

An Invitation to Jonathan Edwards' book *Religious Affections*

Gary E. Schnittjer

Copyright © 2010

I

We say we are conservative evangelicals.¹ I think this is right. Yet, both undergraduate and graduate students more and more frequently ask, 'What does it mean to be evangelical?' There are many reasons for our blurry identity, or, many might say, identity crisis. My concern is not to trace out any of these troublesome, endemic issues. Rather, I want to turn to the embryo of what we call the evangelical faith.

The word "evangelical" comes from the Greek word *euangelion* which means "the gospel, the good news."² When we use the term as an adjective, "evangelical Christians," we are saying we are the kind of Christians who embrace the gospel as central to human life. Now of course the term, when it is assigned to a group of people, takes on a bunch of social nuances, because there are all kinds of people who call themselves evangelical. But if there is any common denominator, evangelicals see personal conversion to the gospel of Christ (or rejection thereof) as the defining element of human life.

There was a time in the early eighteenth century, when many things that had been the way they were for a long time began to shift. English speaking society was beginning to turn away from monarchies and aristocracy. A middle working class arose who sometimes had more wealth and influence than some born as leisure class aristocrats. And, though they did not know it at the time, in the English speaking world, the first impulses took shape of what we now call the Industrial Revolution. Moreover, this was accompanied by a shift from town life to city life. In religious terms, it has been said, that the Puritan way required a small town society where

¹ Lecture for Cairn University chapel (9.13.2010).

² It seems Mark borrowed and adapted *euangelion* (noun) from Isaiah 40:9 LXX (verb form) (see Mark 1:1, and note the use of Isa 40 in Mark 1:2-3).

everyone knew each other, and the like.³ Those days were passing away. Amidst these dramatic economic and social shifts the evangelical way was born.

The beginning of these evangelical traditions, especially regarding the preeminence of personal conversation, was established during the transatlantic revivals of the early 1700's. These revivals eventually became known as the Great Awakening.⁴

Were the numerous local revivals part of a multi-colony and even transatlantic awakening work of the Spirit of God? This question prompted widespread pamphleteering, with many things being written and published all the time. A great mass of pro-revivalist literature was read eagerly by those who were attracted to the revivals. At the same time a large mass of anti-revivalist literature hit the press, and these largely came from establishment clerics. Look back at the pro-revivalist or anti-revivalist literature, and take any of it literally, and it becomes difficult to figure out what happened. The pro-revivalist literature claimed that these were unprecedented revivals amounting to the greatest changes since the Reformation and the days of the apostles. Yet, coming out of the same presses, the anti-revivalist literature said, nothing is happening, there is no change. If there is a change, it is merely that “the enthusiasts”—a negative word used by establishment intellectuals of the day—are stirring people's emotions and promoting disorder against the established standards of decency and social structure. Thus emerged two radically different interpretations by eyewitnesses of these things.

Within this context of great controversy surrounding the revivals on both sides of the Atlantic, particularly the colonies, Jonathan Edwards wrote his book entitled the *Religious Affections*. But to understand this book, it cannot merely be set in this context. We need to understand how personal this book is for Edwards.

³ See Harvey Cox, *The Secular City*.

⁴ Now, of course, these revivals are responsible as much as anything else for the invention of the pre-Revolutionary tendencies of the English colonies along the Eastern seaboard of the North American continent. Specifically, the focus on the immediacy of personal conversion as a defining characteristic of Christianity naturally gave rise to a new sense of importance to the individual, to choice, and to the rise of the democratic spirit. For the revivalists made the claim, which was widely embraced, that individual conversion, not family, not state religion, and not even an established church at all, but individual conversion is what defined one's place within the people of God. Moreover, these revival meetings were often taking place in very unconventional places, not always in the meeting house or church. They often held large gatherings with zealous revival preachers sometimes in the streets, sometimes in barns, even sometimes in the open fields. Some of these gospel preachers who thought that this was an unprecedented work of the Spirit also began to encourage parishioners to question whether the established ministers were, in fact, converted. The criticism of the revival itself by some clerics is what led to many people beginning to define them as unconverted ministers. The idea is that without supporting the revival, one must not truly have a work of God in their heart. (This interpretation, in terms of the relationship between the revivals and the pre-Revolutionary spirit, is indebted to Harry S. Stout, “Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series [1977]: 519-41.)

