

Salvation
and
Christian Identity
in the
Thought of
Jonathan Edwards

Doug Gray
28 April 1991
CFTS
History/Polity Paper

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God.”¹

—1 John 4:1-3a

I. Introduction

Second perhaps to questions of the nature of God, the question which has most plagued human religion is how does one know one will live in eternal bliss after death? This question is at the heart of modern controversies such as the “Who’s a Jew” debate currently waged in the Jewish community and the Fundamentalism controversy of the early 20th century.² Indeed, one of the ongoing tasks of Christian theology is giving meaning to the word, “Christian,” and reappropriating the meaning of the Cross in terms which have meaning for our own times and yet retain that which is eternal and life-giving in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and the Church which He established and continues to succor. Whenever the church faces a threat to its existence, church theologians have sought the meaning of “Christian,” and, in confessing for their time the meaning of Cross and their own relation to Christ’s work on it, often found their paths more clearly defined.³

Jonathan Edwards lived in a time in which the church in America—constituted largely of Congregational churches—faced an incredible array of challenges. Though he was almost entirely academic in temperament and inclination, Edwards stood at the hub of

¹All scriptural references from the RSV unless otherwise stated.

²Cf. for example, J. Gresham Machen’s *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1923; reprinted in 1987).

³I think especially of the Creeds of the early church, the Savoy Declaration of the 17th century and the Barmen Declaration of this century.

the early manifestations of what would later become The Great Awakening in 1740.⁴ Indeed, his *Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton* (1737) proved the inspiration and guide for such 18th century revivalists as George Whitefield and John Wesley. In many ways it established the standard by which all later revivals were judged.⁵ This subject continued to burden Edwards as evidenced by works including, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741), *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion* (1742), and *The Religious Affections* (1746). With the hundreds, even thousands, of people coming to Christ, claiming divine inspiration, hearing voices and having visions of Scripture,⁶ the question burned in Edwards' day: how do you know if God has really adopted someone as a child of God? How do you know someone is really Christian?

To answer this question, however, one must first examine Edwards' understanding of Divinity in relationship to humanity, before exploring the nature of the event. Then and only then, will we have the groundwork to properly suggest guidelines for determining whether or not someone is Christian. Or to state the structure of this paper more crassly: Who does the saving and to what end? Who is saved? How is one saved? How do you know someone else is saved?

II. The Nature and Purpose of the Divine

To understand Jonathan Edwards' views of the nature of salvation, one must seek his understanding of the nature and purpose of the divine. While I cannot hope to cover the

⁴Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America: An Historical Account of the Development of American Life*, 4th ed. (NY: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987), p. 64.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁶These were some of the claims of the converted alluded to time and again in Edwards' *The Religious Affections* (originally published 1746; reprinted Worcester, England: Billing & Sons, Ltd., 1986).

full breadth of Edwards' thought on the nature and purpose of the Divine, some introduction will be helpful in setting the tone and terms which will later impact discussion.⁷ Three principle attributes bear on our discussion: God's sovereignty, God's holiness, and God's disposition.

Of primary importance to Edwards' understanding of the nature of God is God's absolute sovereignty. In the Calvinist tradition, of which Edwards is a part, God has complete authority over all of creation, including humanity.

Following at a close second in importance is Edwards' belief in the holiness of God.⁸ God is without stain and so infinitely beautiful that God cannot bear the sight of that which is tainted and marred. God's holiness is reflected in the Law, in God's wrath at human failure before the Law, and in God's mercy as God demonstrates a righteousness far beyond human ken.⁹ The sovereignty of God is clear in the working out of God's holiness, for God and God only may act efficaciously in wrath or mercy.¹⁰

Finally, Edwards' view of God is a dynamic one in which "God is essentially a perfect actuality as well as a disposition to repeat that actuality through further exercises."¹¹

⁷Moreover, given that I cannot hope to cover Edwards' thought in this area, I am under even fewer delusions that any discussion here will even approximate a full understanding of God. Nevertheless, even a limited understanding of God and God's Purpose is better than no understanding at all, provided that we are headed in the right direction. Assuming our discussion is properly directed, I ask for the reader's indulgence as I sketch some of Edwards' understanding of the Divinity.

⁸*Affections*, p. 129f.

⁹For a fuller development of the themes of divine wrath and mercy see the next section, *III. The Nature and Purpose of Humanity*.

¹⁰"Man[sic] is absolutely dependent upon the sovereign will of God for everything belonging to his salvation, 'from the foundation to the topstone.'" Conrad Cherry, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1972), p. 56. While I am painfully aware of the need for human inclusive language, to try and correct the language of past authors is tedious to write and read. Hereafter I do not indicate these errors.

