over the world. Indeed, 'there was scarcely a single person in the town, old or young, left unconcerned about the great things of the eternal world.' So 'the work

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<sup>12</sup> Murray, 1987: 117ff.

of conversion was carried on in a most astonishing manner, and increased more and more; souls did as it were come by flocks to Jesus Christ.'

There was 'a glorious alteration' in the town; 'it was never so full of love, nor of joy, and yet so full of distress, as it was then.' People crowded into the meeting-house on Sundays. Public praise took on a new lease of life. The singing had never before been so elevated. And, of great significance, the young people of the town were transformed. 'They were wont to spend the time in talking of the excellency and dying love of Jesus Christ, the glory of the way of salvation, the wonderful, free, and sovereign grace of God, his glorious work in the salvation of a soul....'

Overall, some three hundred people turned to Christ in a period of about six months (I:xlili, 350)—not a huge number, but a significant proportion of a town of probably not more than fourteen hundred inhabitants.<sup>13</sup> Those affected included all ages, from children to the elderly.

In 1740, similar events occurred. This time, the movement was more widespread. The English evangelist George Whitefield, was involved and instrumental in leading many to Christ. But the work was not his alone. Edwards saw this second wave as more significant than the first.

Conversions were frequently wrought more sensibly and visibly; the impressions stronger and more manifest by their external effects; the progress of the Spirit of God in conviction, from step to step, more apparent; and the transition from one state to another, more sensible and plain, so that it might, in many instances, be as it were seen by bystanders (I:lix).

Edwards gives considerable attention to describing the process by which people were convicted of sin by the Holy Spirit, sometimes seeking peace with God for days at a time.

He goes into great detail to explain the various phases of conviction and ultimate conversion (I:350ff). First, people are awakened 'with a sense of their miserable condition' and 'the danger they are in of perishing eternally.' This results either in an immediate change or an 'earnest application to the means of salvation.' There is a great variety, he explains, to 'the degree of fear and trouble' which people experience before attaining 'comfortable evidences of pardon.' Normally, their apprehension of judgement increases, the nearer they come to deliverance, a factor aggravated by Satan. 'Persons are sometimes brought to the borders of despair, and it looks as black as midnight to them a little before the day dawns in their souls.' God's purpose is to bring them to a sense of absolute dependence on His sovereign power and grace before bringing them relief. Some reach such depths of despair that they lose hope, feeling that they are unworthy of salvation and that see their condemnation as righteous and just. But 'more frequently,

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<sup>13</sup> Murray, 1987: 89.

Christ is distinctly made the object of the mind, in his all-sufficiency and willingness to save sinners.’

Edwards describes these processes towards conversion in considerable detail. There is no doubt that he sees the phenomena already mentioned as being expressions of either conviction of sin or delight in God’s grace. They are never seen in a vacuum or as an end in themselves. Whenever he mentions the expression of the affections or unusual bodily behaviour, it is always in this context.

It seems likely that Edwards may have read more into some of the outward manifestations than the people themselves may have understood. The language used is clearly that of Edwards himself. Yet there seems little reason to doubt the general truth of what he argues. For Edwards, the manifestations were of little significance in comparison with the holiness of God, the glories of the gospel and the thrill of people being ‘savingly wrought upon’ through Christ.

In all revival movements, there are always some conversions. In the 1990s, some churches reported significant increase.<sup>14</sup> In places, hundreds of conversions were recorded, notably at Pensacola, where the Brownsville Assembly of God church recorded over 100,000 professions of faith in a two-year period.<sup>15</sup> But these were exceptions. Generally, the ‘Blessing’ was seen as a time of refreshing for Christians rather than regeneration of sinners.<sup>16</sup> This was a matter of concern to some observers. David Wilkerson, for example, sees revival only in terms of harvest and dismisses any manifestation attributed to the Holy Spirit unless it also produces ‘a broken-heartedness for the lost and unsaved’ and results in a deep and earnest desire to reach a lost and dying world.<sup>17</sup>

### 3 SARAH EDWARDS’ EXPERIENCES

The centrality of Christ in Christian experience is clearly illustrated in the detailed testimony given by Edwards’ wife Sarah. Her story appears twice, once in her own words, in the *Faithful Narrative* (I:lxii ff) and once anonymously, retold by Edwards in his *Some Thoughts concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* (I:376).

From childhood, Sarah had been known for her devotion to God and her delight in His presence. She loved to spend time with Him and valued the things of God more than ‘the richest of treasures.’<sup>18</sup> On Tuesday 19 January, 1742, when she

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<sup>14</sup> For example, Karl Strader, pastor of an Assembly of God church in Florida saw a huge increase after a visit by Rodney Howard-Browne in 1994.

<sup>15</sup> Waugh, 1998:136.

<sup>16</sup> W. Jackson, *What in the World is Happening to Us?* Urbana: Vineyard, 1994:18;

<sup>17</sup> David Wilkerson, ‘The Latter Rain: When the True Revival Comes’, *Times Square Church Pulpit Series*, New York: World Challenge, 1-9-1995.

<sup>18</sup> Murray, 1987:92.

was 32 years old, Sarah was feeling very 'low in grace.' So she resolved to spend time in solitary prayer, which she did. During this time, the words of Romans 8:34 were strongly impressed upon her, and 'melted and overcome by the sweetness of this assurance' she began to weep aloud. She experienced a 'delightful sense of the immediate presence and love of God.'

The peace and happiness, which I hereupon felt, was altogether inexpressible. It seemed to be that which came from heaven; to be eternal and unchangeable. I seemed to be lifted above earth and hell, out of the reach of everything here below, so I could look on all the rage and enmity of men or devils, with a kind of holy indifference, and an undisturbed tranquility. At the same time, I felt compassion and love for all mankind, and a deep abasement of soul, under a sense of my own unworthiness.

This sense of divine goodness remained with her for several days, including Sunday, during which she enjoyed worship more than usual. The next Tuesday, while Edwards was away in Leicester, honouring one of many invitations he was receiving, a young preacher named Samuel Buell visited Northampton. He had only been licensed to preach the previous September.<sup>19</sup>

On Wednesday 27 January, after a lecture by Buell, Sarah Edwards was deeply moved. She and others remained in the meeting house for a further three hours and during most of this time, she recalled, her 'bodily strength was overcome' and she was so full of joy and thankfulness that she was led to converse with those who were with her in a very earnest manner.

When she arrived home, Buell and others were there, and again, as she talked with them of divine matters, her desire to worship the Lord took was physically draining. But then, as she uttered the words of one of Isaac Watts' hymns, she had difficulty restraining herself from jumping to her feet and leaping for joy.

The next morning, she was still excited about the blessings of God, and found it difficult to accomplish her daily tasks. She entered a room where Buell was speaking and felt so grieved at the lack of gratitude that was apparent among God's people that she sank to the floor. People eased her into a chair and earnestly she shared with them her sense of God's wonderful grace towards her in redeeming her from hell. During the next hymn, she was so impressed by heavenly truth that she 'leaped unconsciously' from her chair, feeling as if she were ascending to heaven. After the reading of two more hymns, again, she sank to the floor, and was taken and laid on a bed, where she continued to 'contemplate the glories of the heavenly world.' During this time, she felt wholly indifferent to the affairs of the world and to earthly glory and ambition. Her heart was filled with love and she felt so 'exhausted by emotions of joy' that she could not rise or sit up for about four hours. That Thursday night she described as 'the sweetest night I ever had in my life.'

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<sup>19</sup> Murray, 1987:171.

All night I continued in a constant, clear, and lively sense of the heavenly sweetness of Christ's excellent and transcendent love, of his nearness to me, and of my nearness to him; with an inexpressibly sweet calmness of soul in an entire rest in him. I seemed to myself to perceive a glow of divine love come down from the heart of Christ in heaven, into my heart, in a constant stream, like a stream or pencil of sweet light. At the same time, my heart and soul all flowed out in love to Christ; so that there seemed to be a constant flowing and reflowing of heavenly and divine love, from Christ's heart to mine...My soul remained in a kind of heavenly elysium... It was a pure delight which fed and satisfied the soul.

Sarah was obviously very loyal to her husband and believed strongly in him. But on Friday morning, she found herself entertaining the idea of the minister from another town preaching in Northampton with greater effect than her husband. She was able to say, 'Amen, Lord Jesus!'

Later that day, when conversing with another pastor, she was so affected by her sense of the mighty power of Christ that she 'could not forbear rising up and leaping with joy and exultation.'

So great was Sarah's intensity of delight, that one woman expressed fears that she might die before her husband returned! Her response was that she was not only willing to die, but to die in darkness and horror if it was most for God's glory. That night while reading the closing chapters of John, she fainted, but then lay awake most of the night reflecting on the goodness of God, but 'without any agitation or motion of the body.' During the night, in Quietist fashion, she expressed her willingness to die on the rack or at the stake for the Lord's sake—or, on the other hand, to live for another thousand years, rather than go to heaven, if this was the Lord's will. Indeed, she would do whatever the Lord required whatever it might be. This resignation to God's purpose continued all through Sunday and Monday. In particular, she felt a love for others and a complete absence of any desire to be critical of anyone else.

On Monday evening, she was dismayed when another believer spoke cheerfully of the growing interest in the things of God in the town. 'It seemed to me,' she said, 'that we ought greatly to revere the presence of God and to behave ourselves with the utmost solemnity and humility, when so great and holy a God was so remarkably present, and to rejoice before him with trembling.'

That night, at the thought of the presence of the Holy Spirit as the Comforter, there was such assurance and joy in her heart that again, it took away her strength, and she began to fall to the floor, but was supported by people around her. The next night, at dinner, after further conversation about the Comforter, again she was so affected that her 'limbs grew cold' and she was overcome for an hour or so, all the while 'expressing earnestly' to those around her sense of joy and delight in the Lord. On Thursday, again, she could scarcely refrain from leaping for joy.

In recounting this story, Sereno Dwight, Edwards' great-great-grandson and early nineteenth century biographer, anticipated that some would pronounce what happened to Sarah the result of either physical or mental illness while others would dismiss it as mere enthusiasm (or what we would call today, emotionalism or fanaticism). So he points out that she was in the best of health and that she had long been growing in grace and in love for God. There were no marks of fanaticism or false revelations. Her experience could be attributed to her glimpse of 'the glorious sufficiency of Christ' and a delightful sense of the Holy Spirit as Comforter. Quoting Edwards himself as his authority, he goes to great length to explain that it was Sarah Edwards' growing understanding of the great truths of the gospel that caused her to respond as she did.

In his version of Sarah's experiences, Edwards himself claims that two things in particular were evident—'a peculiar aversion to judging other professing Christians' and a 'very great sense of the importance of moral social duties.' Sarah's strength failed her, he says, because of her great mourning for sin and 'a sight of the fullness and glorious sufficiency of Christ.' Furthermore, her 'sense of the glory of the Holy Spirit' was such as to overwhelm her in both soul and body (I:376f). He concludes—

Now if such things are enthusiasm, and the fruits of a distempered brain, let my brain be evermore possessed of that happy distemper! If this be distraction, I pray God that the world of mankind may be all seized with this benign, meek, beneficent, beatifical, glorious distraction! (I:378)

It was no argument that bodily manifestations also occurred among groups such as the French prophets, Huguenot enthusiasts who had migrated to London in the early eighteenth century and whose behaviour Edwards clearly disapproved. Certainly, if Knox is to be believed, their behaviour was unusual, to say the least—

The usual method of preaching seems to have been as follows. The prophet beat his head with his hands for some time, then fell down on his back; his stomach and throat swelled up and he remained speechless for some minutes, after which he broke out into an utterance. De Brueys gives us a more highly coloured account of these symptoms elsewhere, on the authority of one who had experienced them; 'you shivered all over your limbs as if in a fever, then you fell, foaming at the mouth, and you lay motionless with your stomach and your neck swelled out, a state which might last for several hours.'<sup>20</sup>

Often, when the preacher shouted, people fell on their backs while he conducted them with his hand movements as if they were some kind of orchestra. Significantly, Knox points out that 'it was a mark of reprobation if you did not fall when you were told to.' Some drove knives into themselves; others spoke in tongues; most were unconscious of what they did or said while under inspiration. Violent agitations were common. A speaker might lie as dead for an extended

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<sup>20</sup> R. Knox, *Enthusiasm* London: Collins, 1987:357ff.

time and then begin to tremble violently until his limbs all shook. In at least one case, one person ‘gobbled like a turkey cock.’ A contemporary writer refers to people shaking their heads, crawling on the floor, quaking and trembling, drumming, trumpeting, thundering, snuffling, blowing as with a horn, panting, sighing, groaning, hissing, laughing, pointing, shaking, threshing, using childish repetition, howling like a dog and generally acting in a disorderly fashion. While these descriptions all come from their critics, there seems to be sufficient evidence to suggest that they are not widely inaccurate.

These ‘French prophets’, as they were known in England, caused some embarrassment to Edwards’ English contemporary John Wesley (1703-1791). On more than one occasion, Wesley spoke strongly against ‘enthusiasm.’ In his *Plain Account*, enthusiasm is the second of six dangers he sees to genuine faith. He does not mince matters—

Beware of that daughter of pride, enthusiasm. O keep at the utmost distance from it! Give no place to the heated imagination. Do not hastily ascribe things to God. Do not easily suppose dreams, voices, impressions, visions or revelations to be from God. They may be from him. They may be from nature. They may be from the devil... Try all things by the written word, and let all bow down before it. You are in danger of enthusiasm every hour, if you depart ever so little from Scripture; yea, or from the plain, literal meaning of any text, taken in connexion with the context. And so you are, if you despise or lightly esteem reason, knowledge, or human learning; every one of which is an excellent gift of God, and may serve the noblest purposes...

I say yet again, beware of enthusiasm. Such is, the imagining you have the gift of prophesying, or of discerning of spirits, which I do not believe one of you has; no, nor ever had yet. Beware of judging people to be either right or wrong by your own feelings.<sup>21</sup>

When five or six ‘honest enthusiasts’ predicted the end of the world on 28 February 1759, he preached against them and in 1762, at the Beech-lane meeting, Wesley was dismayed to discover a few who mistook their own imaginations for the voice of God, and to observe ‘horrid screaming, and unscriptural, enthusiastic expressions,’ which he promptly put an end to, an action which brought him further criticism from some quarters.<sup>22</sup>

To another Methodist, he said, ‘Nothing under heaven is more catching than enthusiasm.’ The danger was that when a faith was based only on inner sensations, when these dissolved, the faith might well go too.

Edwards also distanced himself from such people. On several occasions, he makes it plain that the experiences of the Great Awakening and these bizarre expressions of enthusiasm had nothing in common.

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<sup>21</sup> Wesley, *Plain Account*, in Works Vol 11, 1996:430.

<sup>22</sup> Wesley, *Works* Vol 11, 1996:406ff; Vol 12, 1996:125.



The similarity of the actions of these extremist Huguenots to many of the manifestations of the late twentieth century 'Toronto Blessing' is uncanny. Falling, shaking, 'drunkenness', crying, laughter, jerking, animal noises, roaring, catalepsy, writhing, being thrown across the floor, trances and the like were all reported as frequent happenings. Patrick Dixon describes a Rodney Howard-Browne meeting where 'strange and bizarre' things happened, with people 'quivering, shaking, contorting, jumping and falling.'<sup>23</sup> He quotes a newspaper article which reported—

The congregation were rolling in the aisles. Rolling and weeping and laughing and sometimes just lying there, moaning, wailing but in no pain. In other churches, they are occasionally barking, crowing like cockerels, mooing like cows, pawing the ground like bulls, and more commonly, roaring like lions. But mainly they are on the church floor laughing... Tens of thousands of British churchgoers are experiencing the 'Toronto Blessing.'<sup>24</sup>

It is very clear that Edwards would have wanted none of this. To suggest that he had this kind of behaviour in mind when he reported his wife's experiences, for example, is unthinkable. They two phenomena were worlds apart. Many years later, when a group of Presbyterians in Virginia entreated Edwards to accept a pastorate there, Samuel Davies, the first permanent evangelical pastor in that colony, wrote this about him—

Fiery superficial ministers will never do in these parts: they might do good; but they would do much more harm. We need the deep judgement and calm temper of Mr Edwards among us.<sup>25</sup>

The description of Edwards is significant. It does not fit the image of either a revivalist or an enthusiast. His ministry is seen as being characterised by maturity and balance.

For Edwards, it was the cause, not the effect that was important. The gospel brought peace, joy and glory, which are 'the fruits of the true Spirit.' When the Spirit was poured out, 'very joyful and glorious times could be expected.' It would be a mistake to conclude that Edwards was defending the 'bodily agitations' in their own right. They were always and only in response to an appreciation of the glories of Christ.

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<sup>23</sup> Rodney Howard-Browne is a South African preacher who was credited with being one of the initiators of the 'Toronto blessing' and who popularised it in the 1990s. See Chevreau 1994:23ff, 199.

<sup>24</sup> P.Dixon, *Signs of Revival*, Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1994, 9ff; see also Jackson, 1994:1ff; J.Davies, "'Toronto Blessing' Reaches Australia', *ARMA Sydney Newsletter*, #30, November, 1994; Roberts, 1994:15ff; I observed similar phenomena in Australia from 1995-1997.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Murray, 1987:365.

Guy Chevreau seems to underestimate this point. He claims that Mrs Edwards was 'out' for four hours, implying that she was in a comatose state.<sup>26</sup> However, she makes it plain that although during this time she was too exhausted by her great sense of joy, to rise or even to sit up, she spent 'most of the time' talking with friends about the things of God. Clearly, she was in full possession of her faculties.

Chevreau argues that Sarah's experience was similar to what happens in some charismatic meetings today.<sup>27</sup> However, most commonly today, people only fall to the floor if someone prays for them. When Sarah Edwards felt weak at the knees, it was the result of *her own insight* into the glories of God, not of someone else's mediation. To allege that she was 'slain in the Spirit' is to read too much into her experience.

Secondly, when people today claim a revelation of Christ or a renewed love for Jesus, it is usually after they fall. In Sarah Edwards' case, her physical weakness was the *result* of an apprehension of God already hers.

Thirdly, falling today is often accompanied by an extended time of being in a comatose or trance-like state, often not knowing what is happening around them. Sarah Edwards, although weakened physically, was *always aware* of her circumstances.

#### 4 PRIMARY EMPHASIS

Soon, the Northampton revival spread to other places and the conversions were numbered in thousands, not hundreds. So many towns and communities were affected that Edwards could claim that 'this remarkable outpouring of the Spirit of God... thus extended from one end to the other of this county' and spread over the borders into Connecticut (I:349).

Proponents of physical manifestations of 'blessing' seem eager to use Edwards to justify the emotional and demonstrative aspects of what they are experiencing, yet too often they make little reference to the primary emphasis in all of his writings, which is the conversion of sinners and a profound awareness of the wonders of Christ. Bill Jackson's 1994 pamphlet, 'What in the World is Happening to Us?'<sup>28</sup> is a case in point. There is much about manifestations, how to justify them biblically and how to control them, but little about soul-winning or the primary message of the gospel.

Sadly, it is not uncommon for stories and testimonies to be presented at considerable length about people's experiences of revival, with little or no reference to the saving grace of Christ.<sup>29</sup> Although leaders frequently warn people

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<sup>26</sup> Chevreau, 1994:79.

<sup>27</sup> Chevreau, 1994:77, footnote.

<sup>28</sup> Jackson, 1994.

<sup>29</sup> This observation was frequently made by attendees at Rodney Howard-Browne's meetings.

not to become preoccupied with the phenomena, in practice, that's where the emphasis often seems to lie.<sup>30</sup>

Edwards was well aware of this problem. From the beginning, he saw the dangers. In his *Faithful Narrative* of 1736, he points out how he is concerned about the difficulty of discerning between what is spiritual and what is imaginary. He points out how he has often warned people not to put their trust in outward signs. Generally, he says, no one has argued with this, but nevertheless, in spite of the many good effects of what God has done, there have also been some 'ill consequences' as a result of imprudent leadership (I:358f).

When, in 1742, there was an evident waning of the fervour of the revival, he wrote a letter in which he made it plain that the genuineness of an awakening could not be judged by the height of emotion expressed. He pointed out that the second work was more pure than the earlier one because people were now 'better guarded, and their affections were not only stronger, but attended with greater solemnity, and greater humility and self-distrust, and greater engagedness after holy living and perseverance: and there were fewer errors in conduct' (I:1xi). The phrase 'self-distrust' is of particular note, indicating, as it does, a realisation that we can easily deceive ourselves into believing that acts of the flesh are actually acts of God.