II

Jonathan Edwards was born in the colonies to a strict and rigid Puritan minister, Timothy Edwards. The young Jonathan Edwards had religious convictions and some moments of spiritual enlivenment. But Reverend Timothy Edwards was skeptical that these were true workings of the Spirit, thinking these could be generated by some kind of enthusiasm. These questions incited personal anxiety within Jonathan Edwards. Did he have the marks of the workings of the Spirit of God? The situation for Edwards was so intense that his biographer entitles the opening chapter “The Overwhelming Question.”⁵ For Edwards, the issue of his life was the question of personal conversion, first his own and later the souls of his own congregation.

What gave rise to this question for Reverend Timothy Edwards and his son was the Puritan science of conversion. The old Puritans writers, particularly William Perkins, explained the “preparatory steps” for true conversion. The first step is conviction. Conviction refers to an awakening of some sort to the sad estate of a person’s standing with reference to eternity. The second step is humiliation, or the more well-used Puritan word, “terrors.” Because of one’s awakening as to one’s standing, one should go to the next step of having terrors of the wrath of God. The third step is receiving God’s regenerating life, or a new spirit, within the person, when the person repents from sin and turns and embraces the grace of God.

For the Puritans, these steps were essential. When a Puritan minister interviewed and evaluated those who would like to join with the covenantal fellowship of the assembly, they interpreted the congregant’s testimony, especially with respect to the terrors. And it is at this point that Jonathan Edwards never really lived up to his father’s inspection. He never sufficiently suffered from the terrors of hell, at least not in the way that was expected of those that would testify of a true conversion.⁶

Now, it is said that Jonathan Edwards never gave up on an argument.⁷ This seems to be the case with the disagreement he had with his parents over the Puritans steps to saving faith. Edwards eventually came to believe God’s Spirit works differently in some cases. In his adult life, with his rigorous and frequent writing and preaching for the great revivals, he devoted

⁵ See Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Biography*.

⁶ This summary indebted to Marsden, 26-29, and pg. 522, note 24. Marsden notes that sometimes the Puritans noted three and sometimes four steps.

⁷ See Marsden, 58.

himself to the question of conversion. The nature and way of personal conversion fueled Edwards' angst and drove his work as a minister and Christian writer. At a personal level, "Edwards literally kept score of how well he did, as he would put it, of the evidence of God's grace."⁸

III

Edwards rose to prominence, in part, due to his embrace and his critical, careful watch over revivalist preachers like George Whitefield. Whitefield preached with fervor throughout the colonies. Edwards took one of his own sermons and did something unusual with it. He worked and reworked and styled it overtly Whitefieldian. He managed to write a sermon more Whitefield than Whitefield, and this is the ultimate revival sermon for which Edwards is most remembered. You may have read it while you were in high school; it is called "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

As the sun began to set on the revivals of the late 1730's and early 1740's, Edwards was compelled to face the question, "Is this a true revival or not?" To get at this Edwards addressed the meaning and theology of personal conversion. Circumstances raised his lifelong personal and ministerial concern to the forefront of transatlantic English speaking Christianity.

Edwards' most important book the *Religious Affections* addresses his own lifelong anxieties, even while challenging the longstanding Puritan views of the necessary steps which precede conversion. Yet the book is much more than that because he addressed in a definitive way the raging controversy between the pro-revivalist and anti-revivalist pamphleteers. Moreover, the enduring legacy of the so-called Great Awakening remains the primacy of personal conversion for all evangelical Christians.

Now, in no way did Edwards mean to break with Puritan traditions, nor break with the revivalists; not at all. I think he saw himself in continuity with all that, but he was innovative to such a large degree that it really changed the way people thought about personal conversion and its place in the life of an individual.

⁸ Marsden, 52. Marsden is here referring to the journals Edwards kept as a young man.

IV

In the *Religious Affections*, Edwards attacks both the pro-revivalists and the anti-revivalists with respect to personal conversion. He frames his explanation of personal conversion against both sides of the debate. While ultimately he affirms the work of God in converting individuals in the revival, he is not in any way endorsing the arguments of the pro-revivalists. Rather, he affirms the revival, even while rejecting the pro-revivalist arguments. For Edwards, quite rightly, many of the pro-revivalists arguments stand as sensationalist propaganda.