¹¹Dr. Sang Hyun Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 6. Dr. Lee's note refers the reader to Chapter 7 of his work, "The Increasing Fullness of the Divine Being."

God is thus both the omnipotent creator, the supreme sovereign upon whom a regenerate humanity must depend, and the redeemer who encounters the creation and seeks to mirror the Divine completion through the regeneration of both humanity and creation. In other words,

God accomplishes his self-repetition in time by creating intelligent beings who can know and love the divine beauty, thereby repeating God's own Trinitarian knowledge and love of that beauty. This means, according to Edwards, that God needs to become visible in time so that the regenerate men and women may come to know and love God as their ultimate good. The Son of God, in other words, needs to become incarnate in time, and Jesus Christ is the needed presence of God in time. And it is "the sight of the divine beauty of Christ that bows the wills and draws the hearts of men."¹²

In this the Divine purpose seems clear: God, paradoxically both completely actualized and increasingly full, seeks to bring all of creation into congruence with Divine Beauty in all its glorious perfection through the temporal presence of Jesus Christ.¹³

III. The Nature and Purpose of Humanity

If the nature and purpose of God—who does the saving—is important, so too, is the nature and purpose of humanity—that which is saved by God. According to Edwards, humanity is created, albeit imperfectly, in the image of God.¹⁴ As such, each member of

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 227. Dr. Lee's note refers to "The True Grace Distinguished from the Experience of Devils," *The Works of President Edwards*, 4 vols. (NY: Leavitt and Allen, 1852), 4:469-70.

¹³Edwards devotes most of his *The Nature of True Virtue* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1991) to a discussion of how Beauty is the Divine.

¹⁴Edwards is thus in agreement with Genesis 1:26.

humanity possesses some of those qualities which God possesses, the mind and the heart among others.¹⁵ From these qualities derive understanding and affections respectively.

One should not, however, argue under the false assumption that understanding and will are separate faculties.¹⁶ Stemming primarily from Aristotelian psychology, this “split-faculties” approach to the human psyche does not adequately explain the behavior of people during the revivals of the early 1700s. Moreover, as Miller points out, such a proponent of a fractured psyche will conceive

the psychological problem as it had been conceived since the Middle Ages, that of controlling the imagination and the will by reason, and of subduing the emotions to the will; hence all intelligible address must be directed to the reason, through which decisions are always given to the will. Any appeal directly to the passions, which attempts to bypass speculation, was demonstrably immoral.¹⁷

In sharp contrast, by utilizing Locke, Edwards was better able to comprehend the situations which he faced. To argue for distinct faculties is something like arguing that as I now write only my writing faculty is exercised. I hope more than just my writing faculty is engaged at the moment! My mind and heart and body are all engaged in the endeavor of this paper—my fingers type what my mind thinks and heart feels.

Indeed, Edwards held that no one could—even should—appeal to only a single faculty, e.g., reason, without involving the other faculties:

There must be light in the understanding, for heat without light is not heavenly; yet “where there is a kind of light without heat, a head stored with notions and speculations,

¹⁵I speak figuratively here of the seats of two basic powers: intellect and will. (Cf. Cherry, *op.cit.*, p. 16f. God, of course, has no “mind” or “heart” as we would understand it, yet the comparison is worth making, as we speak of God as All-Knowing and try to understand God’s Will.

¹⁶Many of Edwards’ contemporaries understood human nature in just this light. Cf. Cherry, *op.cit.*, pp. 13-4. One notable proponent of this view, Rev. Charles Chauncy, debated with Edwards on this topic through several publications over a 6 year period. Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1949; reprinted 1981), p. 177.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 177-8.

with a cold and unaffected heart, there can be nothing divine
in that light.”¹⁸

Or looked at another way, body and mind cannot function without affecting one another.¹⁹

For Edwards, human nature was an organic whole, a dynamic disposition, similar to, though infinitely smaller and simpler than, God’s. Refusing to speak, for example, of faith as an act of separate and distinct faculties,

Edwards intimates that he is not content [even] with simply describing faith as an act of *both* the understanding *and* the inclination. For faith is a *sense of the heart*—an act which is a willing, affective, “loving knowledge” of God’s truth. It is a human act in which the human faculties are virtually blended.²⁰

Each person, then, is a dynamic system (“disposition” in Edwards’ parlance) made up of closely inter-related modes of human thought and expression, inextricably intertwined in the act of life.

But to what end? To what purpose these intertwined faculties? If Edwards is correct, that humanity was created for no other reason than religion, then it follows that

God has given to mankind affections, for the same purpose which he has given all the faculties and principles of the human soul for, viz., that they might be subservient to man’s chief end...²¹

Given the discussion above on the Divine Nature and Purpose, the chief end of religion—and thus the chief end of humanity as well—is to further God’s completion of the universe.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 179.