So why did the revival fade? Interestingly, the people were 'infected' by reports from other places where there was 'greater visible commotion... and outward appearances were more extraordinary.' So the Northampton people were ready to believe that what was happening there excelled their own experience—their eyes were dazzled with the high profession and great show that some made... from other places.' These visitors went 'so far beyond them in raptures and violent emotions and affections... and what they call boldness for Christ' that the local people felt inferior and were ready to imitate their behaviour. Sadly, says Edwards, the result was 'a deep and unhappy tincture' from which some still had not been delivered. He then makes a significant statement—

The degree of grace is by no means to be judged of by the degree of joy, or the degree of zeal;... indeed we cannot at all determine by these things, who are gracious and who are not; and... it is not the degree of religious affections, but the nature of them, that is chiefly to be looked at. Some that have had very great raptures of joy, and have been extraordinarily filled... and have had their bodies overcome, and that very often, have manifested far less of the temper of Christians in their conduct since, than some others that have been still, and have made no great outward show. But then again, there are many others, that have had extraordinary joys and emotions of

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<sup>30</sup> In one conference where Guy Chevreau spoke, he began by reading from Ephesians and advising his hearers that preaching Christ was of greater priority than manifestations. Then he made no further reference to the Scripture passage but spent the next forty minutes justifying the bodily phenomena experienced through the 'Toronto blessing.' Several pastors and people have told me that although their church leaders stated that it was not necessary to experience bodily manifestations, in practice there was significant pressure on them to do so.

mind, with frequent great effects upon their bodies, that behave themselves steadfastly, as humble, amiable, eminent Christians (I:1xi).

This statement encapsulates Edwards' understanding of the value of outward bodily phenomena. In simple terms, they are almost irrelevant. We cannot judge a person's spirituality by such matters. Whether we experience physical manifestations or not is really a matter of indifference to how effective we are as Christians. Edwards would clearly be dismayed when too great an emphasis is placed on the importance of physical response to the faith. He goes on to point out that only true Christian living is valid evidence of true faith. In regard to this, he is afraid lest some have been 'woefully deceived.'

As Dwight observes, the revival's worst enemies were found among its most zealous friends (I:1xx). In 1743, 160 ministers published a statement approving of the work which had been done, because of the numbers who had been converted and the 'power with which it was carried on.' They gladly bore witness to the many whose lives had been changed and the 'extensive reformation of morals' which had occurred. Yet they also deeply regretted the many 'extravagances and irregularities' which had also been evident. They were particularly disturbed by the number of lay people who set themselves up as preachers. The other major disappointment was the division that occurred in congregations and churches (I:1xxvii)

'I wish,' Edwards says in a letter to Rev William McCulloch, 'that God's ministers and people, everywhere, would take warning by our errors, and the calamities that are the issue of them' (I:1xxiii). Among other things, 'we have run from one extreme to the other.' Once there was too great a reservation; now there was too little. Among the most appalling of the extremes were attempts by two people to cut their own throats (I:363). Edwards attributes both of these to melancholy at not being able to experience the delights demonstrated by others.

A year later, Edwards wrote another letter about the decline in the work (I:1xxviiiiff). From the beginning, there had always been a mixture of true and false, but over the previous two years, a 'vast alteration' had taken place. The Spirit of God had begun to withdraw and the revival was on the decline. Edwards identifies two major causes for this. One was spiritual pride. The other was that many were being led away with false experiences and 'sad delusions.' The result was that the work throughout New England had generally ceased. Here, as in other places, he refers to the seed on stony ground which sprang up quickly but soon died away.

Iaian Murray has no doubt of the destructive effects of a preoccupation with physical demonstrations. Ultimately, he says, Edwards believed that 'fanaticism had been the great stumbling-block of in the revival.'<sup>31</sup> Both he and Whitefield came to realise that no matter how dramatic or apparently divinely-initiated physical demonstrations were, they could become a distraction from the real work of God.

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<sup>31</sup> Murray, 1987:255.

On one occasion, when Whitefield and a companion arrived at a church, there was 'noise and tumult on every side.' When Whitefield entered, he demanded to know what was going on. Some of those present told him they were so full of the Spirit, they could not contain their joy. 'My dear children,' Whitefield replied, 'you are like little partridges, just hatched from the egg. You run about with egg shells covering your eyes, and you cannot see and know where you are going.'<sup>32</sup>

In addition to all this, Dwight notes that pure exhaustion was a factor. People can only stand physical excitement for a limited time (I:xliv).

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<sup>32</sup> W.B.Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, I, 325, quoted in Murray, 1987:218f.

## DISTINGUISHING MARKS

In 1741, Edwards wrote a short volume entitled *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God Applied to the Uncommon Operation that has Lately Appeared on the Minds of Many of the People of New England with a Particular Consideration of the Extraordinary Circumstances with which this Work is Attended*.

Taking as his text 1 John 4:1—'Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world'—his aim was 'to show what are the true, certain, and distinguishing evidences of a work of the Spirit of God' (II:260). From the outset, he makes it plain that the Scriptures are our 'infallible and sufficient rule' and that he will use them as the basis for his comments.

### DEALING WITH CRITICISM

In 1742, an anonymous 89-page letter entitled *The Wonderful Narrative: Or, a Faithful Account of the French Prophets, Their Agitations, Extasies and Inspirations* appeared in print detailing the history of the 'French Prophets' and other similar extremists, and applying the narrative to 'the unusual Appearance among us' of allegedly similar occurrences. It is thought that the author was Charles Chauncy, the junior pastor of Boston's First Church.<sup>33</sup> He was not convinced that the town was 'much mended' by the visitation and dismissed it as nothing more than 'a commotion in the passions.' This guilt by association approach was evidently effective and was one of the elements that stirred Edwards to action.

Further letters and publications followed over the next few months and by 1743, it was evident that there was serious division between the New England clergy on the subject.

Iain Murray summarises three main targets for criticism, namely, the style of preaching employed by Whitefield, Edwards and others; the nature of experimental Christianity in itself; and historic Calvinism.

Gaustad adds that itineracy also became an issue, as wandering preachers began to spread the message without due accountability to a local congregation. It was

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<sup>33</sup> Gaustad, 1965:89, 90; Murray, 1987:204. Following details are from this source.

in the midst of this conflict that Edwards wrote his treatise. He begins by laying down a number of what he calls ‘negative signs,’ that is, observations and criticisms that do not invalidate a work of God. Although he expands all of these in some detail, only a brief summary will be attempted here. The ‘negative signs’ are—

1.1 *We can draw no certain conclusion from the fact that the work is carried on in a very unusual and extraordinary way* (II:261). Because God cannot be limited in his operations, the presence of strange phenomena cannot be used as proof against the work (as long it is consistent with Scripture).

1.2 *We cannot judge a work by any effects such as tears, trembling, groans, loud outcries, agonies of body, or the failing of bodily strength* (II:261). Because the Scripture nowhere defines or denies such behaviour as a mark of the true Spirit, we cannot assume that it necessarily is or is not of God. It may well be, he argues, that a person terrified by the prospect of hell or delighted with the excellency of Christ should be overcome. So it is the cause of the behaviour which is significant, not the behaviour itself.

1.3 *An upsurge of religious excitement and fervour does not prove that it is not the work of the Spirit of God* (II:262). When God’s Spirit is at work, asks Edwards, how can there not be an upsurge of excitement? It is morally impossible that there should be a significant spiritual awakening without there also being ‘open commotion’ among the people.

1.4 *The fact that many people have great impressions made on their imaginations is no argument that it is not the work of the Spirit of God* (II:262). People’s imaginations may be affected but this does not prove that this is all that is affected. Indeed, how can we think of the spiritual, invisible realm without using the imagination? People may have ecstatic experiences without in any sense invalidating the genuineness of what is happening. Ecstasy is not necessarily satanic—human nature sufficiently explains it.

1.5 *The fact that people are following the example of others does not prove it is not a work of the Spirit of God*. Nor is it a problem that certain methods, or as Edwards calls them, ‘means’ are used in producing it (II:263). It is both scriptural and reasonable that we should be moved by the example of others. In fact, the impact of seeing others greatly affected emotionally may be more durable than the results of being convinced by reason. Such an outcome, however, is only effective ‘as the Word of God is indeed held forth.’ Otherwise, it is ‘unintelligible and vain.’

1.6 *That there are imprudences and irregularities in the conduct of many people is no sign that a work is not from the Spirit of God* (II:264). There never has been a time or a revival when there has not also been unwise behaviour. In any mixed crowd of human beings, imprudences will occur. But ‘a thousand imprudences’ will not prove that a work is not of the Spirit of God.

Possibly Edwards had in mind here people like James Davenport whom Bushman describes as ‘one of the most powerful and certainly the most controversial of all the itinerants.’<sup>34</sup> Davenport’s excesses included preaching ‘under the influences of enthusiastical impressions and impulses’ with an excessive preoccupation with hell. At one point he even ordered his hearers to strip off their clothes and throw them into a bonfire.<sup>35</sup> Even such ‘imprudences,’ said Edwards, would not invalidate the awakening.

*1.7 Nor are errors in judgement, and some delusions of Satan intermixed with the work, any argument that the work in general is not of the Spirit of God (II:265).* It is always the case that even great saints may experience both the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Satan in their hearts.

It may seem that Edwards is conceding too much here, but a study of the writings of people like Anthony, Augustine, Jerome, Teresa, Mary MacKillop, Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley and innumerable others will provide abundant evidence of the struggle even the most holy of people sometimes have with evil.

*1.8 That some fall away into gross errors, or scandalous practices, is no argument that the work in general is not the work of the Spirit of God (II:265).* Even in the apostles’ days, there were those who fell away or turned their backs. Such things will continue to happen in all times of revival.

*1.9 That some ministers who promote it insist very much on the terrors of God’s holy law, and ‘that with a great deal of pathos and earnestness’ is no argument that a work is not from the Spirit of God (II:265).* If there really is a hell, why should not ministers of the gospel take great care to warn people of its dangers? ‘Is it not a reasonable thing to fright a person out of a house on fire?’

In summary, Edwards seems to be appealing for fair play in our approach to revival. There may well be problems, he argues, but these do not invalidate the work. The same plea has commonly been made by Pentecostal and charismatic leaders over the years.<sup>36</sup> Plainly, this is a reasonable position to adopt, as long as it doesn’t mean accepting everything, regardless.

## 2 DISTINGUISHING MARKS

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<sup>34</sup> R.L.Bushman, R. L., (ed), *The Great Awakening: Documents on the Revival of Religion, 1740-1745*, New York: Atheneum, 1970

<sup>35</sup> Bushman, 1970:46, 52. The latter incident occurred in 1744, well after Edwards wrote these words, but Davenport had commenced his ministry well before then.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Sometimes when God does something fresh, we are put off by some of the "unacceptable" things that go with it... in fact, in all my life I have never seen so many strange things as I have in this outpouring!... There no doubt has been a mix of flesh and Spirit here and there. But in a move of this magnitude, mistakes are bound to happen... But I have resolved to lay hold of all that is from God.’ Terry Virgo, ‘Interrupted by the Spirit’, *Charisma*, February 1995: 31.



Having dealt with these objections to the validity of the awakening, Edwards now goes on to discuss what he sees as five genuine, distinguishing marks of the work of God. These have been often quoted by almost everyone interested in revival. And almost everyone interested in revival approves, or at the very least, gives lip service to them. Again, it is helpful to list them one by one—

*2.1 Christ-centred preaching.* Edwards puts it plainly—‘When the operation is such as to raise their esteem of that Jesus who was born of the Virgin, and was crucified without the gates of Jerusalem; and seems more to confirm and establish their minds in the truth of what the gospel declares to us of his being the Son of God, and the Saviour of men; it is a sure sign that it is from the Spirit of God’ (II:26). In simple terms, when Christ is plainly preached and people’s hope and faith towards Him is stirred, the Holy Spirit must be at work. Edwards stresses that the Christ who is proclaimed must be the Christ of Scripture ‘not the mystical, fantastical Christ; such as the light within.’

This is a reference to Quakerism and its stress on the inward experience of Christ rather than the external, objective truth that Jesus was God manifest in the flesh. Edwards strongly questioned any spirituality which drew its inspiration and authority from inner leadings. For him, true revival emphasised the plain and sure truth of the Gospel, which is clearly portrayed, apart from feelings, in the Scriptures.

In the Great Commission, Jesus’ major command was to preach and teach (Matthew 28:19f; Mark 16:15ff) and to bear witness to Him (Acts 1:8). The record of Acts shows clearly that the primary thrust of the apostles was preaching and teaching (Acts 2:46; 4:33; 5:42; 7:2ff; 8:4; 13:15ff; 14:21ff; 17:2ff; 18:4ff etc). The result was that the Word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power (Acts 19:20).<sup>37</sup> Even when the early apostles and evangelists healed people, they often did not pray. They just pronounced healing in the authority of God’s word (Acts 3:6; 9:34,40; 14:10).

In the letters, the major focus is on the proclamation of the gospel. When Paul prays for people, more often than not, it is for them to have greater understanding of the glorious truths of Jesus Christ and to develop Christian character in their lives (eg Ephesians 1:17ff; 3:14ff; Philippians 1:9; Colossians 1:9). When he asks them to pray for him, it is that he might be more effective as a preacher of Christ (Ephesians 6:19f; Colossians 4:3).

In the pastorals, where Paul gives specific instructions to two young men in the ministry, it is remarkable to observe that there are no verses which refer to music, only three which mention spiritual gifts, only five which deal with worship and only nine with prayer—but 58 verses deal with teaching, preaching and learning.<sup>38</sup> This emphasis on God’s Word is remarkable. For Paul, the prophetic model was clearly paramount.

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<sup>37</sup> Note that it is ‘the Word’ which spreads widely and increases in power, not ‘the revival.’

<sup>38</sup> Another 65b verses refer to Christian lifestyle.

2.2 *Conviction of sin.* ‘When the spirit that is at work operates against the interests of Satan’s kingdom, which lies in encouraging and establishing sin, and cherishing men’s worldly lusts; this is a sure sign that it is a true, and not a false spirit’ (II:267). Christ taught that His kingdom was not of this world. 1 John 4:4,5 clearly distinguishes between the Spirit of God and the spirit of the world.

It cannot be imagined, Edwards continues, that Satan would awaken people’s consciences and convict them of sin. On the other hand, when people’s hearts are drawn off from the world, this is clearly the work of the Spirit of God.

A number of ‘Toronto’ leaders expressed the hope that what they described as a ‘refreshing’ among believers would become a ‘revival’ among sinners and that what was happening then would be just the first phase of a greater move of God. They were concerned that there had been relatively few conversions and that the movement had mainly touched only the church.

So Bill Jackson wrote, ‘Those who are in the vanguard of this move of the Spirit believe that its purpose is to refresh the church and to prepare it for the mighty and genuine revival that is on the horizon.’<sup>39</sup> Sadly, in most cases, these worthy expectations were not fulfilled. Few churches reported any significant growth. It is evident both from Edwards’ writings and from the nature of the movement that the problem lay in its shaky biblical and christological foundations.

2.3 *Appreciation of Scripture.* ‘The spirit that operates in such a manner, as to cause in men a greater regard to the Holy Scriptures, and establishes them more in their truth and divinity, is certainly the Spirit of God’ (II:267). Edwards laments that enthusiasts commonly ‘depreciate this written rule,’ and ‘set up the light within or some other rule above it.’

The devil has always hated the Word of God, he says, but it is by the ‘sharp sword’ of Scripture that Christ has always defeated His enemies. Clearly, for Edwards, when our appreciation of Scripture is enhanced, and our reliance on the Word of God is increased, this is the Lord’s doing.

While there have always been testimonies of people’s love for Scripture being rekindled through revival experiences, often there seems to have been a lessening of the value of God’s Word. While this is commonly disputed by those who are revitalised by revival, when the fervour settles down, they find themselves languishing because of a lack of biblical sustenance and nourishment. Many times, ministers have boasted of the fact that the preaching would be reduced so that more time could be devoted to ‘ministry.’<sup>40</sup> One of the factors for the speedy waning of the renowned 1904-1905 Welsh Revival, for example, may well be the fairly common practice of abandoning preaching and the reading of Scripture for

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<sup>39</sup> Jackson, 1994:18

<sup>40</sup> Personal knowledge and observation.

prayer and praise.<sup>41</sup> There were phenomenal gatherings with packed meeting houses, fervent worship, passionate prayer and thousands of converts. But they were often insubstantial in content. Edwards notes that ‘the weakest part of the ministry of Evan Roberts (1878-1951) was the freedom he gave to the meetings and the lack of preaching in them.’<sup>42</sup> B.P.Jones argues that this was allowable given the special circumstances of the time.<sup>43</sup> But it is hard to imagine Edwards approving of the setting aside of the preaching of God’s Word, no matter what the reason.

Murray comments, ‘Whenever wrong methods are popularised, on the basis of a weak or erroneous theology, the work of God is marred and confused.’<sup>44</sup>

*2.4 Knowledge of the truth.* ‘Another rule to judge of spirits may be drawn from those compellations given to the opposite spirits, in the last words of the 6th verse (of 1 John 4), "The spirit of truth and the spirit of error". These words exhibit the two opposite characters of the Spirit of God, and other spirits that counterfeit his operations’ (II:268). So if we see a spirit at work bringing people to a knowledge of truth, and an understanding of the gospel, this must be the Spirit of God.

*2.5 Christian love and humility.* ‘If the spirit that is a work among a people operates as a spirit of love to God and man, it is a sure sign that it is the Spirit of God’ (II:268). The rest of 1 John 4 makes this plain. Love is the ‘most eminent’ sign of the true Spirit.

There is a kind of counterfeit love, alleges Edwards, which is commonly displayed by ‘the wildest enthusiasts.’ This is no more than their strong agreement about the areas in which they differ from all others. But true Christian love arises from a realisation of the great love of God to us in Christ. Hence, it is particularly marked by humility.

One comment frequently made about revival meetings is that they bring together people—and especially ministers—from a wide range of churches, who would normally not fraternise. ‘One of the distinctives of this renewal,’ wrote Daina Doucet in 1995, ‘is its cross-denominational character. Baptists, Catholics, Anglicans, charismatics, Pentecostals and believers from virtually every Christian denomination have experienced the same refreshing—often while standing side by side.’<sup>45</sup> The same was true of the charismatic renewal of the 1960s and 70s. On the other hand, there was also significant and strong opposition from some

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<sup>41</sup> B.P.Jones, *An Instrument of Revival: the Complete Life of Evan Roberts, 1878-1951* South Plainfield, NJ: Bridge Publishing, 1995:49.

<sup>42</sup> B.Edwards, *Revival: a People Saturated with God* Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1997:212

<sup>43</sup> Jones, 1995:49.

<sup>44</sup> Murray, 1994:412.

<sup>45</sup> ‘What is God doing in Toronto?’ *Charisma*, February 1995: 22.

charismatic leaders who raised serious doubts about the authenticity of some aspects of the 'Toronto' phenomenon.<sup>46</sup>

The primary question is whether the love being expressed will be true Christian *agape*, or, what Edwards describes as a counterfeit in-house expression of common interest.

So Edwards concludes that there are some things 'the devil neither can nor will do; he will not give men a spirit of divine love, or Christian humility and poverty of spirit; nor could he if he would.' The followers of Satan may appear as angels of light (2 Corinthians 11:13f) and may boast of extraordinary knowledge (Colossians 2:8), of miraculous signs (Matthew 24:24), of great holiness (Romans 16:17, 18f), of extraordinary piety (Colossians 2:16ff) and of false humility (Colossians 2:18, 23). But none of these can diminish the true marks of love and humility that distinguish both the Spirit of God and the people of God.

### 3 PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Having laid down these principles, Edwards proceeds to draw some practical conclusions.

3.1 *Firstly, he acknowledges the good that has occurred.* He states plainly 'that the extraordinary influence that has lately appeared, causing an uncommon concern and engagedness of mind about the things of religion, is undoubtedly, in the general, from the Spirit of God.' This could be ascertained by rules and facts. The rules had already been laid down. So what were the facts? Edwards lists several—

- the work was widespread among people of all ages and background, including many 'of good understanding and known integrity' and had been so for many months.
- his investigation of the extraordinary manifestations convinced him that in 'very many instances' the distinguishing marks previously listed had been fully satisfied.
- the subjects of the manifestations were both those who had been in agony of soul and those who had experienced the sweetness of Christ. In both cases, people had been able to give a reasonable account of their experiences.

All three of these observations applied, at least in some measure, to aspects of the 'Toronto' movement, in particular the first one. It was certainly widespread, touching churches and people all over the world in just over twelve months. In regard to the other two, some, at least of the five distinguishing marks were

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<sup>46</sup> For example, Clifford Hill, Johannes Facius, David Wilkerson, Harry Westcott, Philip Powell, George Wood, Aeron Morgan.

evident, although with varying degrees of intensity and there were plenty of testimonies of renewed intimacy with God.

