

RELIGIOUS AFFECTIONS

A TREATISE CONCERNING RELIGIOUS AFFECTIONS

IN THREE PARTS

NOTES ABOUT RELEVANCE OF THIS CLASSIC

(excerpts)

By James M. Houston

This work of Jonathan Edwards is of special value today because of the lack among Christians of a spiritual cultivation of the interior life and its affections. I hope that you, as a reader, will not be impatient nor reject Edwards's probing of your heart and affections. Eventually he will help you see how the true Christian life depends upon the cultivation of the right inclinations of the will and of the affections for godly living. Just as the pragmatist has no friends because he simply "uses" people, so pragmatic Christian — and they are indeed numerous today — use God and do not realize the need to know Him intimately. They simply speak in His name and by His authority without allowing their own affections to be nurtured toward Him.

Occasionally we are privileged to meet princes. Jonathan Edwards is acclaimed as both a prince in the world of the thought, as well as in the realm of Christian faith. Like Augustine and Calvin, he stands as one of the greatest leaders of the Church universal...

A Summary Of The Religious Affections

Today the Christian faith is being seriously distorted by the ways we organize it, institutionalize it, and propagate it. Edwards maintained there is a distinct religious dimension to living which consists largely of the affections. To attempt to reduce or distort the intrinsic reality of this sphere of human life was, and still is today, a serious matter. Moreover, Edwards saw that personal piety was never so private an affair that it could not be publicly scrutinized and judged as either genuine or false in its character.

In the first section of his classic, Edwards uses the text of 1 Peter 1:8 to remind us that persecution is always a good test to reveal what is genuine about the religious life. It helps us to begin to distinguish between "false" and "gracious affections." Edwards also distinguishes between affections and passions. The latter are dark, uncontrollable emotions that obstruct the formation of "gracious affections." Edwards identified love as the master affection, the spring of all other

affections. Illustrating conclusively from many Scriptures, Edwards shows how central is, the part played by the affections in the thought and language of the Bible.

In the second part Edwards describes those signs which indicate false affections. He is particularly concerned with people who confine the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to a limited sphere of operation. He is also skeptical that mere activity such as reading, praying, singing, or strong self-confidence in one's religious activities is a sign of true affections. Yet we are in no position to judge the motives of others, so we must take heed to ourselves.

In the third and largest part of his book, Edwards gives an exhaustive account of "twelve signs of gracious affections." The first sign states that the presence and power of the Holy Spirit alone is the source of true affections toward God. The origin of gracious affections, according to the second sign, is in viewing God as God. Love for God springs from His own excellence rather than from our need of Him. So, the third sign states, gracious affections are only developed as we delight in God's holiness. The sight of God is then enough to melt and humble us in His presence. Edwards' fourth sign asserts that gracious affections need spiritual understanding, imparted by the Holy Spirit. Without this they remain cold and inadequate.

However, affections, according to the fifth sign, are supported by real, historical evidences. These challenge the unbeliever and reinforce the believer. The sixth sign states that it is our sense of personal inadequacy and our deep need of God that cause gracious affections to flow and go on flowing. Spiritual pride, then, is the most serious cause of blockage to the outflow of the affections. That is why "evangelical humiliation" is so essential to God's people. The seventh sign points to the change of character that results from conversion. Gracious affections cause us to be more Christ-like. The eighth sign reveals that they produce the meek and gentle spirit of Jesus and the ninth states that a person who possesses the gracious affections will be tenderhearted and without the "hardness of heart" which characterizes the ungodly.

In his tenth sign Edwards asserts that such a life will have balance of temperaments and virtues as well as consistency and permanence of character. The more such characteristics are found in a Christian, the more longing there will be for God in one's life. This is the eleventh sign: God in His holiness will seem to appear less attainable, yet the ardor to be closer to Him and more like Him will grow.

And finally, the twelfth sign states that the reality of Christian experience is seen in the practice of its virtues. Without this, Christianity is reduced to a notional system of thought and is not sustained as a formational reality for authentic living. To confess faith in God is therefore to live a life that is governed by godly

emotions, such as the fear and reverence of God, repentant sorrow over sin, joy in God's steadfast love, and love toward one's neighbors....