The *Religious Affections* falls out into three parts, and each part bears on the matter of personal conversion. In the first part the real question comes to the fore. What does it mean to have “religious affections”?⁹ The meaning of the religious affections is tied to how one understands the soul. I cannot get into anything complicated here. To put it simply, by the term “affections” Edwards means the very vigorous or lively movings of what we call the heart when the soul moves inwardly, or when it is expressed outwardly, the will. For Edwards it is not enough to have minor inclinations, but persons need a true re-inclining, real shifts of the heart and will. The question turns on whether the person truly loves God?

Edwards affirms that having affections does not mean one is truly religious, for there are many mere enthusiasts. The matter is twofold. One, what is the object of the affections? Are they truly affected, do they signify a true love of God? Two, and even more difficult to understand, what are the deep motives? What really moves the affections? Is it the Spirit or not? To answer these questions, we move to parts two and three of Edwards’ book.

In part two, Edwards’ lays out twelve signs which are not evidence one way or the other of whether a person is truly converted. By this list he is especially attacking the pro-revivalists, for these are the evidences they used to point to conversions. Edwards lays these out one by one and effectively says, when you see this sign, it could be the sign of religious affections, or it might not be. This part of the book might scare you to death. And, to be honest, if you have never been scared to death, you should be scared to death.

The twelve signs which are no evidence of whether one is truly converted include, (1) strong emotion, (2) physical reaction, (3) that a person is preoccupied by the things of religion, (4) that a person says they did not conjure up their religious feelings themselves, (5) that a person begins to quote Scripture frequently, (6) that a person seems to be loving, (7) that they have

⁹ Edwards apparently borrows this language from his favorite book, John Smith’s *Select Discourses* (1660).

many different kinds of religious affections, (8) nothing can be determined concerning awakenings and comforts even if they come in a *certain order*, (9) that persons do good works and zealously practice acts of godliness, (10) that persons give glory to God and speak testimonies to his glory for what he has done in them, (11) that persons have great confidence in their good estate, and (12) that persons do acts of charity and love.¹⁰ Now this is an impressive list of signs, many of which were pointed out by the pro-revivalists to try and demonstrate that the revivals were real. Edwards says these are no true signs. These might be evidence of a work of the Spirit of God or they might not.

I will focus attention, for a moment, on the eighth sign.¹¹ Edwards here directly challenges the widely embraced Puritan tradition of a certain order of convictions and steps which preceded conversion. Edwards provides a long discussion which includes his view that the devil can counterfeit the appearance of the saving graces of the Spirit of God. He notes that human beings are not able to understand the ways of God when God works to convict and draw someone to himself. Moreover, we do not know how far God will reach out to someone, even those that ultimately reject him. Perhaps Edwards' strongest point is his invitation for readers to consider how frequently people apparently go through convictions and comforts in the traditional steps to conversion, yet do not continue in the ways of true Christian spirituality.

Edwards directly addresses the Christian leaders who had been watching over their congregants during the revivals. He writes, "I appeal to all those ministers in this land, who have had much occasion of dealing with souls, in the late extraordinary season, whether they han't been many who don't prove well, that have given a fair account of their experiences, and have seemed to be converted according to rule, i.e. with convictions and affections, succeeding distinctly and exactly, in that order and method, which has been ordinarily insisted on, as the

¹⁰ Edwards (1705-1758) was no friend of some of the critics of establishment religion like the satirist, Jonathan Swift (1667-1745). But Edwards and Swift can agree on a few things. Swift in his scathing attacks against Protestant Christianity, especially Puritans and especially zealous Puritans, says, for example, "That those are pretenders to purity who place so much merit in using Scripture phrases on all occasions" (Jonathan Swift, "A Tale of a Tub," in *Jonathan Swift Major Works* [Oxford's World's Classics, 2003], 154, note). Again Swift says, "The villainies and cruelties committed by Enthusiasts and fanatics among us, were all performed under the disguise of religion and long prayers" (156, note). In other respects, Edwards and Swift could not be further away from each other. Edwards considered satirists (like Swift) mere mockers and thought it was not a sign of strong thinking to ridicule rather than make an argument. At the same time, Swift thought that people like Edwards who were ministers and made arguments were ignoring the real issues and just settling for the niceties that can be all hidden under theological jargon. The two men for all of their seeming disagreements do agree on one thing: the grave nature of human sinfulness. This is demonstrated in many, many of both of their works. Probably the best example of a pessimistic view for human potential in Swift's work is his well known *Gulliver's Travels* (Oxford's World's Classics, 2005).

¹¹ See Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 151-163.

order of the operations of the Spirit of God in conversion.”¹² Edwards goes on to argue that just going through these steps is not a sure sign that a person is truly converted.