Now Edwards makes some interesting observations on the bodily expressions of the revival (II:271ff). Firstly, he stresses repeatedly that the cause of them is either a sense of conviction of sin or a sense of delight and wonder at the glories of the gospel. He never talks of manifestations without linking them to this deeper work of the Spirit.

Secondly, he believes that people should normally endeavour to refrain from outward manifestations and should 'refrain to their utmost' at times of public worship. However, if God should so stir people's consciences that they cannot avoid them, even to the point of interrupting the service, this is no more to be rejected than if people should pray for rain and the rain should fall on them. 'Would to God,' he writes, 'that all the public assemblies in the land were broken off from their public exercises with such confusion as this the next sabbath day!... He who is going to fetch a treasure, need not be sorry that he is stopped, by meeting the treasure in the midst of his journey.'

In 'Toronto' meetings, there was little attempt to curb bodily manifestations. Quite the contrary. The manifestations were actually the feature of the meetings. It was more common to make a display of them. Often, people who were trembling or shaking or laughing or jumping were invited to the front of a gathering so that what they were doing could be observed by all.<sup>47</sup> On other occasions, preaching was frequently interrupted or actually stopped by loud laughter or distracting movements among the congregation.<sup>48</sup> At least one pastor told his people, 'If you don't fall when we pray for you, fall by faith anyway!' And another said, 'Fake it till you make it.'<sup>49</sup>

In other words, far from holding back on physical phenomena, especially in public, these people were being encouraged to try to make them happen. In a gathering held in Sydney in 1994, under the leadership of Argentinian Claudio Freidzon, acknowledged as one of the pioneers of the 'blessing', it was obvious that Freidzon gave special attention to those more likely to respond emotionally or physically than to those who were not.<sup>50</sup> This was very different from the approach advocated here by Edwards.

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<sup>47</sup> This happened in meetings conducted in England by Bishop David Pytches and in Australia in services where Tim Hall, Claudio Freidzon and Rodney Howard-Browne were the speakers.

<sup>48</sup> According to Richard Riss, in his tape 'Counterfeit Revival,' Hank Hanegraaff deplores the fact that once when Rodney Howard-Browne was preaching on hell, the more he told people what hell was like, the more they laughed. Riss suggests that this was actually a sovereign act of God because 'we are able to laugh in the face of the powers of hell.' See R.Riss, 'The Counterfeit Revival?' pamphlet, n.d. See also Roberts, 1994:90.

<sup>49</sup> Personal knowledge.

<sup>50</sup> Cruzada de Milagros en Sydney, Calvary Chapel, George's Hall, January 1994; see also Dixon, 1994: 'John Arnott [pastor of Toronto Airport Vineyard] attended a conference that Argentinian pastors Ed Silvano, Claudio Freidzon and Hector Jimenez staged for North American pastors... Claudio Freidzon prayed for John.'

Thirdly, Edwards states that he has seen many whose bodily strength has failed. This has been because of a 'sense of the glorious excellency of the Redeemer, and the wonders of his dying love.' Again, the stress is on the gospel, not the manifestation.

Fourthly, he argues that there should be no surprise that when reformation occurs after a time of coldness, bizarre and unusual things should occur. Both wheat and tares grow together.

Fifthly, he observes that young people have been the main subjects of irregularities. As they have 'less steadiness and experience' this is to be expected. Youth are more likely to be extremists. A similar observation could have been made about some of the 'Toronto' behaviour.

Sixthly, he points out that there is plainly a great need for wisdom, guidance and leaders who know well how to conduct both themselves and their services of worship.

Lastly, he claims that the latter move of the Spirit was deeper and purer than the former one. People were now more likely to weep than to laugh. Their rejoicing now 'breaks their hearts, and brings them into the dust' (II:272).

3.2 Edwards now admonishes his readers *not to do anything that might oppose the work of God*. 'Let us all be hence warned, by no means to oppose, or to do anything in the least to clog or hinder the work; but, on the contrary, to do our utmost to promote it. Now Christ is come down from heaven in a remarkable and wonderful work of his Spirit, and it becomes all his professed disciples to acknowledge him, and give him honour' (II:272f).

Here Edwards takes a very strong stand. He gives a most solemn warning. There can be no neutrality. When ministers stay silent about the work of God, this is 'undoubtedly provoking' to Him. Indeed, 'let all to whom this work is a cloud and darkness—as the pillar of cloud and fire was to the Egyptians—take heed that it be not their destruction, while it gives light to God's Israel.'

To wait for a pure work is to wait in vain—like waiting at the river side for all the water to pass. There never was a work of God without stumbling blocks: indeed, they are likely to increase, not decrease. The apparent prudence of waiting before they acknowledge the work may be to miss the greatest opportunity of blessing that God ever gave to New England.

As for those who speak against it, they should beware lest they commit the unpardonable sin. And those who do not become more happy by the work will probably become more miserable.

One of the saddest verses in the Bible, notes Edwards, is the one that tells how Jesus wept over Jerusalem and lamented, 'You did not know the hour of your

visitation.’ This failure to discern the seasons of God resulted in the fulfilment of Jesus’ words, where He said, ‘Your house will be left desolate.’ Our cry to God must be, ‘Help me not miss what You are doing ...’<sup>51</sup>

3.3 Next, Edwards makes the point that Consistent, godly lifestyle is the best argument for a true revival. So he expresses his desire to ‘to apply myself to those who are the friends of his work, who have been partakers of it, and are zealous to promote it. Let me earnestly exhort such *to give diligent heed to themselves to avoid all errors and misconduct, and whatever may darken and obscure the work; and to give no occasion to those who stand ready to reproach it*’ (II:273).

The strongest defence, he says, will be ‘humility and self-diffidence, and an entire dependence on our Lord Jesus Christ.’ Some ‘true friends of the work of God’s Spirit’ had done it discredit by yielding more to impressions and impulses than to the revelation of Scripture. The fruits of the Spirit were far greater than the gifts. A man may have extraordinary gifts ‘and yet be abominable to God, and go straight to hell’ (II:274). As there are no supernatural gifts in heaven, the church is most like heaven when it emphasises the fruits of the Spirit.

It is interesting that Edwards did not believe that the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit as listed in 1 Corinthians 12 are to be expected today. He is quite specific about this. ‘The ordinary sanctifying influences of the Spirit of God, are the end of all extraordinary gifts, as the apostle shows, Eph iv.11,12,13... God communicates his Spirit only in that more excellent way of which the apostle speaks, viz. charity or divine love... The apostle speaks of these gifts of inspiration as childish things, in comparison of the influence of the Spirit in divine love.’

When the church is in an adult state, it has no need of such gifts. So Edwards plainly says—

Therefore, I do not expect a restoration of these miraculous gifts in the approaching glorious times of the church, nor do I desire it... I had rather enjoy the sweet influences of the Spirit, showing Christ’s spiritual divine beauty, infinite grace, and dying love, drawing forth the holy exercises of faith, divine love, sweet complacence, and humble joy in God, one quarter of an hour, than to have prophetic visions and revelations the whole year (II:275).

This approach to charismata has often been overlooked by advocates of charismatic renewal, who have portrayed Edwards as a champion of their cause. Chevreau, for instance, points out that Charles Chauncy, a strong critic of the

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<sup>51</sup> Andrew Evans, ‘A New Wave of the Holy Spirit’, pamphlet, n.d., 11; Greg Beech, sermon title, ‘Welcoming a Visitation of God—Jesus grieved over the fact that God’s people did not recognise the visitation of God. Is this a work or [sic] God? How can we respond to Him?’ Randwick Baptist Church, 21 April 1995.

awakening, denied the need for spiritual gifts in his day, but fails to mention that Edwards shared the same view.<sup>52</sup>

Edwards also stresses the need for learning. Both knowledge and the means by which it is obtained, namely study, are strongly commended, especially for leaders.

Thirdly, he deplores criticism and judging one another. 'The disciples of Christ ought to avoid this practice... however needful... they may think it.' This is God's prerogative. It was a great mistake to try to ascertain who was right and who was not. Both wheat and tares should be allowed to grow together until harvest. Nor should we denounce those who criticise us. We are not called to strive, but to be gentle and patient (2 Timothy 2:24-26).

Not that Edwards meant by this that there should be no debate on the things of God. His own writings include many a lively discussion on the Scriptures in which he compares the views of others with his own. Even in his *An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People in Extraordinary Prayer for the Revival of Religion and the Advancement of Christ's Kingdom on Earth* (1747) he spends pages debating Moses Lowman's opinions on the coming of the antichrist and the end of the age. Furthermore, a year after completing *Distinguishing Marks*, he began his next volume by writing, 'In the ensuing treatise, I condemn ministers assuming, or taking too much upon them...' (I:365). In fact, the following paragraphs are irenic in approach which suggests that 'condemn' was perhaps too strong a word. Nevertheless, they make it plain that while Edwards deplored needless attacks on fellow-Christians, he did not shrink from healthy and vigorous debate.

One dilemma facing us today is the difficulty of finding a suitable forum for discussing the issues aroused by phenomena such as the 'Toronto blessing.' While academics have long been used to the rough and tumble of intellectual jousting, pastors and evangelists, especially in charismatic organisations, feel less comfortable with this. When you are convinced that certain phenomena are the work of God, and especially when they have resulted in perceived spiritual benefit, it is difficult to embrace the thought of questioning them. Yet the Scripture makes it plain that all spiritual phenomena are to be assessed and judged. Don't despise or reject prophesying, says Paul, but test everything and hold on to what is proven to be good (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21; 1 Corinthians 14:29).

The other problem is that of how to respond to questionable public statements or practices without appearing to be critical and negative. Edwards would have agreed that once a statement is spoken in a public meeting or published in a printed or electronic media format, it becomes public property and is then open for public debate. Many Christian leaders, especially in the Pentecostal area, where ministerial training may be less scholarly, have difficulty with this. It is sometimes argued that the terms of Matthew 18:15-18 should be applied in all

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<sup>52</sup> Chevreau, 1994:112.



circumstances. Others feel that this passage only applies to personal difficulties, not to public issues.<sup>53</sup> Certainly, it is both difficult and frustrating if one person can make a public statement which is contrary to Scripture but no public response can be made by others lest they be accused of unbiblical and unloving behaviour. This is a question which needs to be considered more fully in the current climate of spiritual renewal.

There is no doubt that Edwards drew a clear distinction between debating public issues and denouncing his opponents. 'In a free nation,' he urged, 'such liberty of the press is allowed, that every author takes leave, without offence, freely to speak his opinion...' He would prefer that someone more senior should undertake the task. But 'the sad jangling and confusion' that had attended the revival required someone to speak up about how to manage such a work. If he was perceived as acting in pride, then he begged forgiveness.

So begins a further work, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England and the Way in Which it Ought to be Acknowledged and Promoted Humbly Offered to the Public in a Treatise on That Subject* (1742).

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<sup>53</sup> See Lee Grady, 'Does the Church Need Heresy Hunters?' *Charisma*, May 1995: 47.

## CHAPTER THREE

# THOUGHTS ON REVIVAL

It is interesting to monitor the development of Edwards' thoughts over the half-decade in which he wrote about revival. To quote only from his earlier works would be to present an inaccurate picture of his position. While there is much that he never changes, there is a shift in some areas. Only in his later writings is his mature position presented.

Also, Edwards regularly presents both sides of the question. It is disarming to read several pages of convincing argument in one direction only to find the next few pages presenting an equally compelling dissertation in another. To gain a balanced or comprehensive understanding of Edwards' position it is clearly necessary to consider all his major works on the subject.

### 1 CLEAR PRINCIPLES

In the first part of *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival*, Edwards lays down six clear principles.

1.1 '*We should not judge of this work by the supposed causes but by the effects*' (I:366). If we set about to determine how and why God has caused this work, before we acknowledge that it is His work, we presume too much. God has chosen the weak and foolish to carry it on and need to recognise this.

1.2 '*We should judge by the rule of Scripture*'—and not just individual texts, but the Scriptures as a whole (I:367). Here Edwards makes several strong points. Firstly, some make philosophy their guide and reject the place of the affections altogether. It is here that Edwards begins to develop the theme which was to become the centre of one of his greatest works—*The Religious Affections*. He defines affections as including both the will and the emotions. 'All acts of the affections are in some sense acts of the will, and all acts of the will are acts of the

affections.’ In fact, ‘the things of religion take place in men’s hearts, no further than they are affected with them.’ To inform the mind without also affecting the heart is pointless. True religion has its source in the heart.

It is true that there are false affections, but these do not discount the true. Taking Scripture as a guide, it is plain that the greater our love for God and the greater our delight in Him, the more we have abiding peace and unspeakable joy in our hearts.

Secondly, he argues that many make the mistake of not taking the whole of Scripture as their guide. Not that the Bible will teach us about anatomy, for example—and hence about the nature of bodily manifestations—for its aim is divinity, not physiology. But there are many biblical examples of people being physically affected by an encounter with God—Jacob, Daniel, Habakkuk (‘When I heard, my belly trembled, my lips quivered at the voice, rottenness entered my bones, I trembled in myself ...’—Habakkuk 3:16), David, Jeremiah. Indeed, it is perfectly reasonable to suppose that if God lets even a little of His light into our souls, we might tremble and shake like a leaf as a result.

Thirdly, it is a mistake, he says, to make history, rather than the Scriptures, our standard of assessment (I:368). To argue that such things have not occurred previously is to limit God. On the other hand, there was plenty of evidence that the manifestations which had been recently demonstrated had, in fact, been witnessed previously. Here Edwards lists a number of examples from earlier history of awakenings which were attended by similar phenomena, especially both crying out and falling (I:369).

Even so, Edwards clearly distinguishes between bodily response to divine revelation and what he saw as ‘enthusiasm’ as evidenced, for example, among Quakers and the French Prophets. Hence it was a mistake to argue that because similar manifestations had occurred among these groups, such behaviour was necessarily invalid. This work was ‘totally and essentially different in its nature.’ There seems good evidence to suggest he might have made a similar comment in reference to some contemporary phenomena as well.

Fourthly, he asks, could it be that those who claim to make the Scriptures their only rule are actually guided by their own backgrounds and hence reject some phenomena, not because they are unbiblical, but because they lie outside their own experience? This comment could well be applied to many forms of Christian corporate worship today. Charismatic people feel uncomfortable in a highly reflective environment; conservative believers feel uneasy in Pentecostal praise gatherings; non-conformists find it hard to appreciate a liturgical service. But these responses have little to do with the Scriptures. They are almost entirely based on our own experience and cultural or denominational traditions. It would be difficult, for instance, for a non-conformist to find a *biblical* reason for not joining in a liturgical prayer. It would be equally difficult for a conservative evangelical to find *scriptural* grounds for not clapping or lifting their hands in a charismatic meeting. It is important to ensure that our objections to religious phenomena of any kind derive from valid reasons.

1.3 *'We should distinguish the good from the bad, and not judge of the whole by a part'* (I:371). Too many people had rejected the whole work in general because they had seen some aspects that were wrong. Here Edwards readily acknowledges that there had been much to criticise—'great numbers' had fallen into 'errors and mistakes.' There had been 'a great deal of noise and tumult, confusion and uproar, darkness mixed with light.' But was there any man in New England, no matter how wise and mature, who could prevent himself being moved if he were so strongly impressed, as many others had been, with the sense of divine and eternal things?

He goes on to argue that enthusiasm, superstition, extremism and 'intemperate zeal' have always been present in times of revival of religion. When people have been so long in 'a strange stupor' it is no wonder if they respond emotionally to the hand of God. But worse than all the extremes is the 'disease' of criticism. Yet, even this may not be totally wrong. The end of all is to make men wise to salvation, and even those who question may have a part in achieving this goal.

This is a salutary warning for those today who see problems with extravagant revival meetings. Responding on the basis of Scripture is one thing; being critical and vindictive is another. On the other hand, those whose actions are being questioned need to beware of reacting impulsively to criticism without considering whether there might be some truth in what is being said.

1.4 *Even where there are excesses, a great deal of good may still be done.* Edwards puts it graphically—

Whatever imprudences there may have been and whatever sinful irregularities; whatever vehemence of passions, and heats of the imagination, transports and ecstasies; whatever errors in judgement and indiscreet zeal; and whatever outcries, faintings, and agitations of body; yet it is manifest and notorious, that there has been of late a very uncommon influence upon the minds of a very great part of the inhabitants of New England, attended with the best effects' (I:374).

Two things are clear here. First, Edwards is obviously concerned about the extremes—and there had clearly been very many of them—and yet he also sees a great deal of good. He proceeds to list some of the benefits—

- a great increase in seriousness about eternal things
- a disposition to hear God's word and to treat religion with solemnity and to make it a common subject of conversation
- an increase in public worship and other 'external duties of religion'
- a general alteration in the face of New England
- multitudes of changed lives
- an increase in concern for the lost
- the hearts of multitudes turned from the pleasures and profits of the world

- multitudes with their consciences awakened and a greater fear of sin
- an alteration in the behaviour of young people
- a diminishing of frequenting of taverns and of profane language
- the reform of many ‘vicious persons’
- community thoughts and concerns now about the favour of God
- through the greatest part of New England, the Bible in much greater use than before
- the Lord’s day more religiously observed
- old grudges removed and reconciliation affected
- multitudes with a ‘a new and great conviction of the truth and certainty of the things of the gospel’

This last point is developed at some length. Here again, Edwards outlines what was to become his major thesis on this question in *The Religious Affections*, that for him, the great truths of Scripture and the evidence of lives changed spiritually and morally were the primary marks of revival. So he writes—

They have had a most affecting sense of the excellency and sufficiency of this Saviour, and the glorious wisdom and grace of God shining in this way of salvation; and of the wonders of Christ’s dying love, and the sincerity of Christ in the invitations of the gospel. They have experienced a consequent affiance and sweet rest of soul in Christ, as a glorious Saviour, a strong rock and high tower; accompanied with the admiring and exalted apprehension of the glory of the divine perfections, God’s majesty, holiness, sovereign grace, &c—with a sensible, strong and sweet love to God, and delight in him, far surpassing all temporal delights, or earthly pleasures; and a rest of soul in him, as a portion and the fountain of all good. And this has been attended with an abhorrence of sin, and self-loathing for it, and earnest longings of soul after more holiness and conformity to God, with a sense of the great need of God’s help in order to holiness of life... (I:375).

There is much more in similar vein. Again, one cannot help but wonder whether these great and exalted concepts reflect more Edwards’ own view of things than that of people generally. It seems hard to imagine that ordinary believers had such a profound insight as he into the mysteries of the gospel. His frequent references to abuses indicate that there were many who placed greater value on human manifestation than divine revelation. How many people shared his concept of the primacy of the gospel is no doubt arguable.

Nevertheless, Edwards serves as a model of leadership in times of awakening, in relentlessly calling people back to the clear focus of the Scriptures. Too often, revivalists fail in this area. The major published works on the ‘Toronto blessing’, for example, did not appear to have this emphasis. Although there were references to people loving Jesus more and experiencing greater intimacy with God, the general thrust seemed more commonly to be an attempt to justify the manifestations rather than to see them, as Edwards did, as essentially irrelevant to the true nature of revival. Certainly, neither conviction of sin nor the revelation of Christ was usually presented as a prime motivation for bodily expressions. More

commonly, these were seen as the results of actions like laughing or falling, rather than the cause of them.<sup>54</sup>

Edwards is amazed that so many people in a Christian country cannot tell whether a work is of God or not. Again, he dismisses the fact that the second century Montanists or the French prophets had ‘agitations of body’ as irrelevant. It is the Scripture to which we must turn if we want the truth.

*1.5 Personal testimonies of people who have been enriched spiritually cannot be ignored.* Edwards knew of many. ‘I have been particularly acquainted with many persons who have been the subjects of the high and extraordinary transports of the present day’ (I:376). It is interesting that Edwards does not ever refer to himself experiencing any of the phenomena he describes in others. It is apparent that apart from the instances of praying and weeping mentioned earlier, he himself seems not to have personally experienced other physical manifestations.

As we have seen, however, there was one case very close to him, which he did have occasion to note—the experience of his wife Sarah, whose story he recounts again here.<sup>55</sup> Even here, he was personally away from home at the time of the height of her strongest affections and only had reports to go on, although he points out that ‘since this time there have often been great agitations of body, and an unavoidable leaping for joy.’

This great rejoicing was also with trembling but not with laughter, which was seen as superficial. The details are substantially the same as those noted earlier, except that Edwards claims that Sarah ‘was deprived of all ability to stand or speak,’ which seems to go further than her own testimony, that even when weak in body, she could still converse plainly and rationally about the things of God (I:lxv).

Once again, Edwards stresses that his young wife’s bodily expressions were in response to her profound and deeply moving insights into the ‘fullness and glorious sufficiency of Christ’ (I:377).

