

What are Religious Affections

Trinity Baptist Church Discipleship Training

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Introduction:

How do we distinguish between true and false religious experiences? In 1742-43 Jonathan Edwards preached a series of sermons dealing with this subject. Edwards preached against the backdrop of the Great Awakening. Multitudes were being swept into the Kingdom of God but, at the same time, the fervor also fostered religious extremism. How could one distinguish between the genuine work of the Holy Spirit and the counterfeit? A book based on these sermons was published in 1746 titled, *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*. In this work Edwards describes the true experience of salvation. What is genuine Christian conversion? How do we test it? What is genuine Christian assurance?

Edwards' book was divided into three parts:

Part I – Concerning the nature of the Affections and their importance in religion

Part II – Showing what are no certain Signs that Religious Affections are truly gracious, or that they are not (i.e. – Things that do not prove that our affections come from a true experience of salvation.)

Part III – Showing what are distinguishing signs of truly gracious and holy Affections

Bibliography:

Edwards, Jonathan. *The Experience that Counts*. London, Grace Publications Trust, 2005.

Edwards, Jonathan. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards - Volume One*, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987.

Edwards wrote (*Experience that Counts*, page14), “A failure to distinguish between true and false religion produces terrible consequences. For example:

- (1) Many offer to God a false worship which they think is acceptable to him, but which he rejects.
- (2) Satan deceives many about the state of their souls. In this way he eternally ruins them. In some cases, Satan deludes people into thinking they are outstandingly holy, when really they are the worst hypocrites.
- (3) Satan spoils the faith of true believers. He mixes deformities and corruptions into it, and so causes believers to grow cold in their spiritual emotions. He also confuses others with great difficulties and temptations.
- (4) The outright enemies of Christianity are encouraged, when they see the Church so corrupted and distracted.
- (5) Men commit sin under the illusion that they are serving God. So they sin without restraint.
- (6) False teaching deceives even the friends of Christianity into doing, without realizing it, the work of its enemies. They destroy Christianity far more effectively than outright enemies can do, under the illusion that they are advancing it.

- (7) Satan divides Christ's people and sets them against each other. Christians quarrel with great heat as if this were spiritual zeal. Christianity degenerates into empty disputes. The quarreling parties rush off into opposite extremes, until the right path in the middle becomes almost totally neglected.
- I. Concerning the nature of the affections and their importance in religion
- A. Peter states of the relationship between Christians and Christ. He gives two clear signs that Christianity is genuine:
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:”
1. Love for Christ – Though you have not seen Him you love Him
 Christians have been willing to suffer through great ordeals and go through great inconvenience because of their love of Christ.
 Unbelievers cannot understand this.
 2. Joy in Christ – Although their outward sufferings were great their inward joys were far greater. The source of this joy was faith – “yet believing”
 This joy is “unspeakable and full of glory.”
- B. What is meant by religious affections?
1. Today the word generally refers to a certain degree of love. As Edwards used the word it carried more of the meaning of “**emotions**” or “**feelings**.”
 Edwards saw these affections as responses of the will.
 2. God has given the human soul two powers.
 - a. The first is **understanding** or intellect.
 - b. The second is **inclination**; i.e., the ability to look at things, not as indifferent spectators, but with the emotion of liking or disliking them or being pleased or displeased with them.
 - c. Thus we move towards or away from something according to likes or dislikes. We are drawn toward things due to desire, hope, joy, gratitude, pleasure, etc. We are turned away due to hatred, fear, anger, grief, etc. When these feelings rise in intensity we call them affections or emotions.
 - d. Our wills and emotions are not different in type, only in intensity.
- C. According to Edwards, true religion consists primarily in affections or emotions
1. By this he means that true religion consists in energetic actions of the will
 2. Christianity is not dull, lifeless, and apathetic but spiritually energetic and lively
 3. This liveliness of affection in the heart is the fruit of regeneration – the circumcision of the heart
Deuteronomy 30:6 – “And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.”
 4. These affections of the heart towards God are stronger than natural affections. We love Christ more than “father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes and his own life also” (Luke 14:26).

