

The Benefit of Having a Worthy Opponent

How the Theology of Seventeenth-Century Puritans Can Be Complemented by the Nineteenth-Century German Thought Known as the Mercersburg Theology

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CHAPTER SIX (cont.)

Religious Affections

For any reader who appreciates the theology summarized by the Synod of Dort, he or she may be ready to discard Nevin at this point, but Nevin's work has value in supplementing another major work of Edwards entitled *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections in Three Parts*. *Religious Affections* considers what the distinguishing characteristics are of those who are in God's favor, taking up the question, "What is the nature of true religion?"¹

Edwards published this work to combat both the rationalism from Boston infecting the Protestantism of his own day and the enthusiasm of some who practiced a fanatical style of revivalism in the Connecticut Valley. He was careful to steer a clear course through the various schools of thought as he was aware that the same Satan who pretended to befriend Adam and Eve is adept at counterfeiting contemporary forms of religion.²

Referencing 1 Peter 1:8 where Peter writes to those whose religion was being refined and proven in time of trial, Edwards notes two evidences of true religion referenced by the Apostle – love to Christ and joy in Christ. From that verse he concluded that "true religion, in great part, consists in holy affections."³ Affections can be defined as "the more vigorous and sensible exercises of the inclination and will of the soul."⁴

Edwards notes two components to the soul – perception/understanding and inclination (liking/disliking). The will never commits itself apart from being affected and is never moved out of a state of indifference. Affections that move the will include love, desire, hope, joy, gratitude, complacency, hatred, fear, anger, grief,

¹ Jonathan Edwards, "A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections in Three Parts," *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* Vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, reprinted 2011), 234.

² *Ibid.*, 235.

³ *Ibid.*, 236.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 237.

etc.⁵ Love is chief of the affections, for according to 1 Corinthians 13, without it all other elements of religion are empty.⁶

Second Timothy 3:5 makes clear that true religion has a deeper power of godliness than mere outward participation in rituals. "The Spirit of God, in those who have sound and solid religion, is a Spirit of powerful holy affection."⁷ Ordinances and religious duties are designed to foster true religion in the affections.⁸ The opposite of true religion in the Bible is sometimes designated as hardness of heart, a description of an unaffected heart which is when God abandons a person to the power of sin and corruption. It is difficult to consider that Nevin might accuse Edwards of constructing a model of religion which is mechanical when one reads such rich material describing how religious affections engage the living God.

True religion is more than religious affections, but true religion cannot exist without them. Satan can promote wild or zealous false affections or at other times virtually no affections, in that instance reducing religion to lifeless formality.⁹

Edwards supplies a helpful list of qualities of affections that do not prove affections are gracious. First, having very high affections is no proof they are either gracious or false.¹⁰ Extremely high affections may be genuine or fraudulent. Both scenarios were pictured in Scripture. Secondly, whether affections have a great effect on the body does not prove them to be gracious or false, for both genuine and false affections can awaken strong bodily responses such as groaning, becoming ill, crying out or fainting.¹¹

A third quality of affections that neither proves them to be gracious or false is the outward display of fluent, fervent and abundant religious talk.¹² Fourthly, another on the list would be having involuntary experiences where affections were excited without preparation or effort to stir them. The work of the Spirit in the Scriptures is seen to be varied among individual persons. He converts some suddenly, and others through a more secret and gradual process. But Satan can stir emotions and counterfeit true religion. Also, a person can have a generic encounter with the common influence of the Holy Spirit but not truly have salvation (Hebrews 6:4-5). This would not be a demonic counterfeit, but neither is it proof of truly gracious affections.¹³

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 240.

⁷ Ibid., 238.

⁸ Ibid., 242.

⁹ Ibid., 243.

¹⁰ Ibid., 245.

¹¹ Ibid., 246-247.

¹² Ibid., 247.

¹³ Ibid., 248-249.