This was the strength of the ‘Toronto blessing.’ While no one seems to have produced a clear, comprehensive, systematic biblical rationale for the approach to ministry that was adopted, testimonies by the score were published. For most people, this was undeniable evidence of the validity of the experience. It needs to be noted, however, that Edwards makes it plain that in every report, it is the ‘glorious sufficiency of Christ’ which must be central.

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<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Dixon, *Signs of Revival*, 1994; Chevreau, *Catch the Fire*, 1994; Roberts, *The ‘Toronto Blessing*, 1994; Jackson, *What in the World is Happening to Us?* 1994; G.Coates, ‘Toronto and Scripture’, *Renewal* #222, November, 1994, 24ff; D.Pytches, ‘The Blessings and the Concerns’, *Renewal* #223, December, 1994, 14ff.

<sup>55</sup> Although not by name. He refers only to ‘a person’ of his knowledge.

1.6 *If the price of being involved in revival is being accused of mental instability, then it is a small price to pay.* At this point, Edwards makes a statement which has been often taken up by advocates of revival phenomena—

Now if such things are enthusiasm, and the fruits of distempered brain, let my brain be evermore possessed of that happy distemper! If this be distraction, I pray God that the world of mankind may all be seized with this benign, meek, beneficent, beatifical, glorious distraction! (I:378).

Again, Edwards dismisses the argument that the French prophets also displayed physical manifestations. Yes, there had been a mixture of true and false, and a ‘sad degenerating of religious affections’, but overall, it was ‘the same spirit’—and the result had been peace, joy, love, freedom and glory. Again, he warns those who were waiting to see whether this was a work of God not to wait until everyone again grew cold and dead. ‘This is undoubtedly either a very great work of God, or a great work of the devil, as to the main substance of it,’ he argues. It was clearly of God, overall, and therefore it was a glorious work.

Would he have made a similar statement about phenomena like the ‘Toronto blessing’? It was difficult to be neutral. As we have noted earlier, people took strong positions one way or the other. What one called a new wave of the Spirit, another called a counterfeit revival.<sup>56</sup> Would Edwards have concluded here, as he did in the eighteenth century, that overall, in spite of the problems, it was clearly a work of God?

Concerning the Great Awakening, Edwards concludes that it was glorious in nature, degree and circumstances, considering the unworthiness of the people who had been involved. It was glorious in extent, being beyond any awakening ever previously known in New England. It was glorious in numbers in that so many appeared to have turned from sin to serve God. It was glorious in circumstances, as a great part of the congregation had been moved at one time, with up to ten souls being converted on one occasion, with populous towns being changed and ‘multitudes of little children... wrought upon.’<sup>57</sup> It was glorious in the high attainments of Christians who had experienced ‘extraordinary degrees of light, love and spiritual joy.’

## 2 THE OBLIGATIONS OF THE REVIVAL

In Part Two of *Thoughts on the Revival*, Edwards outlines the obligations of believers to acknowledge, rejoice in and promote the revival.

2.1 Firstly, he points out again ‘the danger of lying still, and keeping long silence, respecting any remarkable work of God.’ It is very dangerous to be slow or

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<sup>56</sup> See ‘Does the Church Need Heresy Hunters?’ *Charisma*, May 1995:46ff; Hank Hanegraaff, *The Counterfeit Revival*, cassette tape, quoted in R.Riss, ‘The Counterfeit Revival?’ leaflet, n.d. but 1995?

<sup>57</sup> It is of interest, in passing, that many children have experienced the ‘Toronto blessing.’

backward in recognising God's hand at work. For Edwards, what had happened was so patently of God, that he clearly could not understand those who did not recognise it. Paul's exhortation to 'test everything' (I Thessalonians 5:19-21) does not seem to be part of his thinking here, perhaps because he felt he himself had already done this. In any case, it was impossible to be neutral. God had set his King on his holy hill and determined to put honour upon his Son. So it was incumbent on all to recognise this.

2.2 The next section is interesting. 'The latter-day glory is probably to begin in America.' He sees this as a fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy that the isles would wait for the Lord (60:9). This view also reflects his post-millennial view that it would be through the preaching of the gospel that the church would triumph and the millennium be introduced. This comes out frequently in his writings. Earlier in this work he wonders whether the Great Awakening would be 'the dawning of a happy state of his church on earth' (I:373; see also II:272). He is strongly of the belief that 'the time will come, when there will not be one nation remaining in the world, which shall not embrace the true religion... the prophecies of the New Testament do no less evidently show, that a time will come when the gospel shall universally prevail, and the kingdom of Christ be extended over the whole habitable earth, in the most proper sense... John 12:32' (II:286).<sup>58</sup>

Edwards believed in a widespread and glorious pouring out of the Holy Spirit at the end of time which would result in a wonderful revival. It would specifically be the result of the preaching of the gospel and would bring multitudes into the kingdom of God. There would also be great opposition, but ultimately, Satan's kingdom would be overthrown and Jesus would reign as King of Kings and Lord of Lords (I:605ff).

In the light of comments like this, Edwards was accused of believing that the Millennium had already come (I:lxix). While recognising the possibility that others may have more light than he, he still says plainly that he believes the recent revivals may be forerunners of 'those glorious times so often prophesied in Scripture that this was 'the first dawning of that light' which would bring in the church's 'latter-day glory.' However, there would be many dark times 'before this work shall have subdued the world, and Christ's kingdom shall be everywhere established and settled in peace, which will be the lengthening of the Millennium or day of the church's peace, rejoicing and triumph on earth.'

Edwards argues that he cannot see how Europe can fulfil biblical prophecies. But in the new world, 'the new and most glorious state of God's church on earth might commence there' (I:382). Given the almost universal acceptance of pre-millennial eschatology amongst evangelicals and charismatics these days, such post-millennial teaching falls strangely on modern ears. Few advocates of contemporary revival would see it in the light of a post-millennial interpretation

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<sup>58</sup> Edwards' eschatology is spelt out in some detail in *A History of the Work of Redemption*, a collection of sermons preached in 1739 and published posthumously (I:532ff,604ff)



of biblical prophecy although there is fairly wide belief in an age-ending revival preceding the return of the Lord.<sup>59</sup>

2.3 In the third section, Edwards again outlines ‘the danger of not acknowledging and encouraging, and especially of deriding, this work’ (I:383). Here again, he expounds a post-millennial concept, linking the revival with ‘a great day of ingathering of the elect’ as symbolically represented by the feast of tabernacles or ingathering. This would involve both ‘the weaning of the church from its milk of cardinal ordinances, shadows and beggarly elements’ and ‘the conversion of sinners.’

2.4 Again, Edwards writes of ‘the obligations of rulers, ministers, and all sorts to promote the work’ (I:386). When a new king comes to the throne, it is expected that people of all elements of the realm will welcome him. Those who stand at a distance will be clearly noticed for their reluctance. Above all, ministers of the gospel should be quick to respond to a visitation from God. Again, Edwards is very strong here, warning that failure to promote the work of God may result, as it did in biblical times, in being exposed to God’s curse (I:389).<sup>60</sup> This is strong stuff; but it must be seen in the light of his earlier (and subsequent) calls for discernment and reflection in the light of Scripture. Edwards himself had no hesitation in dismissing opinions or actions that did not seem to him to be consistent with the Word of God. Clearly, once we are convinced something is of God, we are obliged to respond to it with all our hearts.

### 3 ERRORS IN LEADERSHIP

In Part Three of *Thoughts*, Edwards considers some of the errors made by ministers which had been detrimental to the cause. ‘In our endeavours to promote this great work,’ he urges, ‘we ought to use the utmost caution, vigilance and skill, in the measures we take in order to it. A great affair should be managed with great prudence’ (I:390). Satan’s method of hindering revival was to beguile the leaders. Edwards lists several mistakes that leaders had made.

3.1 ‘*Ministers addressing themselves rather to the affections of their hearers than to their understandings*, and striving to raise their passions to the utmost height... by a very affectionate manner of speaking, and a great appearance of earnestness in voice and gesture, than by clear reasoning, and informing their judgement’

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<sup>59</sup> ‘Mainstream,’ pamphlet, Belper, UK: Banner Ministries, n.d., 8.

<sup>60</sup> Compare the following statement from the General Superintendant of the Assemblies of God in Australia urging them to attend the 1995 National Conference where Rodney Howard-Browne was the invited speaker—‘One of the saddest verses in the Bible records Jesus weeping over Jerusalem and saying, “You did not know the hour of your visitation.” This failure to discern the seasons of God, resulted in the sombre declaration of Jesus’ words, where he said, “Your house will be left desolate”. My cry to God is, “Help me not miss what you are doing. Give me wisdom to lead my church into the blessing. Help me, Lord, not to force it or make it happen and may I not just seek some formula, but out of a relationship with Jesus, guide my assembly into the fullness of the Spirit.” May the Lord bless you. Looking forward to seeing you at, perhaps, the most significant conference we have ever had.’ (*Ministers Bulletin* Mitcham: Assemblies of God in Australia National Conference, April 1995:5)

(I:391). Here again, Edwards hints at concepts he would develop later in *The Religious Affections*. He notes that the affections arise from some understanding—either true or false. So it behoves ministers to speak truth.

There is nothing wrong with raising the affections high if the cause is ‘worthy of affection.’ Reason, on the other hand, produces more light than heat. But ‘our people do not so much need to have their heads stored, as to have their hearts touched; and they stand in the greatest need of that sort of preaching, which has the greatest tendency to do this’ (I:391). So the gospel needed to be preached in the way Isaiah described (‘lift thy voice like a trumpet’—58:1) in a loud and earnest manner.

This section epitomises Edwards’ custom of presenting both sides of a question, and almost discounting one by the expounding of the other. Clearly, both points are valid. To preach to the heart without addressing the mind and to address the mind without touching the heart are equally deficient. One reason for the appeal of movements like the Great Awakening or the charismatic movement may well be the sterility of churches where only the intellect has been challenged by the gospel. Perhaps this explains why so many Anglican churches in England were affected by the ‘Toronto blessing.’<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, to attempt to remedy this by ignoring the reason and aiming straight at the heart will simply create problems of a different kind.

3.2 *The next error is that of ‘speaking terror to them who are already under great terrors, instead of comforting them’* (I:392). Of course, Edwards agreed, it is wrong to terrify people with falsehood. On the other hand, not to warn those who do not believe in Christ is not to preach the word of God. Even little children need to be warned of the dangers of hell. A dangerous wound, he argues, even in a child, may need a powerful lance.

3.3 *It is a mistake to overload people with too many meetings* (I:393). There is a limit to how much people can take. Ken Chant expresses it like this—

‘Revivals’ usually bring a rapid and massive, but often short-term ingathering of souls. They tend to have a short life because the energy of the ‘revival’ may be dissipated by lack of restraint. The saints become worn-out from attending too many meetings, exhausted by the inordinate length of the meetings, and drained emotionally by staying on a spiritual ‘high’ for an extended period. People cannot maintain a high level of intense fervour for prolonged weeks and months.<sup>62</sup>

Nevertheless, Edwards makes the obvious point that although ‘worldly business must be done’ it is to be expected that people will be more eager to meet together in times of special visitation than they would normally do.

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<sup>61</sup> By the end of 1994, ‘between 2,500 and 4,000 British churches... experienced meetings similar to the Airport Vineyard’s,’ *Charisma*, February 1995:21.

<sup>62</sup> K.Chant, *Better Than Revival* Kingswood: Ken Chant Ministries, 1994: 67.

3.4 *It is erroneous to make too much of bodily manifestations.* Edwards makes his own hesitations clear—

Another thing, wherein I think some ministers have been injured, is in being very much blamed for making so much of outcries, faintings and other bodily effects; speaking of them as tokens of the presence of God, and arguments of success in preaching; seeming to strive to their utmost to bring a congregation to that pass, and seeming to rejoice in it, yea, even blessing God for it when they see these effects (I:394).

This sentence might well have been a description of the ‘Toronto blessing.’ There is no doubt that proponents of the ‘blessing’ clearly saw the physical effects as ‘tokens of the presence of God.’<sup>63</sup> Howard-Browne, for instance, talked of the ‘manifest presence of God’ in contrast to His general omnipresence.<sup>64</sup> Virtually all the written material available on the subject, by friend or foe, was preoccupied with the physical phenomena. Those who enjoyed the ‘blessing’ inevitably used anecdotes of people being ‘slain in the Spirit’ or displaying some other bodily reaction as an example of its validity. Those who are opposed to it generally pointed to bizarre behaviour as proof that it was heresy. Edwards’ advice is salutary. There are more important issues at stake.

Edwards agrees that physical expressions are signs of God’s presence, but only in the right context. ‘When I see them excited by preaching the important truths of God’s word, urged and enforced by proper arguments and motives, or consequent on other means that are good, I do not scruple to speak of them, and to rejoice in them, and bless God for them as such.’

Although its major roots lay in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition, this general tendency to focus on experience more than practice was also evident in the Pentecostal and charismatic movements. Personal piety was important, and immoral behaviour was absolutely unacceptable, but areas such as social justice and plain upright living were less often stressed.

His investigations had shown that generally the fruits in people’s lives validated the experiences. Indeed, ‘to rejoice that the work of God is carried on calmly, without much ado, is in effect to rejoice that it is carried on with less power.’ Again he qualifies this. It is not enough to judge by the experience of individual persons, because of great differences in temperament and personality. But when there is a ‘very powerful influence of the Spirit of God’ a whole multitude will be affected.

Although its major roots lay in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition, this general tendency to focus on experience more than practice was also evident in the

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<sup>63</sup> In a discussion at a meeting of the Steering Committee of the Australian Pentecostal Ministers’ Fellowship in February 1995, at which I was present, several members made the point very strongly that ‘the presence of God’ was the most significant aspect of the ‘Toronto blessing.’

<sup>64</sup> Roberts, 1994:92.

Pentecostal and charismatic movements. Personal piety was important, and immoral behaviour was absolutely unacceptable, but areas such as social justice and plain upright living were less often stressed.

Renowned British pioneer Pentecostal pastor and teacher Donald Gee (1891-1966) put it like this—

EXPERIENCE — yes, indeed; thank God for it! Is it not the great essential to setting any ministry whether public or private, aglow with convicting power? Is it not the substance without which cleverness, arguments, masterly doctrinal statements, and the finest eloquence remain but as an empty shadow, in danger of ending in mere words, nothing more?

No man possessed of a Scriptural experience needs be afraid of an argument; he is beyond its reach. Any man rejoicing in a living experience of God in his life has a power independent of, and mightily beyond, all external training in logic or theology...

Facts are awkward things to dispose of! To the glory of God we can testify — yes, verily by the thousands — to having received a mighty experience, an actual crisis in our Christian experience and in our lives, that has ever since lifted all things to a higher level, has thrust us forth in testimony and service for the Lord Jesus Christ that was before undreamt of, has made us new men and women in a very real sense, has altered the current of our lives, has changed our whole vision both for this life and the next, has flooded the Word of God (with) new meaning and power, and has made us taste as (never) before the exquisite fullness of obeying the ... commandment ‘to love the Lord our God with (all) our heart, all our soul, all our mind and all our strength...’

We suggest that those who have no personal experience of these things might well speak more softly at times.<sup>65</sup>

3.5 ‘Some ministers have been blamed for keeping persons together, that have been under great affections, which have appeared in such extraordinary manifestations’ (I:395). In other words, people encourage each other to reflect their behaviour—what we might call today ‘crowd psychology’ or ‘mass suggestion.’ Again, Edwards urges people not to ‘make an ado without necessity’ for in the long run this will have a negative effect. Nevertheless, a genuine manifestation of the Spirit will have a ‘happy influence’ on the minds of others.

3.6 ‘Another thing that gives great disgust to many, is *the disposition that persons show, under great affections, to speak so much; and, with such earnestness and vehemence, to be setting forth the greatness, and wonderfulness, and importance of divine and eternal things; and to be so passionately warning, inviting, and entreating others*’ (I:395) As before, Edwards warns against overdoing it, but points out that when we are excited about temporal things, we speak much of them, so why not of things eternal?

In sports-mad contemporary societies, this is a salient point. It is not unusual for crowds of fans to shout, cheer, clap, sing, wave banners, laugh, cry and tremble at

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<sup>65</sup> GN 16:11 Nov 1925, pp.8f

sporting events, with never a suggestion that such behaviour is inappropriate or unseemly. In fact, commentators will talk or write enthusiastically about the great 'atmosphere' being generated. Yet, let people show even a little excitement at a service of Christian worship and it is condemned as emotionalism or fanaticism. With less reason than we have, Old Testament saints seemed to have a more generous attitude to exuberant worship than we do today, as witness the Psalms.

3.7 *'Another thing that some have found fault with, is abounding so much in singing in religious meetings'* (I:396). What would these people make of the long song services which are so prevalent today in charismatic gatherings generally? Edwards has little difficulty in defending the right of the saints to worship God in song, but even he might have some impatience with the disproportionate time given to music and song in some meetings, in relation to the reading of Scripture and the preaching of the Word.

3.8 *'Another thing that many have disliked, is the religious meetings of children to read and pray together, and perform religious exercises by themselves'* (I:397). Edwards is loath to join this criticism. Certainly, there might be mistakes, but so were there among adults. Overall, he has observed that God had 'really descended from heaven to be amongst them' and that children ought to be encouraged in their pursuit of God's blessing. As we have noted, children have often been blessed in revival meetings. In one place in the 1990s, there was a church in which evangelistic and prayer ministry was sometimes carried out by children.<sup>66</sup> Edwards would clearly have wanted to commend this.

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<sup>66</sup> Ken Hooper, 'Report on Visit to Argentina' in a Christian Revival Crusade newsletter, Endeavour Hills, 20 April 1995.

## THINGS TO BE CORRECTED

Having answered some of the more common objections to the Awakening, Edwards now proceeds to list some of the errors which he perceives to be in need of correction. This is a long section of *Thoughts* and contains considerable detail. I will attempt a brief summary here.

Initially, Edwards speaks with some impatience about those who were only looking to find fault, sitting back and waiting for some saint to slip or some preacher to fail. It was common Satanic strategy to oppose revival by driving people into ‘excesses and extravagances’ (I:397). If he cannot hold them back, he will push them on—especially to ‘those three extremes of enthusiasm, superstition, and severity towards opposers.’ This should be ‘an everlasting warning’ for the church. Even in the midst of a great visitation, the devil can be active.

### 1 SOME ERRORS

Now follows a list of five mistakes he had observed. The first major problem he sees is that of spiritual pride—

2 ‘*The first and worst cause of errors, that prevail in such a state of things, is spiritual pride*’ (I:398). Of all kinds of pride, spiritual pride is the worst, for it was most like the devil. It is difficult to discern, because it is secret and subtle. So we need to watch our hearts with diligence, for ‘he that trusts his own heart is a fool’, and ‘he that thinks himself most out of danger, is indeed most in danger’ (I:399). Humility is the pattern for Christians ‘who are but fellow-worms’ and we ought to treat each other as Christ, who is infinitely greater than we, treats us.

Spiritual pride may lure us, Edwards warns, to adopt a distinctive way of speech and behaviour; it tends to make us inflexible; it is greatly affected by opposition and injury; it demonstrates an unhealthy self-confidence towards both God and man; it leaves us open to flattery; it may cause us, like Moses, to provoke God. Such warnings were not only relevant to the Great Awakening, but to all Christians everywhere.

1.2 ‘*Another cause of errors... is the adoption of wrong principles*’ (I:404). Edwards notes several of these. The first is ‘a notion that it is God’s manner in these days, to guide his saints, at least some that are more eminent, by inspiration,

or immediate revelation.’ The problem, as he sees it, is that when we believe we are guided by divine revelation, we cannot be persuaded that we are wrong. So we finish up defending error. Why can’t we be content with the one revelation that is sure—the canon of Scripture? When the Spirit leads us, he does not give us new precepts, but guides us according to the old ones. By expecting divine direction, we lay ourselves open to delusion.

The practice of such divine leading has been widespread in every revival movement. Some people are all too ready to make bold statements such as, ‘God told me...’, or, ‘The Lord said...’ even though all that has happened is a spontaneous thought or a positive feeling towards a certain line of action.

The following statements are illustrative of this kind of experience—

I was walking out the door behind Lonnie, and the Lord told me, ‘Ask that young man to give his testimony tonight.’<sup>67</sup>

That night I had to speak... and the Lord said to me, ‘Call all those that want a blessing...’ And the Lord said to me...<sup>68</sup>

God began to deal with pride, arrogance and pettiness in my life... God said, ‘Don’t worry about their judgement, worry about my judgement.’<sup>69</sup>

God began bringing to my mind those things that were wrong in my life... Then God said, ‘You are trampling on my Name.’<sup>70</sup>

It is evident, that in all these cases, what is being described are almost certainly impressions on the mind. But the language in which they are couched tends to lend them an unwarranted authority. Edwards’ caution in this area is salutary.