- D. Our affections are divided into several types
1. Fear – Godly fear is the chief part of true religion. This fear is properly a high reverence towards God.
 2. Hope – This hope is a firm confidence in God and His promises.
 3. Love – the very heart of a life in Christ and the chief of the religious affections. We have a love for Christ, for the brethren, for His commandments.
Romans 13:10 – “Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love *is* the fulfilling of the law.”
 Along with this is the opposite: a hatred of sin.
Proverbs 8:13 – “The fear of the LORD *is* to hate evil”
 4. Desire – holy desire is expressed in longings, hungering and thirsting after God and holiness.
 5. Joy – This is a spiritual fruit that transcends our earthly condition.
 6. Sorrow – Spiritual sorrow, contrition, and brokenness of heart over sin
Psalms 51:17 – “The sacrifices of God *are* a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.”
 7. Gratitude – this is expressed in the praise of God.
 8. Mercy – essential quality for the Christian
Matthew 5:7 – “Blessed *are* the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.”
 9. Zeal – another essential element in true religion.
Titus 2:14 – “Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.”
- E. Religious affection will be reflected in our religious duties
1. Prayer – we pray not to inform God but to move and affect our own hearts with what we express and in this way prepare ourselves to receive the blessing.
 2. Praise – the duty of singing praises to God seems to have no other purpose than to excite our spiritual affections. When divine truth is expressed in song it tends to impress our affections towards God.
 3. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper – Physical and visible things often influence us by nature. God has ordained not only that we hear the Gospel from His Word, but that we also see the Gospel displayed before our eyes in visible symbols so that it will stir our affections more.
 4. Preaching – One reason God has ordained preaching in the church is to impress divine truths in our hearts and affections.
- F. What is the importance of affections in the Christian religion?
1. We learn of the danger in rejecting all spiritual affections. (Edwards faced this often as he was in the midst of revival.) At the same time, we must understand the danger of looking upon all religious affections as signs of true religion. Satan tries to push us to one extreme or the other
 2. If true religion lies much in our affections, we should set a high value on what kindles these affections in us. We should seek books, preaching, praying, and singing that will affect our hearts.

Caution must be exercised because these things can also stir up the emotions of weak and ignorant people without doing good to their souls. It is possible to stir emotions that are not spiritual and holy emotions. There must be an emphasis upon the spiritual truth in our religious books, preaching, prayer, and songs.

3. If true religion lies much in our affections, we have great cause for shame that spiritual realities do not affect us more.

II. Things that do NOT necessarily prove that our affections are a true experience of salvation. Religious affections can be natural or spiritual in origin. They can exist both in those who are saved as well as the unconverted. The following are experiences that say nothing about whether our affections are spiritual or unspiritual.

A. It does not prove that our affections are spiritual, or unspiritual, if they are strong and lively

Romans 10:2 – “For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge.”

1. True religion *may* produce great emotion. A love for Christ will kindle great emotion. Genuine sorrow and hatred for sin causes great emotion.
2. On the other hand, strong emotions does not prove that the religious experience is genuine.
 - a. Israel often sang praises to God and then turn from Him into idolatry.
 - b. Jesus warned of such temporary zeal:
Matthew 13:20-21 – “But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; ²¹ Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended”
 - c. Multitudes followed Jesus on Palm Sunday only to cry out “Crucify Him!” a few days later.

B. It does not prove that our emotions are spiritual, or unspiritual, if they produce great affects upon the body.

1. Great religious affection may have great bodily effect. We may be driven to tears. Jesus sweated profusely in the Garden of Gethsemane. John said he fell at the feet of Christ as a dead man.
2. On the other hand strong emotions can come that are not of the Holy Spirit and can also cause effects upon the body.
People can weep over a movie or a stirring song. Physical liveliness in worship is no guarantee that it is from God.

C. It does not prove that our emotions are spiritual, or unspiritual, if they produce a great warmth and readiness to talk about Christianity.

1. Genuine conversion often leads a person to talk continually about Christ.
2. On the other hand a readiness to talk about spiritual things is no guarantee of genuine conversion. A talkative tongue is often used to cover an empty heart.