Fifthly, it is no proof whether religious affections are truly holy or not if they occur in the mind in a remarkable manner and even with texts of Holy Scripture accompanying. Besides potential interference from demonic activity, it is noted that the human heart is crafty and a person can easily deceive one's own self.¹⁴ Nor, sixthly, does the appearance of love validate religious affections as true, for love can be counterfeited by Satan as well.¹⁵

Also included on this list, having multiple kinds of religious affections together does not prove them gracious. There were those in Scripture who demonstrated sorrow but at the same time served idols (e.g., 2 Kings 17:32-33). Edwards chronicles the similar instances recorded in Scripture about a variety of affections.¹⁶ Later Edwards would write that Scripture directs believers to examine themselves based on the nature of the fruit they are producing, not by the Spirit's method in producing that fruit.¹⁷

The fact that comforts and joys seem to be associated with certain affections cannot render a verdict conclusively in favor of the affections being genuine. Merely having a dread of hell is not conclusive proof that one is converted. The devil can terrify just as God can. A better indicator of the value of the affections is to monitor whether the subject is separated from his or her lusts. Some terrors could arise naturally from within a person's fearful temperament or powerful imagination. Likewise, the human heart can manufacture counterfeit joy and comfort as well. A footnote referencing Mr. Stoddard points out that what is counterfeit eventually fades.¹⁸

A person who devotes much time to religion and external rites may or may not possess the nature of true religion. Such activity is no proof one way or the other that his affections are truly gracious. Much verbal praise and glorifying God can here be included as well.¹⁹ Add also to the list a show of confidence in one who is moved by affections. Assurance can be counterfeited as well. One way to spot a counterfeit is offered here – a hypocrite lacks the dread of being deceived and is without a cautious spirit. He is not properly aware and distrusting of his own corruptions.²⁰ Lastly, nothing can be concluded about the nature of religious affections based on what others say about them.²¹

¹⁴ Ibid., 249-250.

¹⁵ Ibid., 250.

¹⁶ Ibid., 250-251.

¹⁷ Ibid., 255.

¹⁸ Ibid., 252-253.

¹⁹ Ibid., 255.

²⁰ Ibid., 256-257.

²¹ Ibid., 260.

Finally, the last and longest section of *Religious Affections* is entitled, “Showing what are distinguishing signs of truly gracious and holy affections.”²² Laying the foundation for what follows, Edwards notes that “Affections that are truly spiritual and gracious, arise from those influences and operations on the heart, which are spiritual, supernatural, and divine.”²³ By spiritual is meant what is sanctified or gracious in nature, what is influenced by the Spirit of God and born of God. Spiritual does not just refer to what emanates from the soul, for what is carnal and fleshly can originate from there as well. Nor does it refer simply to what is immaterial. It is the product of the Holy Spirit taking up residence in believers and becoming “there a principle or spring of a new nature and life” (Galatians 2:20).²⁴ It should be noted that the Spirit can influence a person in numerous ways without actually indwelling him. It can act on his mind just as it can act on an inanimate object.

True saints are called spiritual because the Holy Spirit produces holiness in their natures. Holiness is “the beauty and sweetness of the divine nature.” When the Holy Spirit communicates Himself, He “makes the soul a partaker of God’s beauty and Christ’s joy, so that the saint has truly fellowship with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.”²⁵ What is lacking here is any emphasis on organic union with the humanity of Christ. What is shared with God is His nature of holiness as well as His spiritual beauty and happiness, although believers possess those in “infinitely less degree” than is found in God. At no time does the Spirit’s presence cause believers to share the essence of God.

What the Spirit imparts is above nature. It is not merely an improvement of natural principles.²⁶ New operating principles are instilled. The Spirit may impress or improve natural men to act on natural principles (e.g., knowledge, skill, courage) but only gives a new spiritual principle to the elect (saints will seek to honor and please and delight in God and exhibit such characteristics as humility, meekness and self-denial). Consider how Balaam was a natural man used by the Spirit. He had words supernaturally brought to mind, but he was not properly affected by them. Were he converted, a spiritual application of God’s Word would have occurred. Writes Edwards,

A spiritual application of the promises of Scripture, for the comfort of the saints, consists in enlightening their minds to see the holy excellency and sweetness of the blessings promised, also the holy excellency of the promises, his faithfulness and sufficiency; thus drawing forth their hearts to embrace the promises, and thing promised; and by this means, giving

²² Ibid., 262.

²³ Ibid., 264.