Second, ‘another way that many have been deceived, is by drawing false conclusions from true premises’ (I:405). For example, while it is right and proper to pray in faith, this does not mean that everything we pray for is right for us to have. The ground of such praying may be a fertile imagination rather than the will of God.

Third, another wrong principle is that we ought to do everything we feel the Spirit of God inclines us to do (I:406). Not that there is any fault with the Spirit. But we may wrongly express the disposition he gives us. For instance, the Spirit will impart to us a disposition to love our neighbours, but we may apply this mistakenly in a particular instance, by killing them with kindness. Or a minister may be so impelled with a desire to proclaim the gospel that he neglects to eat and drink and care for himself. Dangers of such excess are ever-present.

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<sup>67</sup> John Wimber in Waugh, 90

<sup>68</sup> R.Howard-Browne in G.Waugh, *Flashpoints of Revival* Shippensburg: Revival Press, 1998: 92.

<sup>69</sup> James Hahn in J.Avant, M.McDow and A.Reid (eds), *Revival!: the story of the current awakening in Brownwood, Ft. Worth, Wheaton and beyond* Nashville: Broadman, 1996:39

<sup>70</sup> Avant et al (eds), 1996:46.

Fourth, another wrong principle is to focus on whatever is of immediate benefit to the neglect of future consequences (I:407). Jesus advised us to be ‘wise as serpents’ and the Scriptures urge us to exercise discretion. Like a wise ploughman, we need to plan for the future (Isaiah 28:24f). So it is wise to avoid needless provocation of ‘carnal men’ and to live peaceably with all. New and strange matters should be introduced with care.

He goes on, ‘Nothing can be more evident from the New Testament, than that such things ought to be done with great caution and moderation, to avoid the offence that may be thereby given, and the prejudices that might be raised, to clog and hinder the progress of religion’ (I:408). So Paul refrained from teaching things for which people were not ready (1 Cor 3:1f). And Jesus held back from revealing all to His disciples (John 16:12f).

This is a useful example of the dilemma in which Edwards constantly finds himself. On the one hand, he expresses his longing for ‘holy commotion’; on the other, he urges restraint and discretion.<sup>71</sup> This difficult balance is possibly the greatest challenge facing all revival movements.

Fifth, we may have ‘a wrong notion’ of divine attestation to persons or things. ‘We go too far, when we look upon the success that God gives to some persons, in making them instruments of doing much good, as a testimony of God’s approbation of those persons and all the courses they undertake’ (I:408). Edwards wisely comments, The fact that someone is blessed in one area of ministry does not mean that everything they do is right. ‘If a person’s success be a reward of something in him that God approves, yet it is no argument that he approves of everything in him.’ David and Solomon were sufficient example of this.

Historically, there is abundant evidence that this has often been the case. Because of blessings received, many have accepted everything else that happens. This is like arguing that because God heals some people at places like Lourdes, it is right to pray to Mary. Or that because an evangelist is an effective soul-sinner, all the doctrines he teaches are necessarily correct. God’s favour is an expression of His grace that He honours His word, even when it is proclaimed in circumstances that may be questionable. That God regularly uses fallible instruments for his glory is obvious: He has no other option. Difficulties emerge when the areas of fallibility are substantial. On the other hand, because of faults observed, others criticise everything.<sup>72</sup> This may be equally dangerous. Others, again, try to steer a middle path.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> This also helps to explain why Edwards is quoted both by those opposing physical manifestations of spiritual experience and by those advocating them.

<sup>72</sup> For example, N.Michael, *Slaying in the Spirit: the Telling Wonder* Punchbowl: Bruised Reed, 1992; H.Westcott, ‘Faith to Receive the Gift of Discernment’ in *Vision Newsletter* No.64, January, 1995; H.Sheppard, *A New Wave of the Spirit* Paradise: Published by the author, 1995; P.Powell, *Contending Earnestly for the Faith* Hamilton, N.Z., Vol 1.1, Nov/Dec 1994; Vol 1.2 Jan/Feb 1995; *The Briefing*, Kingsford, No 152, March 7, 1995.

<sup>73</sup> For example, Derek Prince, *Uproar in the Church* Christchurch: Derek Prince Ministries, n.d.; I.Pennicook, ‘I’ve Been to Toronto!’ *New Day*, Plympton, No 145, March 1995.



Sixthly, Edwards argues that another error is ‘that external order in matters of religion, and use of the means of grace, is but little to be regarded’ (I:409). True, there may be some dead forms and lifeless ceremonies, but this does not discount the value of order. ‘Zeal without order will do but little’ (I:410). Order is to be observed among the angels and it is necessary for the Church to achieve its task.

Lastly, the false idea that ‘ministers, because they speak as Christ’s ambassadors, may assume the same style, and speak with the same authority, that the prophets of old did, yea that Jesus Christ himself did in the 23rd of Matthew’ (I:410). It is true that ministers of the gospel are sent out in the same way as Christ and the apostles. But this does not mean they all have equal authority.

In the light of this, it seems plain that Edwards would have some discomfort with the ministry of Rodney Howard-Browne, for example, who, with an unwarranted authority, frequently labeled those who did not accept what he did as pharisaical or cold towards God or lacking in faith, using the language of Matthew 23, which Jesus applied to hypocrites, to denounce those with genuine questions or concerns.<sup>74</sup>

1.3 ‘*A third cause of errors in conduct, is, being ignorant or unobservant of some things, by which the devil has special advantage*’ (I:411). Here he names two things in particular— inward experiences and external effects of experiences.

Regarding inward experiences, he suggests three ways in which the devil may gain advantage over us. Firstly, there is the mixture of truly gracious, divine blessings with that which is natural and corrupt, such as human affection, human passions, impressions of the imagination, and spiritual pride.

Secondly, are ‘the unheeded defects there sometimes are in the experiences of true Christians, connected with those high affections wherein there is much that is truly good’ (I:412). He is referring here particularly to defects in our understanding or experience of God. Just as God is presented to us as both Judge and Father, so we need balance in our lives. To be preoccupied with the great love of Christ, for example, without also being aware of the ‘awful, holy majesty of God’ is to suffer a defect. If this work is to be the beginning of a general revival, such balance will be essential.

Thirdly, even more important is the danger of the ‘degenerating of experiences’ (I:413). Edwards is particularly concerned that the spiritual does not slip over into the carnal—into one or more of the three danger areas previously mentioned of natural affections, imagination or spiritual pride. Having begun in the Spirit it is easy to seek perfection in the flesh (Galatians 3:3). This is not to deny natural affection, towards family and friends, for example, but to ensure that it does not replace true, spiritual affection.

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<sup>74</sup> This happened at gatherings at Christian City Church in Sydney, Australia, in 1995.

Regarding the external effects of experience, Edwards gladly recognises their validity, as we have seen previously, but he strongly advises against unlimited or unrestrained expression. 'There ought to be a general restraint upon these things, and there should be prudent care taken of persons in such extraordinary circumstances.' People should not make 'more ado' than is needed.

While some of the 'Toronto blessing' leaders tried to implement this advice, it was rare to find them making this point as strongly as Edwards does. Generally, although other guidelines were suggested, I am unaware of anyone who, like Edwards, encouraged people to refrain as much as possible from bodily demonstrations. Usually, the very opposite applied. Manifestations were encouraged, and leaders were encouraged to promote them, the only cautions being to maintain a focus on God rather than man.<sup>75</sup> Clark Pinnock, for instance, in a largely favourable comment about the 'Toronto blessing,' wrote, 'I do wish that the teaching component in the meetings were stronger in explaining why the Spirit is outpoured. There is a danger that people may come to the meetings craving a spiritual high, not in order to be empowered to walk with Jesus down the path of suffering and service.'<sup>76</sup>

1.4 *There is great danger in 'censuring others.'* Edwards pays particular note to the problem of even questioning the genuineness of people's salvation, including ministers. It is, he admits, a terrible thing, for unconverted ministers to preach. But it is God's task, not ours, to deal with them. And such subtleties as praying for a minister's conversion publicly should also be avoided! Nor was it a valid excuse to say that the Spirit had forced us to pray in such a way.

1.5 *There is risk when unqualified people attempt to teach the Word of God.* Edwards sees dangers in what he calls 'lay-exhorting' (I:417). He sets down two areas on which he assumes everyone agrees, namely that it is not improper for lay people to exhort one another, but rather a duty, and that there is a way of exhorting which is proper only for the office of teachers. It follows then, that when lay people exhort one another, they should not assume the authority of a teacher. 'There is a certain authority that ministers have and should exercise in teaching, as well as governing the flock' (1 Timothy 2:12; Titus 2:15).

So when 'private Christians' exhort one another, they should do so humbly and by way of entreaty rather than with authority. So no one except a minister 'duly appointed to that sacred calling, ought to follow teaching and exhorting as a calling, or so as to neglect that which his proper calling.' It was a dangerous matter for lay people to 'invade the office of a minister.'

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<sup>75</sup> In meetings I attended, which admittedly may not be fully representative, attention was drawn to physical demonstration and when people laughed out loud during the preaching, for example, the congregation's attention was either been drawn to it or it was allowed to continue unchecked. This was the case at Randwick Baptist Church, in Sydney, Australia, in 1995.

<sup>76</sup> Clark Pinnock, 'Catch the Fire: No Small Feat,' *Spread the Fire*, Toronto: Airport Vineyard Christian Fellowship, Vol 1, Issue 1, January/February 1995:27.

So lay people should not speak out in a time of solemn worship, even if they protest that they could not help it. There ought also ‘to be a moderate restraint on the loudness of persons’ talking under ‘high affections.’ And there should also be ‘some restraint on the abundance of talk, under strong affections.’

Once again, there were historical factors that prompted Edwards to set down these warnings. As there was growing dissension about the revival, new groups were commenced, sometimes with unskilled preachers at the helm. It was not unusual for such people to argue that the presence of the Spirit was sufficient for them; academic training was not needed. One contemporary wrote unkindly of ‘the poor and miserable exhorters who have sprung up like mushrooms in the night, and in the morning thought themselves accomplished teachers and called of God to be so.’<sup>77</sup>

The ordained clergy were generally concerned. Edwards himself wrote a letter to a young friend in which he warned that no matter what good might be done for the present, it was ‘the long run of events’ that had to be considered. There were other ministers, however, who lent support to the untrained preachers and encouraged them in their fervour. Edwards was clearly concerned, as his comments here show.

In today’s church, where the distinction between clergy and lay person is becoming less distinct, especially in charismatic areas, Edwards’ view here seems somewhat restrictive. The use of lay people is becoming increasingly common. However, one can detect the wisdom of experience behind what he says. Many of the heresies which have afflicted the Pentecostal movement, for example, have resulted from lack of theological depth and learning on the part of those who have promulgated them. It is also worth noting again that some advocates of the ‘Toronto blessing’ encouraged participants to put aside their intellect and simply to accept what was happening. Ultimately, such an approach can only lead to confusion and error.

It is interesting to note that in the early nineteenth century, there was an upsurge in theological education, evidently stemming from the awakenings of the eighteenth. Seventeen new seminaries were commenced between 1808 and 1827.<sup>78</sup>

1.6 *Singing should be the servant, not the master, of worship.* A final error that concerns Edwards is that of the ‘mismanagement of singing praises to God.’ He feared that singing would be for ‘amusement or diversion’ rather than a solemn act of worship. There was obviously some concern about companies of people singing in the streets, but Edwards could find nothing against it.

Again, it is interesting to reflect what he would think of some of our modern music and contemporary worship styles. In his day, singing was generally

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<sup>77</sup> Murray, 1987:221.

<sup>78</sup> I. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism* Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994:225.

confined to metrical versions of the Psalms, although he was willing to introduce new forms of hymnody, including Isaac Watts' paraphrases, which were first used at Northampton in 1743. Of course, Wesleyan hymns were soon to become very popular, as well.<sup>79</sup> Edwards' warning is a salutary one, nevertheless. All acts of worship, including music, must be subjected to the overall purpose of glorifying God. When our own pleasure becomes pre-eminent, music is failing in its primary role in that context.

Edwards terminates Part IV of *Thoughts* by reminding us again how eager the devil is to push us too far one way or the other, like a pendulum. And he reinforces our need of wisdom and patience—

What a poor, blind, weak and miserable creature is man, at his best estate. We are like poor, helpless sheep; the devil is too subtle for us. What is our strength! What is our wisdom! How ready are we to go astray! How easily we are drawn aside into innumerable snares, while in the mean time we are bold and confident, and doubt not that we are right and safe! We are foolish sheep in the midst of subtle serpents and cruel wolves, and do not know it. Oh how unfit are we to be left to ourselves! And how much do we stand in need of the wisdom, the power, the condescension, patience, forgiveness, and gentleness of our good Shepherd!

## 2 PROMOTING THE WORK

Edwards concludes his *Thoughts* by outlining ways in which we should promote the work of God. There are three major areas—

2.1 '*We should endeavour to remove stumbling blocks*' (I:421). We need to prepare the way of the Lord (Isaiah 40:3). The greatest stumbling block was unforgiveness. Here follows a profound passage in which Edwards calls for those on both sides to confess their faults and forgive one another. Firstly, those who had opposed the work 'cannot be excused in the sight of God' and must confess their error, especially if they were ministers. For it is against Christ that they had spoken.

On the other hand, those who had been over-zealous in promoting it, to the extent of openly injuring others, needed to repent, too, and publicly confess it. And those who had been guilty of laying stumbling blocks by their open transgression, needed also to repent. 'At such a day as this,' he concludes, 'God especially calls his people to the exercise of extraordinary meekness and mutual forbearance' (I:421).

So not only must we confess our own faults, but we must be tolerant of others. Those who had been injurious in their zeal, should not be treated with bitterness. Ultimately, it is before the throne of grace that we should resolve our difficulties.

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<sup>79</sup> Murray, 1987:187. Both the Wesley brothers, John and Charles, were accomplished composers of hymns, although Charles' works are better known. Both had conversion experiences in 1738 and began their ministries, including hymn-writing, soon after.

This is a profound passage, calling us, as it does, not necessarily to agree on everything, but to be truly Christ-like in our approach to each other. Sadly, revival phenomena too often result in some polarisation. Edwards' exhortation here is as relevant to our situation as it was to his own.

2.2 *We need to preach sound doctrine.* Here Edwards makes no bones about it. This is a sovereign work of God so there is no room for any Arminian beliefs—

And now I would beseech those who have hitherto been somewhat inclining to Arminian principles, seriously to weigh the matter with respect to this work and consider, whether, if the Scriptures are the word of God, the work that has been described in the first part of this treatise must not be, as to the substance of it, the work of God, and the flourishing of that religion which is taught by Christ and his apostles... Now is a good time for Arminians to change their principles. I would now, as one of the friends of this work, humbly invite them to come and join with us, and be on our side... (I:422f)

To Edwards, Calvinism was 'the religion taught by Christ.' That he had little time for Arminianism comes out frequently in his writings. In his *Faithful Narrative* he describes those who are converted as being 'savingly wrought upon,' a phrase which clearly indicates a sovereign act of God (I:347). In the same passage he describes Arminianism as threatening the revival. He disagreed with Wesley over this issue, among others. And later, a year before his death, he published a large volume commonly known as *On the Freedom of the Will*, which was substantially a Calvinist tract.

Edwards saw revival as a glorious expression of God's sovereign grace. It was the Lord's doing and it was marvellous in his eyes. Over the last couple of centuries, revival movements, especially of the charismatic kind, have more often been seen as the fruits of human endeavours such as repentance, humility and prayer and fasting.<sup>80</sup> Edwards would no doubt have been somewhat alarmed at these doctrinal roots, as he saw Arminianism as seriously deficient. Both he and Whitefield strongly declared their Calvinist stance and were convinced that a drift to Arminianism would kill, or at least seriously maim, the revival.<sup>81</sup>

In recent revival movements, such theological niceties have often been of little significance. In the charismatic renewal of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, Pentecostals, Anglicans, Baptists and Vineyard people all seemed equally comfortable with what was happening. Great combined conferences were held in

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<sup>80</sup> Writers such as Charles Finney plainly attributed revival to the fruits of human endeavour. See C.G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, London: Milner and Company Ltd 1838:16-22. The 'Toronto Blessing' clearly saw its origins in the 'Faith Movement,' Roberts, 1994: 61ff, 83ff; A. Morrison, 'The Genealogy of the "Toronto Blessing",' *Australian Beacon*, May 1995.

<sup>81</sup> Murray, 1987:213.

which Catholic nuns and Lutheran pastors stood side by side worshiping the Lord, united, not by common doctrine, but by common experience.<sup>82</sup>

It is probably also true that most charismatics would feel uncomfortable to be labeled ‘Calvinist.’ And there is no doubt that charismatic practice is generally Arminian. God’s blessing is seen as a response to our faith. People are openly encouraged to put themselves in a position of readiness for God to bless them. ‘Create an atmosphere of faith, by giving opportunity for the Spirit to move,’ writes one denominational leader to his fellow ministers, using traditional Pentecostal terminology.<sup>83</sup> Such an approach would be abhorrent to Edwards who saw revival as a sovereign act of God. Clearly, he would have rejected such ‘enthusiasm.’

Edwards is also greatly concerned that ministers are not found wanting. To him, it is intolerable that a minister should stand in the pulpit before God’s people, to undertake to lead and instruct them, ‘when there is nothing in his heart.’ No one, he laments, will sink so low in hell as ungodly ministers (I:423). And, in a practical sense, when ‘enthusiasm and wildness comes in like a flood’ how can such men withstand it? When asked why he invited a certain minister to preach in his church, a well-known Australian pastor replied, ‘Well, I know some of the things he preaches are not scriptural, but he always brings a crowd and we always have many converts. So that’s why I ask him to come.’<sup>84</sup> One cannot imagine Edwards taking such an approach, converts or no converts. Truth was too important.

Ministers need a double portion of the Spirit of God. So it would be of great advantage if ministers in a given area were to meet together regularly for prayer and fasting, ‘earnestly seeking extraordinary supplies of divine grace from heaven’ (I:424).

Edwards sees two things as being important—zeal and resolution. A man of ordinary capacity will do more with these than someone ten times more capable without them. ‘Those who are possessed of these qualities commonly carry the day, in almost all affairs.’ Puritan leader Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) and field-preacher George Whitefield (1714-1770) were great examples.

So what is the answer? Edwards advocates greater care in both the training and the ordination of ministers. Colleges should be ‘nurseries of piety’ and ordinands should be carefully screened before acceptance to ensure that the saving work of God is clearly upon them. While many of today’s seminaries fail to teach from the perspective of biblical authority, Edwards would have been concerned about those who seek to minister with no training at all. Pentecostal pragmatism would have been a concern to him.

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<sup>82</sup> Personal knowledge.

<sup>83</sup> Evans, 1995:5.

<sup>84</sup> This was part of a conversation I had personally some years ago.

2.3 Finally, Edwards has some recommendations for everyone. His first is *fasting and prayer*. The challenge of the hour calls not for a grudging response, but for people to ‘abound’ in this. Before God does some great work, he usually first shows the church their great need of it so they cry to God for it. ‘There is no way that Christians in a private capacity can do so much to promote the work of God, and advance the kingdom of Christ, as by prayer’ (I:426). Men, women and children can all have a part to play here. A poor man in a cottage may affect the whole world!

If congregations were to meet together to pray for their ministers, the effect could only be good. If all over America, people were to keep a day of fasting and prayer, with repentance and thanksgiving, the effect could be extraordinary. On the other hand, there is also much benefit in secret praying and fasting. Arminians would agree.

This may appear to be a contradictory approach. If an awakening is a sovereign work of God, what is the point of such concerted prayer? Edwards does not see a problem here. For him, God’s sovereignty and our spirituality simply go hand in hand.

He would have been pleased with the emphasis on prayer around the world at the present time. The unprecedented numbers of praying people would have met with his enthusiastic approval. That people are encouraged to spend time before the Lord, ‘soaking’ in His blessing would appear to Edwards a positive thing.<sup>85</sup>

### 3 FINAL CHALLENGE

Edwards concludes with one final challenge. And here again, he anticipates a major theme of *The Religious Affections*. While it is important to spend time praying, singing, worshiping and gathering together, it is even more important to excel in moral duties—acts of righteousness, truth, meekness, forgiveness, brotherly love, charity and alms-giving (I:428f). These are ‘of much greater importance in the sight of God than all the externals of his worship.’

Pioneer Pentecostals would have agreed. Although fervent about the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit, the motivation was holiness. It was necessary to seek the Spirit’s fullness so that we could live sanctified lives. Indeed, many early Pentecostals had originally been Methodists brought up on Wesleyan teaching of entire sanctification or, as it was also known, Christian perfection.