¹⁹*Affections*, *op.cit.*, p. 59,

²⁰“Although Edwards would continue to speak of the ‘faculties’ of the human mind, he was aware that it was inappropriate to conceive them as distinct human entities and maintained that in religious faith, the hard and fast distinctions between intellect, will, and affections break down.” Cherry, *op.cit.*, p. 14. Miller, *op.cit.*, pp. 181-2, laments Edwards’ choice of the term, “faculty,” to describe the different modes of human self-expression.

²¹*Affections*, *op.cit.*, p. 51.

Yet one cannot even see divine things unless one has “closed with Christ,”²² for permeating all Edwards’ anthropology and psychology is humanity’s tragic and lethal failure before God. In the Fall, human nature found itself bereft of all spiritual principles, subsisting only upon natural principles. These natural principles (e.g., reason), though sufficient to place humanity far beyond animals, still do not enable a person to fully apprehend the spiritual. Moreover, regardless of how much a person develops and utilizes the natural principles

because [spiritual principles] not only differ from what is natural, and from every thing that natural men experience, in degree and circumstances, but also in kind; and are of a nature vastly more excellent.²³

Put more succinctly, people are completely lost and unable to perceive the spiritual—for Edwards’ the only true reality as well as Beauty.²⁴ Given the inherent sinfulness and blindness of the natural person, only a new principle, a completely new foundation for understanding reality can bring about spiritual uplift. Conversion is necessary.

IV. The Salvific Event: Closing with Christ

Nowhere do the complexities of Divine and human natures come together with more mystery than in the salvific event.²⁵ In this single event and the time leading up to it, both the absolute sovereignty of God and the absolute abjection of humanity are evident in Edwards’ thought.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 132ff.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 132.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 200. See note 13 above.

²⁵With the obvious exception of the Incarnation of Christ.

Like many Puritan theologians, Edwards subscribed to a two step conversion process, the first divided into several more steps:²⁶

1. Preparation
 - a. Conviction of sin
 - b. Compunction for sin
 - c. Humiliation before God
2. Saving faith

Its individual steps fully founded in the law, the preparatory step emphasized the role of the Law in first declaring to a person that what s/he has done is a sin; second, pricking the conscience to remorse; and third, placing oneself before God who by all rights should drop us into hell like the loathsome creatures we must be in God's holy sight. Theoretically, conviction and compunction led to a full understanding of one's dependency upon the sovereign mercy of God as demonstrated in the life of Jesus Christ, and hence to a saving faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.

Unlike most Puritan theologians, however, Edwards refused to limit the working of the Holy Spirit to this rigidly precise procedure. As he points out in his *Affections*:

It is to be feared that some have gone too far towards directing the Spirit of the Lord, and marking out His footsteps for Him, and limiting Him to certain steps and methods. Experience plainly shows that God's Spirit is unsearchable and untraceable...As to the steps which the Spirit of God to bring that effect to pass, we may leave them to Him. 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.²⁷

Further, if God is truly transcendent, then any effort to rigidly schematize the way God works (which implies an attempt to limit and/or control God) is doomed to failure.

Certainly, one may say, as Edwards, that in one's own experience, God often works in a

²⁶The following discussion taken, unless otherwise noted from Cherry, *op.cit.*, pp. 62-7.

²⁷pp. 89-91.

particular pattern, but having said that, one is unable to say with certitude how God will work in a given situation.

Ultimately, the person converted from a “natural” state to a spiritual one receives the spiritual sight and foundation mentioned earlier.

[T]hat new holy disposition of heart that attends this new sense is not a new faculty of will, but a foundation laid in the nature of the soul, for a new kind of exercises of the same faculty of will.²⁸

When this happens the converted person receives “special grace” where s/he had previously only been able to receive the common grace given to even natural people (e.g., the pricking of the conscience and the knowledge of wrongs done)²⁹

V. How Do You Know Someone Is Saved?

At last we have the necessary groundwork laid to fully consider our original question, namely: how do you know someone else is really a Christian? In his *Religious Affections*, Edwards dwells at length on this question, answering first by describing the ways in which one cannot know for certain if another is Christian, before proceeding to the positive signs of the presence of saving grace in a person’s life. Ultimately, however, Edwards makes two arguments which particularly shed light on our question, declaring that “God has revealed no certain connection between salvation and any qualifications in men, but only grace and its fruits.”³⁰

²⁸Affections, op.cit., p. 134.

²⁹Cherry, op.cit., p. 66. “...common grace only assists the faculties of the soul to do that more fully which they do by nature....But special grace causes the faculties to do that that they do not by nature....” Edwards, quoted from Misc. 626.

³⁰Affections, op.cit., p. 88.