James M. Houston

PREFACE

THERE is no question of greater importance to mankind, and that it more concerns every individual person to be well resolved in, than this: *What are the distinguishing qualifications of those that are in favor with God, and entitled to his eternal rewards?* Or, which comes to the same thing, What is the nature of true religion? *And wherein lie the distinguishing notes of that virtue and holiness that is acceptable in the sight of God?* But though it be of such importance, and though we have clear and abundant light in the Word of God to direct us in this matter, yet there is no one point, wherein professing Christians do more differ one from another. It would be endless to reckon up the variety of opinions, in this point, that divide the Christian world; making manifest the truth of that declaration of our Savior, "Strait is the gate and narrow is the way, that leads to life, and few there be that find it.

The consideration of these things has long engaged me to attend to this matter with the utmost diligence and care, and all the exactness of search and inquiry of which I have been capable. It is a subject on which my mind has been peculiarly intent, ever since I first entered on the study of divinity. — But as to the *success* of my inquiries, it must be left to the judgment of the reader of the following treatise.

I am sensible it is difficult to judge impartially of the subject of this discourse, in the midst of the dust and smoke of present controversy, about things of this nature. As it is more difficult to *write* impartially, so it is more difficult to *read* impartially. — Many will probably be hurt, to find so much that appertains to religious affection here condemned: and perhaps indignation and contempt will be excited in others, by finding so much justified and approved. And it may be, some will be ready to charge me with inconsistency with myself, in so much approving some things, and so much condemning others; as I have found this has always been objected to me by some, ever since the beginning of our late controversies about religion. It is a difficult thing to be a hearty zealous friend of what has been *good* and glorious in the late extraordinary appearances, and to rejoice much in it; and at the same time, to see the evil and pernicious tendency of what has been *bad*, and earnestly to oppose that. But yet, I am *humbly* but *fully* persuaded, we shall never be in the way of truth, a way acceptable to God, and tending to the advancement of Christ's kingdom, till we do so. There is indeed something very mysterious in it, that so much good, and so much bad, should be mixed together in the *church of*

God: as it is a mysterious thing, and what has puzzled and amazed many a good Christian, that there should be that which is so divine and precious, as the saving grace of God, dwelling in the same heart, with so much corruption, hypocrisy, and iniquity, in *a particular saint*. Yet neither of these is more mysterious than real. And neither of them is a new thing. It is no new thing, that much false religion should prevail, at a time of great revival; and that, at such a time, multitudes of hypocrites should spring up among true saints. It was so in that great reformation, and revival of religion, in Josiah's time; as appears by Jer. 3:10, and Jer. 4:3, 4, and also by the great apostasy there was in the land, so soon after his reign. So it was that great outpouring of the Spirit upon the Jews, in the days of John the Baptist; as appears by the great apostasy of that people, so soon after so general an awakening, and the temporary religious comforts and joys of many; John 5:35, "Ye were willing for a season to rejoice in his light." So it was in those great commotions among the multitude, occasioned by the preaching of Jesus Christ. *Of the many that were then called, but few were chosen*; of the multitude that were roused and affected by his preaching — and at one time or other appeared mightily engaged, full of admiration of Christ, and elevated with joy — but few were true disciples, that stood the shock of trials, and endured to the end. Many were like the *stony* or *thorny* ground; and but few, comparatively, like the *good* ground. Of the whole heap that was gathered, great part was chaff, that the wind afterwards drove away; and the heap of wheat that was left, was comparatively small; as appears abundantly by the history of the New Testament. So it was in that great outpouring of the Spirit that was in the apostles' days; as appears by Mat. 24:10-13; Gal. 3:1; and 4:11, 15; Phil. 2:21; and chap. 3:18, 19, and the two epistles to the Corinthians, and many other parts of the New Testament. And so it was in the great *reformation* from popery. — It appears plainly to have been in the visible church of God, in times of great revivals, as it is with the fruit trees in the spring; there are a multitude of blossoms, which appear fair and beautiful, and there is a promising appearance of young fruits: but many of them are of short continuance; they soon fall off, and never come to maturity.