In early Australian Pentecostalism, there was a strong emphasis on holy living as they understood it. The spirit of Pentecost was not just a matter of the heart. What people experienced internally was expected to show externally. Spirit-filled Christians were different. The Wesleyan quest for perfection and the evangelical emphasis on holiness remained at the core of Pentecostal piety. Naturally, sins such as murder, adultery, theft, drunkenness, assault and the like were eschewed.

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<sup>85</sup> ‘Soakers’ Meetings’, where people were encouraged to spend time, having been prayed for, in ‘soaking’ in the blessing of God, were common in some churches during the 1990s.

But equally to be avoided were practices such as playing cards, ballroom dancing, smoking and bodily adornment such as cosmetics and jewellery.<sup>86</sup>

At the height of the 'Toronto blessing' it was common to hear what was happening being described as a refreshing rather than a revival. Hopefully, it would be followed by a time of repentance and then revival.<sup>87</sup> But there seemed little discussion of the need for consistent Christian living. The focus was more on intimacy and renewed love for the Lord.<sup>88</sup> Integrity and consistent Christian living came a poor second to intimacy and experience in the preaching, teaching, writing and singing on the subject. Perhaps it was assumed that upright living would automatically follow.

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<sup>86</sup> B.Chant, *Spirit of Pentecost: the Origins and Development of the Pentecostal Movement in Australia, 1870-1939*, unpublished thesis, Macquarie University, 2000:534. See <http://e-theses.webjournals.org/>

<sup>87</sup> 'Arthur Burt... told me he believes that what we're seeing in Toronto and elsewhere isn't the great revival we're praying for. Rather... it's a kind of "John the Baptist", preparing the way for revival.' Stephen Strang, 'Floored in Toronto', *Charisma* Lake Mary: Strang Communications, February 1995:106. On the other hand, in a taped message on the subject, Richard Riss consistently refers to the 'Toronto blessing' as a revival.

<sup>88</sup> Jackson, 1994:17, 18.



## THE RELIGIOUS AFFECTIONS

Edwards' most profound work on the Awakening was *A Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections* first published in 1746 and based on a series of sermons preached in 1742 and 1743. His 1898 editor, Alexander Smellie, described it as containing 'his best and maturest conclusions on the great theme with which it deals.'<sup>89</sup> Murray calls it 'deep and profound' and claims that Edwards 'never gave closer and more careful thought to anything than he did to this.'<sup>90</sup> David Brainerd once advised a young man preparing for the ministry to read it frequently, and to work hard at distinguishing between experiences and affections so that he could learn how to 'make a difference between the gold and shining dross.'<sup>91</sup> Edwards later himself deplored the fact that some of those who had participated in the awakening had not learned to separate 'impressions on the imagination and living spiritual experience.'<sup>92</sup>

It is interesting, for example, that in this volume, Edwards makes virtually no direct reference to specific 'manifestations.' He is concerned with more fundamental issues. It seems clear that the novelty and impact of the physical demonstrations had now worn off, and deeper issues had to be dealt with. The occasion for the book was Edwards' growing concern over the dangers of counterfeit revival.

It is by the mixture of counterfeit religion with true, not discerned and distinguished, that the devil has had his greatest advantage against the cause and kingdom of Christ all along hitherto. It is by this means, principally, that he has prevailed against all revivings of religion that ever have been since the first founding of the Christian church. By this, he hurt the cause of Christianity in and after the apostolic age, much more than by all the persecutions of both Jews and heathens.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> J. Edwards, *The Religious Affections* Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, (1746), 1986:12.

<sup>90</sup> Murray, 1987: 252, 259.

<sup>91</sup> Murray, 1987:304.

<sup>92</sup> Murray, 1987:343.

<sup>93</sup> Edwards, 1986:18.

He laments that by this same means, ‘the devil has prevailed against the late great revival of religion in New England, so happy and promising in its beginning.’<sup>94</sup> So it will ever be in the church,

till we have learned well to distinguish between true and false religion, between saving affections and experiences, and those manifold fair shows and glistening appearances by which they are counterfeited; the consequences of which, when they are not distinguished, are often inexpressibly dreadful.<sup>95</sup>

It takes only a moment’s reflection to realise how pertinent these comments are to contemporary revival movements. Of particular relevance is the distinction Edwards draws between ‘affections’ and ‘experience’, a distinction which he makes very clear as he proceeds.

Meanwhile, Edwards continues, by counterfeiting the genuine, Satan gratifies himself, deceives multitudes, dampens true religion, encourages the enemies of Christianity, promotes wickedness under the guise of righteousness and scatters the flock of Christ. His aim, then, is that we should use our utmost endeavours to discern what is true and what is false. It is of vital importance that we know how to identify and recognise the gracious operations of the Spirit of God.

Edwards takes as his text 1 Peter 1:8—‘Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.’ So true religion as best seen in time of trial, when both love and joy are clearly displayed.

At the outset, Edwards attempts to define what he means by ‘affections.’ There are two faculties of the soul, he says. One is the understanding. The other is the inclination or the will. Through the former, we perceive or view things; through the latter, we respond to them. The more strongly we are inclined to respond, either negatively or positively, ‘the animal spirits become sensibly altered’, and we experience bodily sensations, which we usually describe as centred in the heart. ‘These more vigorous and sensible exercises of this faculty... are called the affections.’<sup>96</sup>

So the will and the emotions are intertwined.<sup>97</sup> There is never any case, he asserts, where the will is vigorously exercised without the emotions being involved. On

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<sup>94</sup> Edwards, 1986:18.

<sup>95</sup> Edwards, 1986:19.

<sup>96</sup> Edwards, 1986:25.

<sup>97</sup> It is of interest that Edwards avoids the use of the word ‘emotion’ at this point, perhaps because he has already drawn a distinction between affection and emotion. However, it seems clear that when he talks of ‘bodily sensation’ arising from vigorous activity of the soul, he is referring to what we would normally call emotion. For this reason, I have used the word in the following paragraphs. It is also of interest that his analysis of the affections is not dissimilar from the more recent common appraisal of human experience comprising the cognitive, the affective and the volitional.

the other hand, the affections are not just physical. Love, hate, joy and sorrow find their origins in the mind. The body in itself is capable of none of these things. So a disembodied spirit may love or rejoice, although there is no bodily response.

It is important to note the initial emphasis Edwards puts on the will. True affections arise out of a conscious decision which then involves the response of the heart. Or, as he had put it earlier in *Thoughts*, ‘All acts of the affections are in some senses acts of the will, and all the acts of the will are acts of the affections’ (I:367).

## 1 TRUE RELIGION ‘LIES VERY MUCH IN THE AFFECTIONS’

Over the next few pages, Edwards makes the point over and over that the affections are crucial to true faith. For all his concerns about excesses and imitations, Edwards never renounces the place of the affections. Nor does he settle for a sterile, cognitive form of Christianity. For him, a faith which does not touch the heart is no faith at all. He emphasises this point repeatedly. Matthew Henry, almost his contemporary, would have agreed. In his commentary on Matthew’s Gospel, he wrote—

All obedience begins in the affections, and nothing is done right, that is not done there first. Love is the leading affection, which gives law, and gives ground, to the rest; and therefore that, as the main fort, is to be first secured and garrisoned for God.<sup>98</sup>

In this regard, he would have great sympathy for those modern advocates of an experiential response to God. Here are examples of the kind of thing he says—

Who will deny that true religion consists in a great measure in vigorous and lively actings of the inclination and will of the soul, or the fervent exercises of the heart?

The Author of the human nature has not only given affections to men, but has made them very much the spring of men’s actions. Such is man’s nature that he is very inactive, any otherwise than he is influenced by some affection, either love or hatred, desire, hope, fear, or some other.

Nothing is more manifest in fact, than that the things of religion take hold of men’s souls no further than they affect them.

I am bold to assert that there never was any considerable change wrought in the mind or conversation of any person... that had not his affections moved.

The Holy Scriptures do everywhere place religion very much in the affection... in the affection of love, in love to God and the Lord Jesus

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<sup>98</sup> M. Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* New York: Fleming H. Revell, n.d., Vol 5:325.

Christ, and love to the people of God, and to mankind... holy desire... holy joy... sorrow, mourning, and brokenness of heart... gratitude... compassion and mercy... zeal... I have mentioned but a few texts, out of an innumerable multitude... which place religion very much in the affections.

The religion of the most eminent saints we have an account of in the Scripture consisted much in holy affections...

The Lord Jesus Christ was a Person who was remarkably of a tender and affectionate heart; and His virtue was expressed very much in the exercise of the holy affections.

The religion of heaven consists very much in affection.

This (affection) appears from the nature and design of the ordinances and duties God hath appointed... prayer... singing praises... the sacraments...

It is an evidence that true religion, or holiness of heart, lies very much in the affection of the heart, that the Scriptures place the sin of the heart very much in hardness of heart.

Upon the whole, I think it clearly and abundantly evident that true religion lies very much in the affections.<sup>99</sup>

Even a superficial glance at these statements makes it obvious that Edwards saw the involvement of the affections as essential to genuine Christian faith. Both the will and the heart must be touched.

From this, he draws several conclusions. Firstly, it is a mistake to reject affections as unimportant. Initially, he points out, in the New England visitation, there was a tendency to accept all expressions of the affections as marks of grace, without any attempt to examine the source from which they arose. More recently, because of extremes and abuses, there had come an equally unfortunate tendency to reject all expressions of the affections as either irrelevant or even harmful. Here Satan had succeeded by 'mingling false affections with the works of God's Spirit,' and causing a reaction to set in.

Edwards' dilemma shows clearly again here. How can you promote true religion and hence true affections, without falling into error one way or the other?

True religion consists so much in the affections that there can be no true religion without them. He who has no religious affection is in a state of spiritual death. As there is no true religion where there is nothing else but affection, so there is no true religion where there is no religious affection. As, on the one hand, there must be light in the understanding as well as an affected, fervent heart; where there is heat without light, there can be nothing divine or heavenly in that heart; so, on the other hand, where there

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<sup>99</sup> These quotations are taken from Edwards, 1986:27-47.

is a kind of light without heat, a head stored with notions and speculations, with a cold and unaffected heart, there can be nothing divine in that light...<sup>100</sup>

So he appeals again for discernment. It is right neither to reject nor to approve all affections, but to distinguish the true from the false.

Most revivalist leaders would generally agree with this. Written papers and articles in the late 20th century include many exhortations to evaluate what is happening. One Assemblies of God leader, for instance, instructs his pastors, 'Deal with any carnal behaviour and do not allow it to hijack what God is doing.'<sup>101</sup>

On the other hand, one criticism of the 'Toronto blessing' was that there was a reluctance to intervene with people's experiences or to stop people from laughing or falling or rolling if they wanted to do so. So guidelines for leaders and workers normally concentrated on how to pray with people or encourage them in their experience, rather than how to discern what was or was not of God.<sup>102</sup> In meetings I attended, there were people acting in a way that would traditionally have been considered out of order even in a Pentecostal church, but there was no attempt to restrain or direct them.

Of course, it was the manifestations which attracted all the attention, so to dampen them was to risk dampening the movement. In fact, one looked in vain for a cogent, biblical explanation of what the 'blessing' actually was, apart from the physical phenomena. Without the phenomena, there was little left to cling to.

Secondly, Edwards argues that 'if true religion lies much in the affections', it is clearly desirable to use whatever means will encourage or move them.<sup>103</sup> However, only just and right means must be used. The stage-craft used by some (although certainly not all) of the 'Toronto blessing' leaders, would have found scant approval from Edwards. He would clearly have been appalled at the kind of blatant manipulation that was demonstrated in some quarters.<sup>104</sup>

Thirdly, Edwards argues that we should be ashamed if our affections are no longer moved by the things of God. The great truths of the gospel should touch us deeply and affect us greatly. How heavy and cold our hearts must be if the gospel

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<sup>100</sup> Edwards, 1986:49.

<sup>101</sup> Evans, 1995: 5.

<sup>102</sup> eg Dixon, 1994:311ff; Jackson, 1994:10f; G.Coates, *Guidelines for Churches Experiencing 'Times of Refreshing from the Presence of the Lord,'* pamphlet, n.d.; P.Pringle, 'Paper on the Recent Revival in Our Church,' Brookvale: Christian City Church, 1995.

<sup>103</sup> Edwards, 1986:50.

<sup>104</sup> The deliberate targeting of more emotional people as candidates for prayer or laying on of hands was an obvious example of this.

no longer moves us! One of his most powerful statements asks a pertinent question—

How can they sit and hear of the infinite height, and depth, and length, and breadth of the love of God in Christ Jesus, of His giving His infinitely dear Son, to be offered up a sacrifice for the sins of men, and of the unparalleled love of the innocent, and holy, and tender Lamb of God, manifested in His dying agonies, His bloody sweat, His loud and bitter cries, and bleeding heart, and all this for enemies, to redeem them from deserved, eternal burnings, and to bring to unspeakable and everlasting joy and glory—and yet be cold and heavy, insensible and regardless!<sup>105</sup>

Again, Edwards' focus on Jesus here is striking and moving. For him, to hear the preaching of the gospel without the affections being stirred is unthinkable. On the other hand, to have the affections stirred apart from the gospel is unjustifiable. In this he is thoroughly consistent with the writings of Paul and other New Testament writers.<sup>106</sup> I fear he would have been distressed at some contemporary gatherings where, as we have noted previously, little or no reference is made to the gospel at all. On one occasion in the mid-1990s, I sat through a two-hour church service in a large charismatic church whose pastor was a recognised leader in his denomination, where, apart from a solo presented by a young woman, there was no mention of even the name of Jesus, let alone His saving work, until the last few minutes, where it seemed to be almost an after-thought. No song or prayer or report or preaching even referred to Jesus by name prior to that. There were, of course, references to God or to the Lord. But who this God was or what He had done for humankind was not explained.

## 2 'NO CERTAIN SIGNS'

Edwards lists twelve aspects of religious revival which he says are 'no certain signs that the religious affections are truly gracious, or that they are not.'<sup>107</sup> It is easy to be frustrated in reading this section, as Edwards argues first one way and then the other, and both arguments appear to be convincing. But this, really, is his point. If you use the affections as a base, the possibility is that you can argue either way. They may be genuine indicators of the work of the Spirit; or they may not. The truth is, they prove nothing. To classify a work as genuine, we have to look elsewhere.

The relevance of each of the following points to any expressive form of Christianity is self-evident. In effect, Edwards' conclusion is that the expression of the affections cannot be used to prove the validity or otherwise of the spiritual

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<sup>105</sup> Edwards, 1986:52.

<sup>106</sup> Paul, for instance, declares everything but rubbish, in comparison with the excellence of knowing Christ and being found in Him (Philippians 3:8ff) and that everything is to be tested and sieved before acceptance (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22).

<sup>107</sup> Edwards, 1986:54ff. The following discussion is based on the content of these pages, basically following Edwards' numbering.

experience. They are neither sure nor certain evidence that God is at work. The dilemma for some revival movements is that in the absence of any clear biblical theology for what was happening, physical phenomena and the accompanying testimonies of the stirring of the affections are generally all the justification there is for the movement. If these are, in fact, insubstantial and unreliable witnesses, there is nothing else to fall back on for its validation.

Briefly, Edwards argues as follows—

*2.1 It is no sign, one way or the other, that religious affections are very great or raised very high.* If true religion does lie very much in religious affections, then it naturally follows that where there is true religion, there will be corresponding affections, such as love or joy (1 Peter 1:8). On the other hand, there are many biblical examples of short-lived affections which meant nothing at all, such as the Israelites at Sinai or the crowds on Palm Sunday.

Ronald Knox, in another context, makes a similar point. Noting that many Evangelicals have identified genuine religion with experience (for example, of being born again), he continues—

In the nature of things you cannot prove the validity of any trance, vision, or ecstasy; it remains something within the mind. Still less can you prove the validity of a lifelong Christ-inspired attitude; in the last resort, all it proves is that certain psychological influences are strong enough to overcome, in a given case, all the temptations towards backsliding which a cynical world affords.<sup>108</sup>

*2.2 Great effects on the body are no sign of genuine affections.* True affections do affect the body. So, writes Edwards, the Psalmist talks of both heart and flesh crying out for God (Psalm 84:2) and Habakkuk describes trembling and quivering of voice (Habakkuk 3:16). But the reverse is not equally true. Bodily effects may have other causes. Temporal matters can produce them, for example.

Similarly, some contemporary writers have argued that other religions, for instance, or even hypnotherapists can instigate identical phenomena to those experienced in revivalist meetings. Nader Mikhael draws a comparison between ‘slaying in the Spirit’ and the effects of hypnosis. He argues that the following phenomena, many of which are claimed by people who experience the former, can also occur as the result of the latter—

- Feelings of weightlessness
- Feelings of heaviness
- Feeling stretched
- Catalepsy
- Automatic repetitive movement of bodily parts
- Rapid eye movement
- Changes in breathing

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<sup>108</sup> Knox, 1987:547.

- Tinglyings
- Healing
- The absence of pain
- Changes in size of bodily parts
- Feelings of detachment from the body
- Feelings of swelling
- Bodily images
- Feelings of force, energy or electricity
- Changes in hearing
- Smelling of flowers
- Seeing a bright light
- Hot or cold areas on the body
- Feeling drunk
- Feeling clean
- Changes in one's sense of reality
- Time distortions
- Age regression
- Duality in age regression
- The agent in control
- Emotional atmosphere
- The role of imitation
- Laughter<sup>109</sup>

Mikhaïel shows that Francis MacNutt's description of people likely to fall in a charismatic meeting (young female, artistic, African or Latin ancestry) or unlikely to fall (elderly male, Anglo-Saxon, German, serious childhood, takes responsibility early in life, determinedly self-controlled) compares favourably with the description of people likely to be subject to hypnosis (young, female, Latin, Spanish, exhibitionist) or unlikely to be subject to it (suspicious, Anglo-Saxon, German, analytical).<sup>110</sup> He argues that some charismatic ministers are actually using suggestion without realising it. Even long-term results can be obtained this way, as post-hypnotic suggestions can be carried out long after the event.<sup>111</sup>

It is plain that identical physical phenomena may have more than one possible explanation. It also seems plain that the benefits of humanly-induced suggestion may be positive, especially if in the context of a religious gathering. For this reason, they may easily be mistaken for divine blessing.

*2.3 Even though people talk enthusiastically and frequently of the things of God, this is no proof that their affections are 'truly gracious affections.'* A person may be over-full of his own experiences, for example, and this is the motivation for his speech; or he may want to make a show, as was the case with the Pharisees. When

<sup>109</sup> Nader Mikhaïel, *Slaying in the Spirit: the Telling Wonder* Punchbowl: Bruised Reed, 1992, 171ff.

<sup>110</sup> Mikhaïel, 1992:35ff.

<sup>111</sup> G.Burrows, *The Phenomena of Hypnosis*, unpublished lecture notes, n.d.



we are genuinely affected by God, there are some matters we do not even share with our closest friends.

*2.4 The fact that affections are not contrived or produced by our own efforts does not prove them to be genuine.* The Holy Spirit is well able to act sovereignly in our lives, as the Scriptures amply illustrate (1 Corinthians 1:26-31; plus many Old Testament examples such as Gideon, David and others).

However, it is equally true, argues Edwards, that there may be other influences than the Spirit of God which can affect us, and we are warned not to believe every spirit, as such spirits may well transform themselves into angels of light. Many people ‘of a weak and vapoury habit’ are liable to impressions about temporal things; they may also be affected by spiritual things.

*2.5 That affections appear to arise from texts of Scripture ‘remarkably brought to the mind’ is also no guarantee of their authenticity.* Here Edwards draws a vital distinction between what we would call today ‘proof texts’ and the whole testimony of Scripture. The devil may well introduce texts to our thoughts—as he clearly did with Jesus in the wilderness. So his teachers may well do the same. All we can argue is that experiences which are consistent with Scripture are valid; that they arise from a passage of the Word unexpectedly coming to mind proves nothing.

This is one of many occasions on which Edwards draws on one of Jesus’ parables and uses the analogy of the seed on stony ground as a warning against the danger of seeing emotion as a valid sign of an encounter with God. The ‘stony ground hearers had great joy from the word... and yet there was no saving religion in these affections’ (Mark 4:1ff).

*2.6 Even an appearance of love in the affections proves nothing either way.* ‘It may be observed that the more excellent anything is, the more will be the counterfeits of it. Thus there are many more counterfeits of silver and gold than of iron and copper...’ Love and humility are likely to be counterfeited more than any other Christian graces. People may have a kind of religious love, yet have no saving grace (Matthew 24:12f).

*2.7 The presence of many different affections does not prove that those concerned have gracious affections.* The stony-ground hearers had spiritual joy. Religious persons may, like Balaam, have desires which are false. They may fondly hope, as the Pharisees did, for eternal life. Pharaoh’s baker had raised hopes, but they proved in vain.