D. It does not prove that our emotions are spiritual, or unspiritual, if we did not produce them by our own efforts.

1. We do not produce salvation so it must follow that stirrings of the heart are not produced by our efforts (not to diminish the importance of prayer, praise, worship, etc.). Affections are the fruit of regeneration.
 2. False believers can be guilty of producing feeling artificially. But just because an emotion is not self-produced does not necessarily mean it is genuine. This is sometimes used as proof that an emotion or religious feeling is genuine; for example, claiming that speaking in tongues is from God. Satan can fill our hearts and minds with deceptions.
- E. It does not prove that our emotions are spiritual, or unspiritual, if they come to us accompanied by a Bible verse.
1. True emotions can arise from an understanding from a particular passage of Scripture. We can be stirred over the glory of God's Word.
 2. On the other hand, it is not necessarily indication it is from God. Someone may claim a particular verse came to mind and was so encouraging they wept for joy. The Bible doesn't tell us to test the reality of our faith in this way. An experience is not right just because it involves the Bible.
- F. It does not prove that our emotions are spiritual, or unspiritual, if there seems to be love in them.
1. Since love is the essence of true religion if a person is loving it is assumed their religion must be genuine.
 2. Love can be imitated. We can believe our love is genuine only to find it a temporary feeling. True love endures.
- G. It does not prove that our emotions are spiritual, or unspiritual, if we experience many kinds of them.
1. Some have many sorts of emotions and think this is evidence that their religion is genuine.
 2. Those who accompanied Jesus into Jerusalem were filled with admiration and love for Jesus. They showed great reverence for Him laying their clothes on the ground for Him. They expressed great gratitude to Him for His excellent works. They expressed great desire for the Kingdom of God. They were full of zeal and joy and were eager to accompany Him. Yet few were true disciples.
- H. It does not prove that our emotions are spiritual, or unspiritual, if comforts and joys seem to follow in a certain order.
1. It is true that God gives the sinner a sense of their need for salvation before He saves them. There is a conviction of sin and condemnation.
 2. It is no sure sign, however, that conversion is genuine just because there is a conviction of sin. Disobedience can cause conviction. The law causes conviction. There is often a conviction of sin without understanding the true nature of sin. They do not see sin as a something that offends the holiness of God. They can be troubled about particular sins without being convicted of sin.
- I. It does not prove that our emotions are spiritual, or unspiritual, if they cause us to spend much time in the outward duties of Christian worship.
1. True Christian conversion will have this effect. It will drive a person to worship.

- a. He will delight in the praise of God.
Psalm 27:4 – “One *thing* have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to enquire in his temple.”
 - b. Daniel prayed three times a day
 - 2. On the other hand, such enthusiasm is not necessarily a sign of conversion. Israel had many sacrifices, festivals, and prayers. Yet their hearts were not right before God.
 - J. It does not prove that our emotions are spiritual, or unspiritual, if they produce assurance of salvation.
 - 1. It is true that genuine Christians can have great assurance and confidence before God.
 - 2. Most people presume all is well with their soul. It is no sure sign that a person is saved just because he feels himself to be saved. A lost person may have the greatest assurance that he is saved.
 - 3. “It is no sufficient reason to determine that men are saints, and their affections gracious, because they are attended with confidence in their state is good, and their affections divine” (*Works of Edwards* – page 257).
 - 4. Satan attacks the assurance of the true believer but does not attack false assurance.
 - K. We cannot know that someone’s emotions are spiritual or unspiritual, just because he gives a moving account of them.
 - 1. A person may give a stirring account of his conversion. He may seem to be a genuine believer so that even the wisest Christian may be deceived by his profession.
 - 2. Satan can imitate all sorts of spiritual affections—love for God and Christ and Christians, sorrow for sin, submission to God, humility, gratitude, joy, zeal, and sound doctrine.
 - 3. In the end, only God can tell the difference.
But the true believer will endure until the end. Many will prove themselves to be temporary professors.
A genuine believer will reveal his true condition by his life.
- III. The distinguishing signs of truly gracious and holy affections
- A. True religious affections arise from spiritual, supernatural and divine influences on the heart.
 - 1. Christians are spiritual people in contrast to natural or carnal people. They are spiritual because they are born of the Holy Spirit and because the Holy Spirit resides in them.
 - 2. The spiritual man has the *influence* of the Holy Spirit upon his life. It manifests itself in holiness. The Spirit of God is the **Holy** Spirit. His influence is that of holiness.
 - 3. The Christian has a spiritual sense for spiritual things.
Edwards: “And something is perceived by a true saint, in the exercise of this new sense of mind in spiritual and divine things, as entirely diverse from anything that is perceived in them by natural men, as the sweet taste

of honey is diverse from the ideas men get of honey only by looking on and feeling it” (Works, Vol. 1 p.266)