It is not, however, to be supposed that it will *always* be so. For though there never will, in this world, be an entire purity, either in particular saints, by a perfect freedom from mixtures of corruption, or in the church of God, without any mixture of hypocrites with saints — or counterfeit religion and false appearances of grace with true religion and real holiness — yet it is evident, there will come a time of much greater purity in the church, than has been in ages past. This appears plain by these texts of Scripture, Isa. 52:1; Eze. 44:6, 7, 9; Joel 3:17; Zec. 14:21; Psa. 69:32, 35, 36; Isa 35:8, 10; chap. 4:3, 4; Eze. 20:38; Psa. 37:9, 10, 11, 29. And one great reason of it will be that at that time, God will give much greater light to his people, to distinguish between true religion and its counterfeits. Mal. 3:3, "And he shall sit

as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the Lord an offering in righteousness.” With verse 18, which is a continuation of the prophecy of the same happy times. “Then shall ye return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God, and him that serveth him not.”

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. It is by this means, principally, that he has prevailed against all revivings of religion, 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. The apostles, in all their epistles, show themselves much more concerned at the former mischief, than the latter. By this, Satan prevailed against the reformation, began by Luther. Zwinglius, etc., to put a stop to its progress, and bring it into disgrace, ten times more than by all those bloody and cruel persecutions of the church of Rome. By this, principally, has he prevailed against revivals of religion in our nation. By this he prevailed against New England, to quench the love and spoil the joy of her espousals, about a hundred years ago. And I think, I have had opportunity enough to see plainly, that by this the devil has prevailed against the late great revival of religion in New England, so happy and promising in its beginning. Here, most evidently, has been the main advantage Satan has had against us; by this he has foiled us. It is by this means that the daughter of Zion in this land now lies on the ground, in such piteous circumstances, with her garments rent, her face disfigured, her nakedness exposed, her limbs broken, and weltering in the blood of her own wounds, and in no wise able to arise; and this, so quickly after her late great joys and hopes: Lam. 1:17, “Zion spreadeth forth her hands, and there is none to comfort her: the Lord hath commanded concerning Jacob, that his adversaries shall be round about him: Jerusalem is as a menstruous woman among them.” I have seen the devil prevail the same way, against two great revivings of religion in this country. — Satan goes on with mankind as he began with them. He prevailed against our first parents, and cast them out of paradise, and suddenly brought all their happiness and glory to an end, by appearing to be a friend to their happy state, and pretending to advance it to higher degrees. So the same cunning serpent that beguiled Eve through his subtlety, by perverting us from simplicity that is in Christ, hath suddenly prevailed to deprive us of that fair prospect we had, a little while ago, of a kind of paradisaical state of the church of God in New England.

After religion has revived in the church of God, and enemies appear, people that are engaged to defend its cause are commonly most exposed, where they are sensible of danger. While they are wholly intent upon the opposition that appears *openly* before them, in order to make head against that, and while they neglect

carefully to look around, the devil comes behind them, and gives a fatal stab unseen; and he has opportunity to give a more home stroke, and wound the deeper, because he strikes at his leisure, and being obstructed by no guard or resistance.

And so it is ever likely to be in the church, whenever religion revives remarkably, 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. *By this means*, the devil gratifies himself, the multitudes should offer to God, under a notion of acceptable service, what is indeed above all things abominable to him. *By this means*, he deceives great multitudes about the state of their souls; making them think they are something, when they are nothing; and so eternally undoes them; and not only so, but establishes many in a strong confidence of their eminent holiness, who, in God's sight, are some of the vilest hypocrites. *By this means*, he many ways damps and wounds religion in the hearts of the saints, obscures and deforms it by corrupt mixtures, causes their religious affections woefully to degenerate, and sometimes, for a considerable time, to be like the *manna* that bred worms and stank; and dreadfully ensnares and confounds the minds of others, brings them into great difficulties and temptations, and entangles them in a wilderness, out of which they can by no means extricate themselves. *By this means*, Satan mightily encourages the hearts of open enemies, strengthens their hands, fills them with weapons, and makes strong their fortresses; when at the same time, religion and the church of God lie exposed to them, as a city without walls. *By this means*, he brings it to pass, that men work wickedness under a notion of doing God service, and so sin without restraint, yea with earnest forwardness and zeal, and with all their might. *By this means*, he brings in even the friends of religion, insensibly, to do the work of enemies, by destroying religion in a far more effectual manner than open enemies can do, under a notion of advancing it. *By this means*, the devil scatters the flock of Christ, and sets them one against another with great heat of spirit, under a notion of zeal for God; and religion, by degrees, degenerates into vain jangling. During the strife, Satan leads both parties far out of the right way, driving each to great extremes, one on the right hand, and the other on the left, according as he finds they are most inclined, or most easily moved and swayed, till the right path in the middle is almost wholly neglected. In the midst of this confusion, the devil has great opportunity to advance his own interest, to make it strong in ways innumerable, to get the government of all into his own hands, and work his own will. And by what is seen of the terrible consequences of this counterfeit, when not distinguished from true religion, God's people in general have their minds unsettled in religion, and know not where to set their foot, or what