*2.8 That a sense of joy follows ‘awakenings and convictions of conscience’ proves nothing.* God often leads people into the wilderness before he ‘speaks comfortably to them.’ He often shows us our weakness and hopelessness before revealing His deliverance, as He did with Abraham and Elijah (Genesis 15:12-21; 1 Kings 19:1-18). On the other hand, it is no proof that affections are right because they follow on from great terror or fear of hell. It is possible to be terrified by Satan. He is well able to counterfeit the saving operations of God.

2.9 *Being busily engaged in religious pursuits is no sign of gracious affections.* Of course, the Scripture shows clearly that it is ‘the tendency of true grace to cause persons to delight in such religious exercises.’ So Anna and David, among others, loved to spend time in the presence of God. On the other hand, many Israelites gave themselves much to the Temple rites, but without true grace (Isaiah 58:4). And again, Edwards quotes the ‘stony ground hearers’ who heard the word with joy, but did not continue. People of false religion may also be very enthusiastic about their activities, but it does not prove them right.

2.10 *Praising and glorying God also proves nothing.* Naturally, true believers will praise Him. But there are many instances of people praising God, whose faith was not genuine—the crowds who followed Jesus, for example.

2.11 *A feeling of great confidence that our affections are divinely stirred is no sign that they are either right or wrong.* Assurance is promised to Christians, with or without strong affections. Over-confidence may well be a dangerous sign. Edwards quotes Stoddard as saying, ‘Some hypocrites are a great deal more confident than many saints.’ A hypocrite with false hope never questions his state, as true saints do. He has lost his sense of caution resulting from God’s holiness; he does not recognise the deceitfulness of his own heart; his confidence is not assaulted by the devil, as the hope of a true saint is; and he ‘has not that sight of his own corruptions which the saint has.’

At this point, Edwards pursues a lengthy discussion about hypocrisy. It is enough here to note that on the one hand he sees Arminianism as responsible for an unwise reliance on ‘external religion’ and that on the other, he sees those who talk much of free grace but ‘make a righteousness of their discoveries and of their humiliation’—a warning which is of particular relevance today. Of the two—legal and evangelical hypocrites—he sees the latter as in the worse state. ‘It is like the confidence of some mad men who think they are kings; they will maintain it against all manner of reason and evidence.’ And again, he returns to his major theme—‘The Scripture is ignorant of any such faith in Christ of the operation of God, that is not founded in a spiritual sight of Christ.’ So our experiences reflect this; but they must not become ends in themselves.

2.12 *The fact that outward manifestations are ‘very affecting and pleasing to the truly godly’ and even win their hearts proves nothing.* Even true saints cannot certainly determine who are godly and who are not. We judge by outward appearances (1 Samuel 16:7); we cannot know fully what is in the heart. It is difficult to distinguish tares from wheat—they are so much alike that it is only when the grain appears we can tell the difference.

In this, Edwards hints at what will be a major thesis later in the book—that only the fruit of upright living is proof of true godliness.

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## CHAPTER SIX

# DISTINGUISHING SIGNS OF TRULY GRACIOUS AND HOLY AFFECTIONS

Edwards now looks at twelve qualities of true affections. He begins by pointing out that he would be hypocritical to detail sure and certain ways of determining true affections from false, given the difficulties he has just outlined. In any case, we are all prevented by our human defects and our sinfulness from totally clear vision in spiritual matters. However, there are still distinctions between true and false religious affections which should be noted.

### 1 THE OPERATIONS OF THE HEART

Edwards begins by declaring that *true affections arise from spiritual, supernatural and divine operations of the heart*. At this point, he defines what it means to be spiritual. Christians do not become spiritual just because certain qualities have their origin in the spirit or soul. Carnal or fleshly properties may also stem from the soul (1 Corinthians 2:14-16; Jude 19). Nor is it by possessing gifts of the Spirit. It is by the ‘virtues’ of the Spirit that we are spiritual (Galatians 6:1). These are the qualities which reflect the indwelling of the Spirit of God. So true saints have only what is spiritual within them.

At this point, Edwards engages in a discussion which is pertinent to all charismatic activity. In effect, he argues that for the natural man, no matter what the source, any revelation or impression comes through the natural faculties which are common to all, especially the imagination. This means that the method by which the affections are stirred has no bearing on the cause of that stirring. For the

same human quality can be the vehicle of either natural imaginings or demonic suggestion or divine revelation—

The Spirit of God, in all His operations upon the minds of natural men, only moves, impresses, assists, improves, or some way acts upon natural principles; but gives no new spiritual principle... Thus the Spirit of God by His common influences may assist men's natural ingenuity, as He assisted Bezaleel and Aholiab in the curious works of the tabernacle...<sup>112</sup>

With true saints, however, there is a new principle, 'a new inward perception or sensation of their minds, entirely different in its nature and kind from anything that ever their minds were the subjects of before they were sanctified.' So the Scripture talks of regeneration resulting in 'eyes to see and ears to hear.'

The Spirit of God in His spiritual influences on the hearts of His saints, operates by infusing or exercising new, divine, and supernatural principles; principles which are indeed a new and spiritual nature, and principles vastly more noble and excellent than all that is in natural men.<sup>113</sup>

At first glance, this sounds very much like the teaching of people like Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland, whose 'hyper-faith' doctrines draw a distinction between the written word of God (the *logos*) and a revealed word of God (the *rhema*). According to them, it is only when we receive a *rhema* that the Word of God becomes active in our lives.<sup>114</sup> It is not enough to believe the words of Scripture; we must also have a faith-filled revelation from God. But this is not what Edwards is saying. His uneasiness with concepts such as 'inner light' has already been noted. What he is describing is a spiritual perception which makes the things of God take on new meaning.

This understanding implies two danger areas. Firstly, not everything pertaining to spiritual affections is entirely different from what the natural man perceives. Love for God, for example, is not dissimilar to love for another human. Yet the idea which a saint has of God and his experience of God's love is different—it is peculiar and entirely diverse from anything the natural man... can have any notion of.' So both a man with a sense of taste and one without a sense of taste may admire a beautiful fruit for its colours and shape, but the one who can taste will have a much more meaningful appreciation of the fruit.

Secondly, even a natural man may have new and surprising apprehensions and affections. Yet these may not involve any new principles. They could indeed be

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<sup>112</sup> Edwards, 1986:134f

<sup>113</sup> Edwards, 1986:135.

<sup>114</sup> Kenneth Hagin's organisation is known as Rhema. For further information see [www.rhema.org](http://www.rhema.org). For Kenneth Copeland see [www.kcm.org](http://www.kcm.org). For opposing views see [www.blessedquietness.com/journal/housechu/rhema1.htm](http://www.blessedquietness.com/journal/housechu/rhema1.htm) and [www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/exposes/copeland/general.htm](http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/exposes/copeland/general.htm).

caused by Satan. So the impressions some people receive in their imagination about God may still have ‘nothing in them that is spiritual.’ The imagination can conceive things that are not present or observable by the senses. It can conceive of voices, of inner calling, of light, even of Christ.

A natural person might imagine Christ on the Cross, but what he sees is no different from what the Jews saw when they crucified Him. Indeed, it does not matter in what form such images come, they may or may not be spiritual. Even the words of Scripture are just letters on paper, and the natural mind may conceive of these in just the same way as of any other words. Gracious affections result from what the words say, not from the method of picturing them. This insight was amply demonstrated in early 2004, when the Mel Gibson film *The Passion of the Christ* was released world-wide. Millions of people viewed it but the reactions were very different. Most Christians were deeply moved; many unbelievers were untouched; some were hostile.<sup>115</sup>

Edwards is particularly concerned about people taking individual Scriptures to heart, especially when the words are just suggested to the mind. For him, it is only when the whole testimony of Scripture is applied to the heart, that it is ‘spiritually enlightening.’ So ‘immediate suggestions, or supposed suggestions, of secret facts, are not gracious affections.’ What many people call the witness of the Spirit ‘has nothing in it spiritual and divine.’ Balaam had glorious facts impressed on his mind, without any gracious influence.

In contrast to this, God’s children have the seal of the Spirit in their hearts (2 Corinthians 1:22; Ephesians 1:13,14) which is not ‘by immediate suggestion’ but the result of God’s grace. It is Christ’s ‘vital indwelling of the heart’ which is important.

In all this, Edwards is clearly still striving to distinguish between the true and the false. It is easy to agree that there is a difference. The difficulty lies in being able to identify that difference and to know of a truth when it is the Spirit of God working in us and when it is just the stirring of imagination. Edwards would probably argue that even recognising the danger is a valuable exercise. Others might retort that after such warnings, we might be discouraged from believing even the witness of the Spirit in case we are wrong.

## 2 THE EXCELLENT NATURE OF DIVINE THINGS

Edwards’ second maxim is that *the primary ground of gracious affections is the excellent nature of divine things as they are in themselves, not self-interest or self-aggrandisement*. At this point, Edwards draws swords with much modern evangelicalism with its self-centred approach to the gospel. For Edwards, Christian love is the foundation of all affections, and so true saints are motivated by the glory of God, not by any supposed interest or benefit they might receive.

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<sup>115</sup> See <http://www.thepassionoutreach.com/default.asp>.

Some, Edwards continues, say—as they still do today—that all love arises from self-love. He dissents from this. Before anything else, we must first love God. To do otherwise is to have ‘no sense of the heinousness of sin’ and of ‘the infinite and terrible opposition of the holy nature of God against it.’ We must not form in our minds an image of a God who suits us. Carnal people have a false notion of communion with God—as though it were based on ‘impulses’, and ‘whispers’ to the imagination, which they take to be indicators of God’s love.

But the exercises of true and holy love in the saints arise in another way. They do not at first see that God loves them, and then see that He is lovely, but they see first that God is lovely, and that Christ is excellent and glorious, and their hearts are first captivated with this view, and the exercises of their love are wont from time to time to begin here, and to arise primarily from these views; and then consequently, they see God’s love and great favour to them.<sup>116</sup>

Here Edwards makes three brief points about our response to God’s love. Firstly, true gratitude rises from a foundation of love to God for what He is in Himself. Secondly, true gratitude is not based on the degree to which God’s grace affects our interests, but on the extent to which it is part of the glory and beauty of God’s nature. Thirdly, God’s love to ‘a particular elect person’ displays His moral perfection and results in glory to Him. All in all, ‘the first foundation of the delight a true saint has in Christ is His own perfection and... His own beauty.’

In contrast to those who genuinely seek the glory of God, Edwards claims that ‘the joy of hypocrites is in themselves.’ What follows is startlingly apposite to the modern charismatic movement—

Having received what they [hypocrites] call spiritual discoveries or experiences, their minds are taken up about them, admiring their own experiences. What they are principally taken and elevated with is not the glory of God, or beauty of Christ, but the beauty of their experiences. They keep thinking within themselves, What a good experience is this! What a great discovery is this! What wonderful things have I met with! And so they put their experiences in the place of Christ and His beauty and fullness. Instead of rejoicing in Christ Jesus, they rejoice in their admirable experiences; instead of feeding and feasting their souls in the view of what is without them, viz., the innate, sweet refreshing amiableness of the things exhibited in the gospel, their eyes are off from these things, or at least they view them only as it were sideways... They take more comfort in their discoveries than in Christ discovered.<sup>117</sup>

The key word here is ‘without.’ True faith and love are based on the objective, external work of Christ in His saving death on the cross. Experience-centred faith is based on the subjective, internal work of Christ within. Edwards has already

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<sup>116</sup> Edwards, 1986:172.

<sup>117</sup> Edwards, 1986:177.

pointed out the many difficulties in correctly identifying the genuine work of God within us. But the external, objective work of Christ is clear and plain. Here is the only true foundation for faith.

It may well be alleged that Edwards here displays an unrealistic idealism that simply doesn't work in practice. Is there anyone who is primarily motivated by the glory of God and the beauty of Christ, without any self-interest? Such an objection would not worry him. Whether it is possible or not is irrelevant; the true question is whether it is right. If the only valid motivation for gracious affections is the glory of God then let it be so, human failure notwithstanding.

This concept raises again the issue of the primary emphasis in the 'Toronto blessing' phenomenon. Although there were regular disclaimers given by leaders, the practical outworking was that most people sought blessings to meet needs in their own lives. In some cases, people were called to the front of meetings and even put on show, as it were, as example of 'what the Lord is doing.'<sup>118</sup> It is hard to imagine Edwards using or even condoning such an approach. Similarly, Edwards' emphasis on the completeness of the work of Christ might have given him misgivings about the frequent plea in these meetings for 'more, Lord.'

### 3 MORAL EXCELLENCY

Edwards now argues that *truly holy affections are 'primarily founded on the loveliness of the moral excellency of divine things.'* Moral excellency, in turn, is seated in the heart or will, and true moral excellency is holiness. According to Iain Murray, from Edwards' teenage years, holiness was always 'first in his concerns'<sup>119</sup> And this is what he says here. For him, 'there is no other virtue than true holiness' for it comprehends all others. So, while true saints love God for all His virtues, their love to God for His holiness is fundamental. All true love for God begins here. A holy love has a holy object. This is the true test of all affections—whether they are based on a 'supreme delight' in holiness.

### 4 ENLIGHTENED MINDS

Edwards affirms that *true affections 'arise from the mind being enlightened... to understand or apprehend divine things.'* Again, Edwards points out the danger of heat without light. It is when 'we see and understand something more of divine things' than we did before, that our affections are stirred. So Paul prays that our love may abound more in *knowledge* (Philippians 1:9; cf Romans 10:2; Colossians 3:10). No matter how high affections may seem to be, if they do not arise from 'light in the understanding' they are not spiritual affections. He stresses this point again and again—

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<sup>118</sup> This is a general observation based on conversations with many who have been involved and on my own experiences of 'Toronto blessing' meetings including those led by David Pytches, Tim Hall, Rodney Howard-Browne and others.

<sup>119</sup> Iain Murray, 1987: 50.

- Truly spiritual and gracious affections... arise from the enlightening of the understanding to understand the things that are taught of God and Christ in a new manner.
- That all gracious affections do arise from some instruction or enlightenment of the understanding, is therefore a further proof that affections which arise from such impression on the imagination, are not gracious affections.
- The affection is not gracious unless the light which is the ground of it be spiritual.<sup>120</sup>

This sort of understanding, he continues, is the knowledge of divine things from whence all truly gracious affections proceed and by which therefore all affections are to be tried.

Edwards will not even allow ‘texts of Scripture coming to the mind’ as sufficient base for true affections unless ‘instruction received in the understanding... is the ground of the affection.’ It is vain to attribute ‘the manner of the coming to mind’ as the justification for the affection. As he has already argued, the manner in which impressions come to us proves nothing. It is when Christ makes the Scripture the cause of our hearts burning within us, that we experience truly gracious affections (Luke 24:32). We may have ‘a pleasant sensation’ or an ‘exhilaration of animal spirits.’ There may be joy and other affections raised ‘in a very tumultuous manner, putting all nature, both body and mind, into a mighty ruffle’—but this proves nothing, unless the cause is ‘spiritual understanding’, which he defines as ‘a cordial sense of the supreme beauty and sweetness of the holiness or moral perfection of divine things, together with all that discerning and knowledge of things of religion, that depends upon and flows from such a sense.’

In particular, spiritual understanding derives from knowing the excellency of the Person and work of Christ, His sufficiency as Mediator, the preciousness of His blood, the merits of His obedience and the sufficiency of His intercession. Current hymnody reflects a different picture. Many popular charismatic songs do not reflect the gospel.<sup>121</sup> ‘Sweet Wind,’ a song which was described as ‘the official anthem’ of the ‘Toronto blessing’ and which was said to be in world-wide demand, did not include the name of Jesus at all and made no clear reference to salvation through His atoning sacrifice.<sup>122</sup>

Similarly, any trend to abandon preaching in favour of ‘ministry’ clearly flies in the face of what Edwards is teaching here. It was not unusual to hear ‘Toronto blessing’ ministers urge people to put their understanding to one side and to just

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<sup>120</sup> Edwards, 1986: 192ff.

<sup>121</sup> See A. Clark, *What Are We Singing?* Sydney: Tabor College, 1996. Clark argues that as few as six per cent of contemporary Christian songs contain specific references to redemption through the cross of Christ.

<sup>122</sup> ‘Sweet Wind,’ *Charisma* Lake Mary: Strang Communications, February 1995:26.



allow God to do what He wanted.<sup>123</sup> There is nothing in the writings of Edwards to suggest even the slightest agreement with this approach. To contemplate the arousing of the affections without sound teaching to undergird and direct them would have been anathema to him.

Edwards expands this point in some detail. He points out that he is not just talking about some new doctrinal argument. Nor is the stirring of the affections the result of new ‘mystical’ insights. Nor is it taking texts out of context and applying some new meaning to them which has no bearing on the original setting. Nor is it the result of some interpretation of Scripture being suggested in some extraordinary way—which is usually the result of delusion. So the ancient Gnostics and Montanists and more recent enthusiasts such as Thomas Munzer and Anne Hutchinson and the French Prophets were led astray by Satan in his guise as an angel of light.

So the danger area, he affirms yet again, is that of the imagination (or ‘fancy’) in which the delusions of Satan are carried. There is a great difference between strong affections which produce lively imaginations and lively imaginations which produce strong affections. The former may truly be of God; the latter are worthless and vain.

## 5 THE CERTAINTY OF DIVINE TRUTH

*Truly gracious affections*, continues Edwards, *are accompanied by a reasonable conviction of the certainty of divine truth*. So when our affections are truly stirred, we have no doubts about great doctrines of Scripture. We are settled in our minds about them and convinced of their certainty. All true Christians have such a conviction, as Scripture makes plain (Matthew 16:16, 17; John 6:68, 69; 1 John 4:13-15). Obviously, to see the truth of the Word of God is also to see the truth of the gospel.

This is extremely important for the heathen and the illiterate. If we have to wait until we can understand all the arguments and examine all the evidence, the propagation of the gospel is ‘infinitely difficult.’ Yet many illiterate people, many women and children, have been martyrs for the faith. Clearly, these people have been convicted of the truth of the Word, and have been so assured of it, they have given their lives.

We are convinced of the truth of the gospel, Edwards continues, because the Holy Spirit removes the prejudices of the heart against it and the mind is opened to the ‘divine excellency’ of Christian truth. In fact, even false imaginations or false doctrines may awaken our hearts to a belief in Christ. The result of such things is usually disillusion and even infidelity. So some times, as Satan often mixes truth

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<sup>123</sup> Personal knowledge and experience. In his article ‘Interrupted by the Spirit’, *Charisma*, February 1995:28ff, Terry Virgo says, ‘Don’t Kiss Your Brain Goodbye’ and urges his readers to give a clear explanation of blessings that are happening among them, but concludes by admitting that he will abandon preaching and ‘get out of the way’ if the Holy Spirit tells him to.

with his lies in order to make the lies less obvious, people may believe many good things and yet still be caught up in counterfeit religion.

That this sort of thing still happens today is readily evident. In my experience, there have been regular examples of people who have been touched or blessed or converted through a certain person's ministry and then have accepted everything else taught by that person, regardless of its biblical base. One noted evangelist taught regularly on the second advent, and the passing of time made it patently obvious that many of his interpretations were incorrect. Yet many people, particularly those who had been brought to God through his evangelism, found it almost impossible to concede that he could be in error. Because his teaching had been correct in one thing, it could not possibly be incorrect in another.

## 6 EVANGELICAL HUMILIATION

Edwards now develops a somewhat contrasting theme—*Gracious affections are attended with evangelical humiliation... a sense that a Christian has of his own utter insufficiency, despicableness, and odiousness, with an answerable frame of heart.*

Edwards discusses this point at considerable length and it is clearly very important to him. Indeed, a sense of one's own unworthiness is 'a great and most essential thing in true religion' (Psalm 34:18; 51:17; Proverbs 3:14; Matthew 5:3). Here again, the need to discern the true from the false is most evident. There are hypocrites who will make a great show of humility. There are others who have a 'pretended great humiliation.' There are others who deceive themselves.

Spiritual pride is evident when we think of ourselves as eminent saints with 'high attainments'—a pharisaical 'holier-than-thou' mentality (Luke 18:11).