4. This is why we can talk of spiritual things to a lost man and they just can’t quite understand or grasp the fullness of what we are saying.
- B. The object of religious affections is the loveliest of spiritual things, not our self-interest.
1. The primary object of spiritual affections is the excellence and beauty of spiritual things for themselves, not the relation they have to our self-interest.
 2. “The deepest cause of true love for God is the supreme loveliness of God’s nature” (*The Experience that Counts*, page 80). In other words, the reason our love is kindled for God is not because of His usefulness to us but because of His excellence.
 3. With true religious affections for God *self-interests* fade as all attention is drawn to God. He is lovely, glorious, and excellent. The heart is captivated by Him.
 4. “How different it is with false Christians! When they hear of God’s love in sending his Son, Christ’s love in dying for sinners, and the great blessings Christ has purchased and promised to His people, they may listen with great pleasure and feel highly elated. Yet if you examine their joy, you will find they are rejoicing because these blessings are **theirs**, all this exalts **them**. They can even delight in the doctrine of election, because it flatters their self-love to think they are heaven’s favourites! Their joy is really a joy in themselves, not a joy in God” (*The Experience that Counts*, page 84).
- C. Religious affections are based on the moral excellence of spiritual things.
1. This is more than what most people call morality. What a Christian loves about spiritual things is their holiness. He loves God for the beauty of His holiness.
 2. Unbelievers are unable to see the beauty of holiness. For the Christian holiness become the object of his spiritual appetite.
 3. A probing question: Do we want to be in heaven because of the holy beauty of God that shines there?
- D. Religious affections arise out of spiritual understanding.
1. Religious affections arise out of spiritual illumination. The true Christian **feels** because he **sees** and **understands**.
Philippians 1:9 – “And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and *in* all judgment;”
 2. There is a difference between doctrinal knowledge and spiritual knowledge. Doctrinal knowledge involves the intellect but spiritual knowledge is a sense of the heart by which we see the beauty of holiness in Christian doctrines. Spiritual knowledge involves both the intellect and the heart (*The Experience that Counts*, page 88).
 3. Spiritual understanding is not finding some new meaning in the Scriptures. Making a new meaning is equivalent to making a new Scripture (ibid. p.89).

- E. Religious affections bring a conviction of the reality of divine things.
1. The true Christian has a solid conviction of the truth of the Gospel. It has become settled in his mind.
 2. Such confidence is not necessarily evidence of true conversion. People of other faiths can also have a strong conviction of the truth of their religion. If this is all a professing Christian has his religion is no better than these.
 3. Spiritual conviction of truth arises when God enlightens our mind to understand spiritual realities – an inward sense of the holy beauty of divine things.
 4. When the Christian sees beauty in Christianity it is because he sees God in it. He can only see the wretchedness of his depravity as he sees the beauty of holiness.
 5. The Christian may not have the same degree of certainty all the time. Sometimes our sight of the beauty of the gospel can become clouded.
- F. Religious affections always exist alongside spiritual humiliation.
1. Spiritual humiliation is the sense a Christian has of how insufficient and detestable he is which leads him to humble himself before God.
 2. There is a legal humiliation in which a sinner under the law sees how sinful and helpless he is but does not see the hateful nature of sin or surrender himself to God.
 3. Spiritual humiliation flows from the Christian's sense of the beauty and glory of God's holiness.
 4. Spiritual humiliation is the essence of true religion. "Those who lack it are not genuine Christians, no matter how wonderful their experiences may be" (ibid. 96). This is the essence of self-denial.
 5. Proud hypocrites may pretend to be humble. Spiritual pride can be very subtle, disguising itself as humility, but there are two things which betray it (ibid 96).
 - a. The proud man compares himself with others in spiritual things, and has a superior opinion of himself. He is eager for leadership among God's people, and wishes his opinion to be everyone's law. The humble man, on the other hand, makes him think others better than himself. It is not natural for him to take upon himself the office of teacher; he thinks others are better suited to it. He is more eager to listen than to speak.
 - b. Another sure sign of spiritual pride is a proud man tends to think highly of his humility, whereas a truly humble man thinks himself as very proud. The truly humble man never feels he has sufficiently abased himself before God.
 6. We must apply these things to ourselves. Does it offend you when someone thinks he is a better Christian than everyone else? Do you think he is proud and you are more humble? Great caution needs to be exercised lest we become proud of our humility.