to think, and many are brought into doubts, whether there be anything in religion; and heresy, infidelity, and atheism greatly prevail.

Therefore it greatly concerns us to use our utmost endeavors, clearly to discern, and have it well settled and established, wherein true religion does consist. Till this be done, it may be expected that great revivals of religion will be but of short continuance; till this be done, there is but little good to be expected of all our warm debates, in conversation and from the press, not knowing clearly and distinctly what we ought to contend for.

My design is to contribute my mite, and use my best (however feeble) endeavors to this end, in the ensuing treatise: wherein it must be noted, that it is somewhat diverse from the design of what I have formerly published, which was to show *The distinguishing marks of a work of the Spirit of God*, including both his common and saving operations. What I aim at now, is to show the nature and signs of the *gracious operations* of God's Spirit, by which they are to be distinguished from all things whatsoever which are not of a saving nature. If I have succeeded in this my aim, in any tolerable measure, I hope it will tend to promote the interest of religion. And whether I have succeeded to bring any light to this subject or not, and however my attempts may be reproached, in these captious, censorious times, I hope in the mercy of a gracious and righteous God, for the acceptance of the sincerity of my endeavors; and hope also for the candor and prayers of the true followers of the meek and charitable Lamb of God.

PART 1
CONCERNING THE NATURE OF THE AFFECTIONS AND THEIR
IMPORTANCE IN RELIGION

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.*

SECTION I

Introductory remarks respecting the affections

IN these words, the apostle represents the state of the minds of the Christians he wrote to, under the persecutions they were then the subjects of. These persecutions are what he has respect to, in the two preceding verses, when he speaks of *the trial of their faith*, and of *their being in heaviness through manifold temptations*.

Such trials are of threefold benefit to true religion. Hereby the truth of it is manifested, and it appears to be indeed true religion. They, above all other things, have a tendency to distinguish between true religion and false, and to cause the difference between them evidently to appear. Hence they are called by the name of *trials*, in the verse nextly preceding the text, and in innumerable other places; they try the faith and religion of professors, of what sort it is, as apparent gold is tried in the fire, and manifested, whether it be true gold or no. And the faith of true Christians being thus tried and proved to be true, is “found to praise, and honor, and glory,” as in that preceding verse.

And then, these trials are of further benefit to true religion; they not only manifest the truth of it, but they make its genuine beauty and amiableness remarkably to appear. True virtue never appears so lovely, as when it is most oppressed; and the divine excellency of real Christianity, is never exhibited with such advantage, as when under the greatest trials: then it is that true faith appears much more precious than gold! And upon this account is “found to praise, and honor, and glory.”

And again, another benefit that such trials are of to true religion, is that they purify and increase it. They not only manifest it to be true, but also tend to refine it, and deliver it from those mixtures of that which is false, which encumber and impede it; that nothing may be left but that which is true. They tend to cause the amiableness of true religion to appear to the best advantage, as was before observed; and not only so, but they tend to increase its beauty, by establishing and confirming it, and making it more lively and vigorous, and purifying it from those things that obscured its luster and glory. As gold that is tried in the fire, is purged

from its alloy, and all remainders of dross, and comes forth more solid and beautiful, so true faith being tried as gold is tried in the fire, becomes more precious, and thus also is “found unto praise, and honor, and glory.” The apostle seems to have respect to each of these benefits, that persecutions are of to true religion, in the verse preceding the text.