Edwards is trying to establish what is the place of God and what is the place of humans. For Edwards, it is God’s privilege, prerogative, and right to be the sole judge over the eternal destiny of every person’s soul. Humans should weigh the evidences and signs of conversion, but humans are not in the place and do not have the privilege of knowing truly the state of anyone’s soul. Edwards’ distinction puts mystery into its appropriate place, affirming the miracle of the forgiveness of sins and conversion. God is not a machine, and salvation is not mechanical: it is a relationship and it is God’s work to save a person. It is not something he owes anyone, it is something he is pleased to do for those who repent and turn to him in faith.

Edwards provides this helpful summary statement: “We are often in Scripture expressly directed to try ourselves by the *nature* of the fruits of the Spirit; but nowhere by the Spirit’s *method* of producing them.”¹³

Part three of the *Religious Affections* also offers twelve signs. But these are twelve signs of truly religious affections, that is, signs of true personal conversion. The disturbing thing on first reading is that, in many cases, these signs seem similar if not the same things which were the signs in part two. What is the difference between the signs in part two and part three? In part three, Edwards accents the underlying motivation rather than the evidences themselves. For Edwards, everything turns on why people do what they do. It is important that a person shows signs in their life of being changed to the ways of Christ, but more critical is discerning why they are showing these signs. Among the hallmarks of truly religious, saving affections is the ongoing work of God leading to merciful and righteous living throughout one’s life.

V

Why read the *Religious Affections*? Evangelicals agree on few things. But, again, evangelicals agree that nothing in an individual’s life is more important than how she or he responds to the gospel of Christ. Receiving or rejecting the gospel stands as the most significant event in any and every person’s life.

¹² Ibid., 160.

¹³ Ibid., 162. Here Edwards makes reference to one of the colonial American Puritan writers, Thomas Shepard. He quotes Shepard, “As a child cannot tell how his soul comes into it, nor it may be when; but afterwards it sees and feels that life; so that he were as bad as a beast, that should deny an immortal soul so here” (*Parable*, part II, page 171, quoted in Edwards, 162, n. 9)

Our identity as individuals and as evangelical Protestants can be strengthened by interaction with and reflection upon Edwards' *Religious Affections*. If we are to escape the identity crisis which is overwhelming us with self-satisfaction, complacency, mediocrity, and, above all else, arrogance, we must come to understand who we are. Whoever we are turns on the meaning of conversion to Christ.

The Christian mission hinges on the things we say are evangelical responsibilities. We claim to be Christians, conservative evangelical Christians. Are our claims to be Christian the only distinguishing mark in our lives? The problem with mere claims and no substance is not simply that we are an embarrassment to the name of Christ, though this is a problem. The larger problem is that as long as we do not understand who we are, we are unlikely make the kind of changes that are desperately needed.

I invite you to avoid a mistake, a mistake for yourself and the evangelical people of God with whom you identify. Read this book.

Notes

For the authoritative edition see Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol. 2, ed. John E. Smith (Yale University Press, 1959). The Yale edition of the *Religious Affections* offers a helpful (if lengthy) introduction which explains both the historical and theological setting of the book. (Also see *Jonathan Edwards on Revival* [Banner of Truth].)

For critical interpretation of Edwards' life see George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (Yale University Press, 2003). Marsden offers an up to date, and the best, biography of Edwards now available. Marsden covers Edwards' personal struggle to understand his own conversion and his motivation to spend much of his adult life pursuing an understanding of conversion in chapters 2 and 3. It may also be helpful to read Edwards' "Personal Narrative" in *Works of Jonathan Edwards* (vol. 16 [Yale University Press, 1998]). His "Personal Narrative" was not written at the time of his conversion but was a later reflection upon his conversion which shows his mature thinking about the things he went through in his youth.

Among the influential Puritan writers that presented the steps or stages that led up to conversion is William Perkins (1558-1602). For a treatment of the Puritan steps to conversion see Marsden page 518, notes 8 and 9, and page 522, note 24.

There are many texts devoted to the Great Awakening. For a couple that look at the issues of revival as these contributed to both the ways of evangelical thought and the prerevolutionary spirit, see Frank Lambert, *Inventing the "Great Awakening"* (Princeton University Press, 1999); and Timothy D. Hall, *Contested Boundaries: Itinerancy and the Reshaping of the Colonial American Religious World* (Duke University Press, 1994).