A. Grace

Of course, the most reliable way to determine whether someone is a Christian or not in Edwards' milieu would be to actually determine if someone had received a special, saving grace. And yet, we cannot see it, cannot measure it, for grace is one of the things unseen which are of the stuff of God. Knowing this difficulty, Edwards admonishes the reader in the opening to Part III of the *Affections*:

Though it be plain that Christ has given rules to all Christians to enable them to judge of professors of religion whom they are concerned with, so far as is necessary for their own safety...yet it is also evident, that it was never God's design to give us any rules by which we may certainly know who of our fellow professors are His, and to make a full and clear separation between sheep and goats. On the contrary, it was God's design to reserve this to Himself as His prerogative.³¹

Ultimately, then, if God is to retain absolute sovereignty, we cannot judge others as to the grace of God; that information is known only to God, and the task of discerning once and for all who is faithful and who is without faith, cannot be subsumed by lesser beings. Rather, only the All-Knowing, All-Seeing, All-Giving God can know how much grace and what kind any person should or has received. To label one person who claims to be bound by the grace of God as a Christian and another who claims the same as pagan, is a task in which the labeler skirts the edges of blasphemy.

B. Fruits

Nevertheless, rules do exist, as Edwards suggests above, for determining the probability someone is or is not a true Christian. In *Religious Affections*, Edwards suggests 12 basic things that separate a spiritual (truly converted) person from a natural

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 120.

(unconverted/sinful) person. Additionally, numerous things may be signs of conversion and the reception of special grace, but very few of these “signs” offer conclusive results.³² In each case, Edwards acknowledges that though these “signs” could certainly be the result of a sincere faith, upheld by the special, saving grace of God, they could also be credited to sources other than God.

The only sure way to discern a true Christian from a non-Christian is by examining his/her fruits. Speaking in metaphor of this examination, Edwards writes,

It is with professors of religion especially such as become so in a time of outpouring of the Spirit of God, as it is with blossoms in the spring; there are vast numbers of them upon the trees, which all look fair and promising; but yet many of them never come to anything....so that we cannot, by any of our senses, certainly distinguish those blossoms which have in them that secret virtue which will afterwards appear in the fruit, and that inward solidity and strength which shall enable them to bear....It is the mature fruit which comes afterwards, and not the beautiful colours and smell of the blossoms, that we must judge by.³³

And again, “That only is to be trusted to, as a certain evidence of grace, which Satan cannot do, and which it is impossible should be brought to pass by any power short of divine.”³⁴

Put another way: one is a Christian only if one really lives as a Christian. Edwards devotes an entire section of *Affections* to this topic, indicating elsewhere that “Assurance is not to be obtained so much by *self-examination* as by *action*.”

VII. Conclusion

How do you know if God has really adopted someone as a child of God? How do you know someone is really a Christian? These questions are no less incisive today, though for different reasons. In sharp contrast to Edwards’ time, America’s mainline

³²One may simply glance down the Table of Contents in the *Affections*, p. 7, for a listing of these.

³³*Ibid.*, pp. 113-4.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 87.

churches—including the Congregational Church—seem today so glad to receive members into their fading congregations that one wonders if the church is welcoming wolves in sheep's clothing. Particularly in the Congregational Way where individual differences of belief are respected, even encouraged, the likelihood increases of admitting someone who has not the mind and love of Christ, but seeks the destruction or corruption of the church. Certainly a *total* lack of standards dilutes the Christian witness. Indeed, one could argue that any half-hearted Christian makes the Christian witness that much more sour. And yet, Edwards' caveats remind us that discernment is at best a difficult and dangerous effort, and at worst a blasphemous one. Moreover, as Edwards notes,

many persons...spend time in a fruitless labour, in poring on past experiences, and examining themselves by songs they hear laid down from the pulpit or that they read in books, when there is other work for them to do, that is much more expected of them, which, while they neglect, all their self-examinations are like to be in vain, if they should spend never so much time in them.³⁵

As Christians—and Congregational Christians—then, we need some powers of discernment as we examine ourselves and others; but according to Jonathan Edwards, such examination should never overshadow our *being* Christian in an active sense, should never dim our actively and constructively seeking to minister more effectively in, through, and for Christ.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 122.

Bibliography

1. Cherry, Conrad. *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal*. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1972.
2. Edwards, Jonathan. *The Religious Affections*. Originally published 1746. Reprinted Worcester, England: Billing & Sons, Ltd., 1986.
3. Hudson, Winthrop S.. *Religion in America: An Historical Account of the Development of American Religious Life*. 4th ed.. NY: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987.
4. Lee, Sang Hyun. *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.
5. Miller, Perry. *Jonathan Edwards*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1949. Reprinted 1981.