But he whose heart is under the power of Christian humility is of a contrary disposition... such a one is apt to think of his attainments in religion as comparatively mean, and to esteem himself low among the saints, and one of the least of them.<sup>124</sup>

There are others who think highly of their experiences. They speak openly of them. This, says Edwards, is equivalent to a claim to greatness, to having more than ordinary grace. But the greatest saints humble themselves as a little child. Like Moses, they hide their faces. The more they apprehend the love of God for them, the less their own love for God seems to be. So also with understanding. The more divine truth is opened to us, the more astonished we are at our own ignorance. The more we receive the grace of God, the more our own deformity and corruption becomes evident to us. The danger is that in boasting of great experiences, we may deceive ourselves in these greater matters—

The nature of many high religious affections, and great discoveries (as they are called) in many persons that I have been acquainted with, is to

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<sup>124</sup> Edwards, 1986:246.

hide and cover over the corruption of their hearts, and to make it seem to them as if all their sin was gone, and to leave them without complaints of any hateful evil left in them (though it may be they cry out much of their past unworthiness). This is a sure and certain evidence that their discoveries... are darkness and not light.<sup>125</sup>

This is not to say that a true saint does not see how much better it is with him now than it was before and how much more free he is now. Furthermore, we know we are covered with the righteousness of Christ. Nevertheless, when we are most in God's grace, we have a quick sensitivity to the vileness of sin. Eminent saints are least likely to see themselves as such.

Spiritual pride is also evident when we think highly of our humility. Those who are truly humble never think of their humility as great.

Again, Edwards warns of the subtlety of these matters. Having been convinced that there is none so corrupt as we are, it is then possible to be proud of this very thing! So to be truly humble is to be poor in spirit. So a truly humble person acts like a poor person—content to be overlooked, to take the lowest place, to honour superiors, to take reproof quietly, to be ready to learn, to serve others. Humility is 'a kind of holy pusillanimity.' Just as a very poor man may be a beggar, so the poor in spirit 'continues still a poor beggar at God's gates.'

One of the strengths of revival movements has been the encouragement which is regularly given to people to spend time seeking more of God's presence and power in their lives. During the 1990s, the phrase 'carpet time' was used to describe the way in which people, after having hands laid on them, would often fall to the floor and lie there for long periods, apparently captivated by an awareness of the presence of God. While, as we have seen, Edwards would almost certainly have had reservations about some of the methodology employed, this approach might still have sat comfortably with his suggestion of waiting poverty-stricken before the Lord to fill and bless.<sup>126</sup>

## 7 A CHANGE OF NATURE

The next theme is plainly evangelical. *Gracious affections are attended by a change of nature.*

All spiritual discoveries are transforming, and not only make an alteration of the present exercise, sensation, and frame of the soul; but such power and efficacy have they, that they make an alteration in the very nature of the soul (2 Corinthians 3:8).<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Edwards, 1986:253.

<sup>126</sup> Davies, 1994:2.

<sup>127</sup> Edwards, 1986:267.

Consequently, if there is no great and continuing change in the life, then however we have been affected, it is not a true work of the Spirit of God.

## 8 A LAMB-LIKE SPIRIT

Edwards now speaks again of Christian character. *True and gracious affections are accompanied by 'the lamb-like, dove-like spirit and temper of Jesus Christ.'* So the result will be peace and love (Matthew 5:7-9; Colossians 3:12-15) and the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22, 23). Further, Christ speaks of Himself as meek and lowly of heart (Matthew 11:29) and so are His true followers. For He is the Lamb and the Spirit is a dove.

Meekness is so much a characteristic of the saints that meekness and godliness are synonyms in Scripture (Psalm 37:10, 11; 147:6). And love is the more often described in Scripture as the mark of a true Christian than anything else (John 13:34, 35; 1 John 2:9, 10; 3:14-18; 4:7-12).

## 9 SOFTNESS OF HEART

A lamb-like spirit is accompanied by a soft heart. *Gracious affections soften the heart and result in tenderness of spirit.* False affections, on the other hand, have a tendency to harden the heart. The result is that people become less affected by their sins, less moved with God's warnings, less afraid of hell. Their high affections give them a false sense of security.

Gracious affections, however, turn a heart of stone to a heart of flesh, and tenderness is the result. So Jesus exhorts us to become like little children, who are easily affected with grief, who trust in their parents, who fear to be left alone, who yield to superiors.

## 10 BEAUTIFUL IN SYMMETRY

Edwards' next point is one not commonly heard in discussions of revival. *Gracious affections differ from false in that they are 'beautiful in symmetry and proportion.'* In other words, there is neither extremism, fanaticism nor heresy. Truly holy affections reflect 'the whole image of Christ.' All fullness dwells in Christ and He is full of grace and truth. Hypocrites, on the other hand, are like 'a cake not turned' (Hosea 7:8).

In true saints, he continues, holy joy and holy fear coexist. The joy of salvation is accompanied by godly sorrow and mourning for sin. Furthermore, true saints are more affected by concern for their own sins than for those of others. Neither do they live 'by fits and starts.' They are not greatly moved only in 'extraordinary seasons' or times of great outpouring or on the receipt of great blessing. Edwards here quotes John Flavel, who writes—

These professors [of the Christian faith] have more of the moon than of the sun: little light, less heat, and many changes. They deceive many, yea, they deceive themselves, but cannot deceive God. They want that ballast

and establishment in themselves, that would have kept them tight and steady.<sup>128</sup>

Using a different image, Edwards alleges that true saints are like streams which may increase by rain and decrease by drought, but which always run. Those of ‘unsound’ affections are like puddles left after rain, which quickly dry up, and wait for more rain till they flow again.

It is surprising that Edwards does not introduce the biblical teaching on self-control at this point—or at some point—in his works. There is much in the New Testament to indicate that self-mastery is a balancing factor in Christian experience. It is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:23; 2 Timothy 1:7). It is strongly urged by Paul (1 Corinthians 6:12; 9:24-27). It is required in church leaders (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:7-9). It is urged on all members of the church as a quality which is consistent with sound doctrine (Titus 2:1-15). When Christian self-mastery is exercised, extremist behaviour is avoided.

It is also of interest that little has been written or said about this in the context of physical or bodily expressions of faith in regard to many revival movements. Self-mastery is vital to maintaining the kind of balance Edwards talks about here. The question must be asked as to how unrestrained manifestations relate to the New Testament in this area. It is difficult to conceive of our Lord Jesus Christ rolling around on the ground, jerking, laughing uncontrollably, barking like a dog or falling into a state of catalepsy.

Edwards goes on to argue that balance is indicated in our spiritual devotion. True saints love the fellowship of others, but they also delight in secret intimacy with God. In fact, they are ‘much alone in solitary places for holy meditation and prayer’—as were Jacob, Moses, Elijah and the Lord Himself.

So that if persons appear greatly engaged in social religion, and but little in the religion of the closet, and are often highly affected when with others, and but little moved when they have none but God and Christ to converse with, it looks very darkly upon their religion.<sup>129</sup>

Again, the emphasis in the ‘Toronto blessing’ seemed different. By early 1995, it was being claimed that 100,000 people had visited the Airport Vineyard Church at Toronto, most of them seeking to be prayed for.<sup>130</sup> In similar meetings around the world, the approach was consistent. Meetings concluded with prolonged times of prayer in which ministry teams prayed with all who requested it—and sometimes with those who didn’t.<sup>131</sup> The focus was clearly and openly on the need

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<sup>128</sup> Edwards, 1986:299.

<sup>129</sup> Edwards, 1986:302.

<sup>130</sup> *Charisma*, February 1995:21.

<sup>131</sup> ‘The “Toronto Blessing” Spreads’, *ARMA Sydney Newsletter*, Northbridge, No 31, February, 1995:3.

to attend the meetings and have the ‘blessing’ imparted. Some reports described the ‘blessing’ as ‘contagious’ and nearly all outlined a clear chain of connection between the various churches where it had been experienced.<sup>132</sup> There was a strong focus on the need to be in a meeting and to be prayed for by others before the ‘blessing’ could be appropriated.

The time-honoured biblical injunction to meet together is not in question here. Christians ought to gather in assembly (Hebrews 10:25). But if this is presented as the only way of approaching God and experiencing His blessing, or if it is seen as a substitute for personal waiting on the Lord, obvious problems emerge.

As I have written in another context—

*There is nothing to suggest that laying on of hands for blessing was a general practice as a basis for Christian living (cf 1 Timothy 5:22) or that it should be normative for the church. It is walking by faith in the Spirit every day that is important (Galatians 5:16), not through ‘blessings’ received week by week through mediatorial ministry.*

It is the consistent evidence of Scripture that is important here. It is not enough to pull out one or two texts to justify a particular manifestation or method of ministry. What we need to observe is the whole counsel of God (cf Deuteronomy 19:15).<sup>133</sup>

## 11 SPIRITUAL APPETITE

A visitation from God both satisfies and dissatisfies. *The higher gracious affections are raised, the more there is a spiritual appetite and longing for further spiritual attainments; on the other hand, ‘false affections rest satisfied in themselves.’* Edwards puts it powerfully—

The more a true saint loves God with gracious love, the more he desires to love Him, and the more uneasy he is at his want of love to Him; the more he hates sin, the more he desires to hate it, and laments that he has so much remaining love to it; the more he mourns for sin, the more he longs to mourn for sin; the more his heart is broke, the more he desires it should be broke: the more he thirsts and longs after God and holiness, the more he longs to long, and breathe out his very soul in longings after God. The kindling and raising of gracious affections is like kindling a flame; the higher it is raised, the more ardent it is; and the more it burns, the more vehemently does it tend and seek to burn.<sup>134</sup>

<sup>132</sup> Compare the title of Guy Chevreau’s book, *Catch the Fire*. A ‘Catch the Fire’ conference in Sydney in June 1995 described John and Carol Arnott and their team as bringing the ‘Toronto blessing’ to Sydney.

<sup>133</sup> Barry Chant, *The Nature of Ministry: priestly or prophetic?* Unpublished paper, 1995.

<sup>134</sup> Edwards, 1986:303.

We believe, but we cry for help in our unbelief (Mark 9:24).

The objection may well be raised that spiritual enjoyments should be satisfying—so why does the longing increase? Edwards gives four answers. First, this happiness is so sweet, we long for more of the same. Second, expectation is like appetite. Thirdly, the gratification of spiritual enjoyments is permanent. Fourth, spiritual good would satisfy us fully except for obstacles such as our lack of faith. False affections, on the other hand, do not fulfil. They deceive us into thinking that we have no further need.

‘More, Lord!’ the catch-cry of the ‘Toronto blessing’<sup>135</sup> seems apt here. There was a strong focus on receiving more of God’s blessings, over and over again, if necessary. The concept that being blessed by God just increased your hunger for more was strongly presented.<sup>136</sup>

Yet, on the other hand, this desire for more may have reflected a lack of appreciation of what we already have in Christ. If so, this was a serious issue. Edwards’ concept of certainty of the truth lifts a restraining hand, reminding us of our need to stand firm in the faith. Were people seeking the so-called ‘thrill of the fill’ rather than a long-term standing firm on the grace that is ours in Christ? (Romans 5:1f; 1 Corinthians 15:58). Years later, there are grounds for thinking this may have been so. Notwithstanding some significant exceptions, there are few examples of long-term change to either individuals or churches.<sup>137</sup>

## 12 CHRISTIAN PRACTICE

The ultimate outcome of a genuine awakening is always consistent Christian living. Edwards puts it succinctly: *Gracious and holy affections have their exercise and fruit in Christian practice*. In other words, it is not the level of experience, but the quality of upright living, that is important.

Edwards give extensive treatment to this point. It is clearly of major importance. First, obedience to Christian rules is essential for Christian living. Second, Christians should make holiness the ‘main business of their lives.’ It is a matter of top priority. We are called to be zealous for good works (Titus 2:14). Third, we must persevere in good works to the end of our days. We may fall into sin and even backslide at times. But true Christians can never grow weary of the ways of God or fall away entirely (Galatians 6:9; Romans 2:7; Hebrews 10:36). Truly converted people are fully sanctified; they walk in newness of life and continue to do so as long as they live.

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<sup>135</sup> Chevreau, 1994:2, 203. Note that Chevreau’s statement that his book is about being ‘drawn out to where we can never return’ seems to be the opposite of what he is trying to say. Does he mean ‘from whence we can never return’?

<sup>136</sup> eg Evans, 1995:5.

<sup>137</sup> In discussions with ministers of churches who embraced the ‘Toronto blessing,’ I have discovered few who could claim long-term growth either spiritually or numerically. Some churches actually lost ground.

Here Edwards goes back over points made earlier. Gracious affections arise from our participation in the divine nature; they arise from love for divine things in themselves, apart from any benefit to self; they are founded on moral excellence; they are accompanied by a thorough conviction of the certainty of God's Word; they result in a radical change of nature in us; they are accompanied by humility and gentleness; they are in symmetry and proportion; there is a spiritual appetite.

Overall, godliness in the heart has a direct relationship to practice. Regeneration leads to upright living (Ephesians 1:4, 5; Matthew 5:14-16; Hosea 14:9; Isaiah 26:10). Christian practice is 'the principle sign' by which we can assess both our own and others' genuineness as Christians.

Holy living is a sign of sincerity to others. A good tree is known by its fruit, not by its flowers (Matthew 12:33; Luke 6:44). It is when people see our good works that they glorify the Father. Not only does the Scripture teach this, but so does reason. In any area, what people do reflects on who they are. So when we keep Christ's commandments, we prove our love for Him (John 14:21). Christian practice is the best evidence of our faith.

On the other hand, Edwards continues, Christian practice implies Christian faith. A profession of belief is part of it. So it is not enough just to be moral and good; obvious Christian practice is also necessary, although it needs to be remembered that no outward behaviour is *infallible* as evidence of grace.

Not only does Christian practice demonstrate our faith to others, it also demonstrates to our own consciences that we are Christians. So we know we know Him by keeping His commandments (1 John 2:3). This is much to be preferred to the evidence of experience. First, 'reason plainly shows' that what we actually do when left to our own choices, especially in time of trial, is the proper indicator of what is in our hearts. Second, the same point is made in Scripture (1 Peter 1:6-9; Psalm 46:10, 11). True grace is gold tried in the fire (Revelation 3:18, 19). Third, the practice of grace is seen in Scripture as 'perfect' (James 2:22). When we keep His commands, His love is perfected in us (1 John 2:4f). Fourth, in Scripture, godly practice is insisted on above everything else. Fifth, in Scripture, Christian practice is the main evidence of the truth of grace to our consciences. Those who keep God's commands are the ones who love Him (John 14:21). If we continue in His Word, then we are His disciples (John 8:31). Sixth, Christian practice is the 'grand evidence' that will be produced before the judgement seat of God (Matthew 25:19-30; Luke 19:12-27; Revelation 20:12).

So Edwards concludes—

Now from all that has been said, I think it to be abundantly manifest that Christian practice is the most proper evidence of the gracious sincerity of professors [of the Christian faith], to themselves and others; and the chief of all the marks of grace, the sign of signs, and evidence of evidences, that which seals and crowns all other signs. I had rather have the testimony of my conscience... than the judgement and fullest approbation of all the wise, sound, and experienced divines, that have lived this thousand years,



on the most exact and critical examination of my experiences as the manner of my conversion.<sup>138</sup>

Not that other evidences are of no value. There may be many indications, for example, that a fig tree is a fig tree, but the greatest is that it bears figs!

It is noteworthy that Edwards calls Christian practice the ‘sign of signs,’ a phrase he uses more than once. He puts it very bluntly—‘Holy practice is the proper evidence of saving faith.’ It is also the ‘proper evidence’ of gracious love, of humility (Micah 6:8), of a true fear of God (Proverbs 8:13), of true thankfulness (Psalm 116:12), of gracious desires and longings (Psalm 27:4), of a gracious hope (1 John 3:3), of a truly holy joy (Isaiah 64:5) and of Christian fortitude (1 Corinthians 9:25ff).

In the light of all this, ‘the degree in which experiences have influence on a person’s practice, is the surest evidence of the degree of that which is spiritual and divine in his experiences.’ Or, to put it differently, ‘Whatever pretences persons may make to great discoveries, great love and joys, they are no further to be regarded than they have influence on their practice.’

So, no matter what revelations, divine encounters, emotional experiences and the like we may have, if they do not result in holy, upright, consistent living, they are to be disregarded. This is an ongoing challenge for everyone who claims an experiential faith.

I once came across a few lines, whose author I’ve long since forgotten, which express a similar concept, this time in regard to martyrdom—

So he died for his faith, that is fine,  
More than most of us do;  
But, say, can you add to that line  
That he lived for it, too?

It is easy to die, men have died  
For a wish or a whim,  
For bravado or passion or pride,  
Was it harder for him?

But to live, every day to live out,  
The truth that he dreamt,  
While his friends met his conduct with doubt  
And the world with contempt.

Was it thus that he plodded along,  
Never turning aside?  
Then, let’s talk of the life that he lived—  
Never mind how he died.

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<sup>138</sup> Edwards, 1986:363.

Edwards would have expressed a similar sentiment about spiritual experiences.

## OBJECTIONS

At this point, Edwards considers two objections which might well have been raised by people enjoying an experiential approach to faith. The first is that spiritual experiences are the main evidences of true grace. He replies that Christian experience is as much involved in the will, and its management of behaviour, as in anything else. Hence, it is actually a mistake to distinguish between experience and practice. All experience is not practice; but all practice is experience (Jeremiah 22:15f). So the love of God is keeping commandments (1 John 5:3; Romans 1:9; 2 Corinthians 1:12; Galatians 2:20).

This is properly Christian experience, wherein the saints have the opportunity to see, by actual experience and trial, whether they have a heart to do the will of God, and to forsake other things for Christ, or no... Religion consists much in holy affection; but those exercises of affection which are most distinguishing of true religion are these practical exercises.<sup>139</sup>

The second objection is that to make Christian practice the chief evidence of grace is to promote legalism and to magnify works above faith. Edwards is not impressed. Why is it inconsistent, he asks, with the free gift of God's grace to make holy practice a sign of it? If good works are inconsistent with the doctrine of free grace, then so are all other experiences.

It is interesting to compare Edwards' conclusions with the major emphasis of the Pastoral letters. In these three short epistles, addressed to young ministers, we have the distillation of the apostle's experience, refined and concisely presented. He begins by telling Timothy that 'the goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith' (1 Timothy 1:5). This clearly expresses the heart of the apostle's message. He concludes the last letter by instructing Titus to 'stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good' (Titus 3:8).

It is interesting that in the pastorals, the number of texts which focus on both teaching and good works significantly outnumber those which talk of areas like spiritual gifts and prayer.<sup>140</sup> Of a total of 242 verses, the number of verses referring to different aspects of Christian activity are as follows—

- music and singing— 0

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<sup>139</sup> Edwards, 1986:373.

<sup>140</sup> I am not arguing that the validity of a biblical teaching can be measured by how often it is mentioned in these letters. Baptism and communion, for instance, are not named at all, yet are clearly essential in Christian practice. However, given that Paul is writing to younger leaders with 'final instructions,' as it were, it can be argued that he does emphasise those matters which he sees of greatest importance in sustaining effective ministry in fledgling congregations.

- revival—0
- anointing—0
- physical manifestations—0
- spiritual gifts— 3
- good conscience— 7
- prayer— 7
- suffering for the gospel— 7
- good works— 24
- the redemptive work of Christ— 28
- various fruits of the Holy Spirit— 41
- preaching and teaching— 53

The comparative importance of Christian living (65 verses in total) and to teaching (53) is beyond question. The relative significance of an experiential approach is slight.

So Edwards concludes that ‘no philosophy or experience will ever be sufficient to guide us safely through this labyrinth and maze, without our closely following the clue which God has given us in His Word.’ If we could only develop a practice of emphasising the same things emphasised by Christ and the apostles, there would be some happy results—

- we would avoid delusion
- we would be delivered from ‘innumerable perplexities’ about experience
- we would show our Christianity by our ‘amiable distinguished behaviour’ rather than by ‘excessive declaring of experiences’
- we would show our zeal more by actions than words
- we would talk together in humility and modesty, with our hands and feet preceding our tongues
- many of the stumbling blocks to ‘experimental and powerful religion’ would be removed
- we would be able to convince people there is a reality in our faith
- our light would so shine before men that they would see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven.

To the end, Edwards refuses to deny the validity of spiritual experience. But he is well aware of the many pitfalls, and especially the immense difficulties of separating the true from the false. There is no question about the fact that in this, his last work on this subject, he is more cautious than he was at the beginning. It is clear that the shine had worn off the attraction of the early manifestations. As a result of more mature reflection, he no longer advocates or even defends them. His concern is far more to set them in correct perspective. In doing so, he in fact leaves little room for them.

For him, three things stand out. First, the primacy of Christ. As we have seen, everything is centred on this. The only justification for any manifestations could be great joy or overwhelming wonder at the excellence of the Person and work of Christ.

Second, the importance of the whole testimony of Scripture. Whatever we say or do must line up, not with a handful of proof texts or inner ‘discoveries’ but with the original, consistent overall teaching of God’s Word.

Third, the greatest evidence of faith and grace is to be found in sound Christian behaviour. Only integrity in living is ultimate proof of the genuineness of our spirituality.

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