And, in the text, the apostle observes how true religion operated in the Christians he wrote to, under their persecutions, whereby these benefits of persecution appeared in them; or what manner of operation of true religion, in them, it was, whereby their religion, under persecution, was manifested to be true religion, and eminently appeared in the genuine beauty and amiableness of true religion, and also appeared to be increased and purified, and so was like to be “found unto praise, and honor, and glory, at the appearing of Jesus Christ.” And there were two kinds of operation, or exercise of true religion, in them, under their sufferings, that the apostle takes notice of in the text, wherein these benefits appeared.

1. *Love to Christ*: “Whom having not yet seen, ye love.” The world was ready to wonder, what strange principle it was, that influenced them to expose themselves to so great sufferings, to forsake the things that were seen, and renounce all that was dear and pleasant, which was the object of sense. They seemed to the men of the world about them, as though they were beside themselves, and to act as though they hated themselves; there was nothing in their view, that could induce them thus to suffer, and support them under, and carry them through such trials. But although there was nothing that was seen, nothing that the world saw, or that the Christians themselves ever saw with their bodily eyes, that thus influenced and supported them, yet they had a supernatural principle of love to something unseen. They loved Jesus Christ, for they saw him spiritually whom the world saw not, and whom they themselves had never seen with bodily eyes.

2. *Joy in Christ*. Though their outward sufferings were very grievous, yet their inward spiritual joys were greater than their sufferings; and these supported them, and enabled them to suffer with cheerfulness.

There are two things which the apostle takes notice of in the text concerning this joy. 1. The manner in which it rises, the way in which Christ, though unseen, is the foundation of it, viz., by faith, which is the evidence of things not seen: “In whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice.” 2. The nature of this joy; “unspeakable and full of glory.” Unspeakable in the kind of it; very different from worldly joys, and carnal delights; of a vastly more pure, sublime, and heavenly nature, being something supernatural, and truly divine, and so ineffably excellent; the sublimity and exquisite sweetness of which, there were no words to

set forth. Unspeakable also in degree; it pleasing God to give them this holy joy, with a liberal hand, and in large measure, in their state of persecution.

Their joy was full of glory. Although the joy was unspeakable, and no words were sufficient to describe it, yet something might be said of it, and no words more fit to represent its excellency than these, that it was *full of glory*; or, as it is in the original, *glorified joy*. In rejoicing with this joy, their minds were filled, as it were, with a glorious brightness, and their natures exalted and perfected. It was a most worthy, noble rejoicing, that did not corrupt and debase the mind, as many carnal joys do, but did greatly beautify and dignify it. It was a prelibation of the joy of heaven, that raised their minds to a degree of heavenly blessedness. It filled their minds with the light of God's glory, and made themselves to shine with some communication of that glory.

Hence the proposition or doctrine, that I would raise from these words, is this:
DOCTRINE. *True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections.*

We see that the apostle, in observing and remarking the operations and exercises of religion in the Christians he wrote to, wherein their religion appeared to be true and of the right kind, when it had its greatest trial of what sort it was, being tried by persecution as gold is tried in the fire, and when their religion not only proved true, but was most pure, and cleansed from its dross and mixtures of that which was not true, and when religion appeared in them most in its genuine excellency and native beauty, and was found to praise, and honor, and glory: he singles out the religious affections of *love* and *joy*, that were then in exercise in them. These are the exercises of religion he takes notice of wherein their religion did thus appear true and pure, and in its proper glory. Here, I would,

1. Show what is intended by the affections.

2. Observe some things which make it evident, that a great part of true religion lies in the affections.

1. It may be inquired, what the affections of the mind are?

I answer: The affections are no other than the more vigorous and sensible exercises of the inclination and will of the soul.

God has endued the soul with two faculties: one is that by which it is capable of perception and speculation, or by which it discerns, and views, and judges of things; which is called the understanding. The other faculty is that by which the soul does not merely perceive and view things, but is some way inclined with respect to the things it views or considers; either is inclined *to* them, or is disinclined and averse *from* them; or is the faculty by which the soul does not behold things, as an indifferent unaffected spectator, but either as liking or disliking, pleased or displeased, approving or rejecting. This faculty is called by various names: it is sometimes called the *inclination*, and, as it has respect to the