²⁴ Ibid., 265.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 266.

the sensible actings of grace, enabling them to see their grace, and so their possessive title to the promise.²⁷

Edwards refers also to this in terms of the seal of the Spirit which is the impressing of a divine mark on the soul, the impression of God's own image.²⁸ This section leaves one poised and ready to hear that it is the same as being made to partake of Christ's humanity, and through Him being joined to the Trinity. Since he neglects a focus on organic union of the believer with Christ, one could get the impression that the Spirit's work in each believer is almost as if each believer is an independent production of the Spirit and not joined to an organic whole. Here Edwards explains the impression of the image on God's children as being performed by the Spirit of adoption. Does not the Spirit insert the believer into Christ or with Christ into one body? Edwards says that "the inheritance that Christ has purchased for the elect, is the Spirit of God," not necessarily in extraordinary gifts, "but in his vital indwelling in the heart, exerting and communicating himself there, in the proper, holy, or divine nature." He continues, "The Father provides the Savior, and the purchase is made of him; the Son is the purchaser and the price; and the Holy Spirit is the great blessing or inheritance purchased."²⁹ Those, like Nevin, who recognize the significance of organic union with Christ would object that while the Holy Spirit facilitates the bond of union with Christ, He is not a proxy who replaces Christ. One must decide whether the end goal of salvation is participation in Christ by the Spirit or participation in the Spirit because of the sacrifice of Christ. Edwards says that "it is through the vital communications and indwelling of the Spirit, that the saints have all their light, life, holiness, beauty, and joy in heaven" and also on earth, though here it is less in measure.³⁰ Love is here identified as the bond of union (not a real participation in Christ's life).

The next step in Edwards' unfolding treatise is the statement that "The first objective ground of gracious affections, is the transcendently excellent and amiable nature of divine things, as they are in themselves; and not any conceived relation they bear to self, or self-interest."³¹ In this he disagrees with any who would claim that all true love arises first out of self-love, for that would be saying that the only reason one loves God or desires His glory is for his own happiness.³² Instead, after a man loves God, he will as a consequence love his own happiness. Love that arises from beholding properties in another that are lovely is different from love that arises from receiving a gift from another which would be self-love. Self-love is natural and occurs in both devils and angels. It is not a gracious product of the Spirit's working.

²⁷ Ibid., 271.

²⁸ Ibid., 273.

²⁹ Ibid., 274.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 275.

This gracious affection of love is more than gratitude. Gratitude for kindness received comes secondarily after one's heart is captivated by God's glory and eager to love Him.³³ This means that one's circumstances and experiences, whether fair or poor, do not hinder one's joy and spiritual delight so easily because that joy and delight are not rooted in self-love. No matter the circumstances, God's divine and holy beauty are constant. A hypocrite rejoices first in himself and what he gains. A person with truly gracious affections rejoices first in God. The hypocrite speaks much of himself; the saint speaks of God.

Edwards next offers that "those affections that are truly holy, are primarily founded on the moral excellency of divine things."³⁴ The moral excellency or perfections of God are different from the natural perfections of God. Moral perfections or those that belong to Him as a moral agent are summarized as holiness. It is acknowledging that God's heart and will are right and good and lovely as demonstrated in His righteousness and truth and faithfulness. Natural perfections refer to God's greatness, such as His power, knowledge, eternity, majesty and omnipresence.³⁵ "Holy persons, in the exercise of holy affections, love divine things primarily for their holiness; they love God, in the first place, for the beauty of His holiness, or moral perfections, as being supremely amiable in itself."³⁶ The regenerate are given a supernatural sense, a divine spiritual taste for God's moral excellency or holiness. "A holy nature must needs love that chiefly, which is most agreeable to itself."³⁷ This is different than becoming enamored with the glory of God's natural perfections which is possible for a natural man to do. For example, Nebuchadnezzar was impressed with God's greatness, but there is no evidence he was captivated by God's holiness.³⁸

This naturally leads Edwards to declare that "glorious affections arise from the mind being enlightened rightly and spiritually to apprehend divine things."³⁹ "Knowledge is the key that first opens the hard heart, enlarges the affections, and opens the way for men into the kingdom of heaven."⁴⁰ What he is combating here is the idea that affections based on images or pictures in the imagination but not tied to an understanding of the Word of God are not gracious.

Gaining a spiritual understanding of Scripture does not refer to finding mystical insight or grasping literary principles of allegory, parables or types. Those can be discovered by the natural man. A person with gracious affections will recognize in Scripture the holy beauty of divine things.⁴¹

³³ Ibid., 277.

³⁴ Ibid., 278.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 279.

³⁷ Ibid., 280.

³⁸ Ibid., 281.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 282.

⁴¹ Ibid., 285.

The next point Edwards makes is that “truly gracious affections are attended with a conviction of the reality and certainty of divine things.” Persons with gracious affections are thoroughly rooted in the Gospel and “the weight and power of real things” are in their hearts and so govern their affections.⁴² This prevents a subjective, in-grown focus pervading Bible interpretation. It requires not only a reasonable belief but one that is spiritual. For example, Judas likely reasoned that Jesus was the Messiah based on what he saw. But he was not converted to entrust himself to Jesus. “True faith arises from a spiritual sight of Christ.”⁴³

Continuing on, Edwards teaches that “Gracious affections are attended with evangelical humiliation.”⁴⁴ This is a sense of one’s own insufficiency and despicable nature. Here again is discovered a distinction between nature and grace. A natural man may encounter a legal humiliation which occurs when one encounters the common influence of the Spirit who imparts knowledge of the natural perfections of God.

In contrast to legal humiliation, evangelical humiliation is administered specially by the Spirit of God to believers. Evangelical humiliation is rooted in “a sense of the transcendent beauty of divine things.”⁴⁵ As an example, the Israelites at Sinai were given over to a legal humiliation as they trembled before God’s greatness and were aware of their own guilt and exposure to divine wrath.

Evangelical humiliation abases self and exalts God alone. Not only is the conscience convicted, but the will submits to God. Legal humiliation leads one to despair; evangelical humiliation induces a renouncing of self. On judgment day those who do not belong to God will be convinced of their sinfulness but will lack any sense of mortification of the pride resident in their hearts. Evangelical humiliation, then, involves forsaking and renouncing worldly pleasures and denying oneself the natural tendency to seek self-exaltation and self-glory. To renounce the world but not one’s own righteousness is to trade one lust in to feed another.⁴⁶ Spiritual pride can actually foster conceit over one’s alleged humility in renouncing the world, particularly as one compares herself with others.⁴⁷ Conversely, true Christian humility will lead one to regard self as least among the saints.⁴⁸ A truly gracious soul regards his holiness as small because, having some sense of the holiness of God, he believes his own personal holiness should be much greater. Further, bearing this consciousness of God’s holiness, his own sins seem so much the more sinful, and he recognizes the infinite hatefulness

⁴² Ibid., 288.

⁴³ Ibid., 290.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 294.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 295.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 296.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 297.

toward God contained in them.⁴⁹ Often those who are proud of special, supernatural religious experiences downplay their own sinfulness. A true believer is a thousand times more apt to recognize his own pride rather than admire his own humility.⁵⁰ Likewise, he will sooner find fault in his own pride than in that of others. Consequentially, in humility she will assign the best interpretation to others' words and actions. A hypocrite will magnify faults in others and be quick to overlook his own.

One might guess that if Nevin were reviewing this work, he might at this point add a point of his own to guide those seeking to discern the presence of true affections in themselves. It would be that one who is in vital union with Christ will love His Body, the Church, recognizing in it the glory of Christ Himself, and would offer himself as a servant to promote its ministry, submit to its discipline, partake of the means of grace offered within it, honor those appointed to lead, generously sacrifice self for the well-being of the other members of the Body, and so on.

Edwards, however, continues with the point that gracious affections can be distinguished from others in that they exist alongside a change of nature or a conversion from sin to God. Before conversion a person may be restrained from sin, but after conversion, the heart is turned toward holiness and becomes an enemy of sin.⁵¹

This is followed by the identifying mark that truly gracious affections give birth to and foster "a spirit of love, meekness, quietness, forgiveness, and mercy, as appeared in Christ."⁵² This may be the closest Edwards comes to acknowledging the believer's organic union with Christ when he says, "These things are spoken of as what are especially the character of Jesus Christ himself." "And as these things are especially the character of Christ; so they are also especially the character of Christians." "Christ is full of grace; and Christians all receive of his fullness, and grace for grace; i.e., there is grace in Christians answering to grace in Christ, such an answerableness as there is between wax and the seal. There is character for character," "the same things that belong to Christ's character belong to theirs." "The brand is of the same nature with the stock and root, has the same sap, and bears the same sort of fruit." "The members have the same kind of life with the head."⁵³ He then references 1 Corinthians 6:17 and that believers are Christ's flesh and bone as well as being one spirit with Him.

The Spirit that descended on Christ came like a dove which represents meekness, harmlessness, peace and love. That same Spirit is given to members of the church. Often in *Religious Affections* it seems believers and Christ develop on parallel paths, each guided by the Spirit. It is difficult to find a reference to

⁴⁹ Ibid., 298.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 301.

⁵¹ Ibid., 302.

⁵² Ibid., 303.

⁵³ Ibid., 304.

partaking of Christ by the Spirit, but this comes very close, even if it is not well developed throughout. Both Nevin and Edwards were combatting subjective forms of enthusiasm and fanaticism. Nevin promoted the church's organic union with Christ as the objective, balancing factor, while Edwards promoted union with the Spirit who can produce a new nature. Nevin's approach was rooted in the incarnation and Christ's perfecting of human nature, while Edwards was focused on an approach of the Spirit instilling new characteristics within the elect.

Another characteristic Edwards identifies concerning truly gracious affections is that "gracious affections soften the heart, and are attended with a Christian tenderness of spirit."⁵⁴ False affections create numbness toward the gravity of past and present sins and do not foster careful self-examination. This occurs while the person believes she is protected by Christ's love without practicing a fear of God.⁵⁵

Gracious affections have a beautiful symmetry and proportion which false affections lack.⁵⁶ Holy affections are not yet perfected in any individual on earth because grace is not yet perfected in any. But holy affections will have a universal effect in that they will affect every part of the believer who receives the entire, whole, complete image of Christ, not just portions of it. So along with joy and comfort will be godly sorrow and mourning for sin. Hypocrites display a disproportion of religious affections.⁵⁷ For example, one may seem greatly affected when learning of God's love and yet have a life characterized by contention, envy, revenge, evil-speaking and grudges. Perhaps another will love strangers but not his own family. Or one may lead a campaign against a certain sin in society while harboring pet sins in amnesty in his own life.

In this section Edwards speaks of feeding on "the comforts Christ has purchased for us," but does not refer to feeding on Christ. He includes this statement, "The most eminent divine favours which the saints obtained, that we read of in Scripture, were in their retirement."⁵⁸ He lists Abraham, Moses, Elijah and Elisha as samples. What is absent is an emphasis on preaching and sacraments or the life of the church. But it is understood that Edwards was confronting those with much empty outward show of religion who lack real private devotion to Christ in secret. He does acknowledge that fellowship and public worship are not without benefit.

The text offers up this point next – that the higher gracious affections are raised, the more of a spiritual appetite and longing develops for spiritual attainments.⁵⁹ False affections are easily satisfied with any present level of spirituality. But of

⁵⁴ Ibid., 307.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 308.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 309.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 310.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 312.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

the godly man Edwards comments that “Godliness is the gain of which he is covetous.”⁶⁰

Following next is this, that “Gracious and holy affections have their exercise and fruit in Christian practice.”⁶¹ The author counsels that “slothfulness in the service of God, in his professed servants, is as damning as open rebellion.”⁶² Explaining why spiritual growth and productivity will certainly be present he says that the inward principle from which gracious affections arise “is something divine, a communication of God, a participation of the divine nature, Christ living in the heart, the Holy Spirit indwelling there, in union with the faculties of the soul, as an internal vital principle, exerting his own proper nature in the exercise of those faculties.” “If God dwells in the heart, and be vitally united to it, he will show he is a God by the efficacy of his operation.” “For in the heart where Christ savingly is, there he lives, and exerts himself after the power of that endless life, that he received at his resurrection.” “The Spirit of Christ, which is the immediate spring of grace in the heart, is all life, all power all act.”⁶³

Another point offered to aid in discerning truly gracious affections is that Christian practice and holy living testifies to one’s sincerity before others.⁶⁴ A tree will be known by its fruit, including self-denial for the sake of promoting Christ’s kingdom and the imitation of Christ. Hypocrites, on the other hand, major in talk and not action. It is not enough to have a life without blatant moral defects. There must also be a universal devotion to the life of Christ.⁶⁵

The last point Edwards offers in this study is that “Christian practice is a distinguishing and sure evidence of grace to persons’ own consciences.”⁶⁶ One must carefully evaluate his own motives behind his actions. Careful attention must be paid to obedience in both body and soul. Christian practice is to be carried out over a lifetime and so is far more than a celebration of an instance of conversion. “Sincerity in religion . . . consists in setting God highest in the heart, in choosing him before other things, in having a heart to sell all for Christ.” “Godliness consists not in a heart to intend to do the will of God, but in a heart to do it.”⁶⁷ Anyone who presently lacks a holy life and practice should not expect to be admitted to heaven as a holy person.⁶⁸ Persevering in holiness and preferring Christ above all in times of trial is evidence to oneself of the presence of truly gracious affections.⁶⁹

⁶⁰ Ibid., 314.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 315.

⁶³ Ibid., 316-317.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 321.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 324.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 326.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 327.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 328.

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