- F. Religious affections always exist alongside a change of nature.
1. Scripture describes conversion as a change of nature; being born again, becoming new creatures, rising from the dead, being renewed in the spirit of the mind, dying to sin, putting off the old man and putting on the new, becoming partakers of the divine nature, etc.
 2. If there is no real and lasting change in people who think they are converted their religion is worthless, whatever their experiences may be (ibid. 99).
- G. True religious affections differ from false ones, in promoting a Christlike spirit of love, humility, peace, forgiveness, and compassion.
1. In the true believer the Holy Spirit dominates them. Holiness in all its aspects belongs to the Christian character, but there are certain aspects of holiness which deserve the name of ‘Christian’ in a special degree. These qualities are humility, gentleness, love, forgiveness, and mercy. Jesus describes these clearly in the Sermon on the Mount.
 2. The Christian is not perfect, yet these virtues still mark him. Scripture know nothing of true Christians who have a selfish, angry, quarrelsome spirit. No matter what a person’s religious experience may be, he has no right to think himself truly converted if his spirit is under the control of bitterness and spite (ibid. 103-104).
- H. True religious affections soften the heart, and exist alongside a Christian tenderness of spirit.
1. True conversion makes our heart tender concerning sin. It is easily offended. The Christian becomes alarmed at the appearance of evil.
 2. A Christian fears to offend God and trembles at God’s chastening.
 3. This drives him to a life of discipline and self-denial.
- I. True religious affections, unlike false ones, have a beautiful symmetry and balance.
1. In the true Christian, joy and comfort go along with godly sorry and mourning for sin. A true Christian mourns and continues to mourn for sin. Many hypocrites rejoice without trembling.
 2. The true Christian loves Christ and men. Some make a great show of their love for God and Christ, but they are quarrelsome, envious, vindictive and slanderous toward their fellow man.
 3. Some get agitated over the sins of others but do not seem troubled over their own sin. A true Christian will be more concerned about his own sin than the sins of others.
“He will of course be upset when his fellow Christians sin, but he is always quicker to detect and condemn his own sins” (ibid. 106).
- J. True religious affections produce a longing for deeper holiness, unlike false emotions which rest satisfied in themselves.
1. The more a Christian hates sin, the more he desires to hate it. Holiness is his chief pursuit. He is constantly seeking Christ.
 2. The false believer rests in his past conversion experience but is not pursuing Christ and holiness today.
 3. The true believer is running the race, wrestling with principalities, pressing forward, continuing in prayer, crying to God day and night.

4. The true believer is seeking holiness because of the beauty of God's holiness. The hypocrite always has a self-centered reason. "He wants better spiritual experiences for the sake of the selfish assurance they bring, or because they flatter him as a favorite of God. He wants to feel God's love for himself, rather than to have more love for God" (ibid. 110).
- K. The fruit of true religious affections is Christian practice.
1. Christian practice means three things (ibid. 110):
 - a. The true Christian directs all aspects of his behavior by Christian rules.
 - b. He makes holy living the main concern of his life. It is his work and business above all other things.
 - c. He perseveres in this business constantly, to the end of his life.
 2. True religious affections result in Christian practice because of what we have already seen as the nature of religious affections (ibid. 113-114).
 - a. True religious affections result in Christian practice because they arise from spiritual, supernatural and divine influence upon the heart.
 - b. Religious affections result in Christian practice because their object is the liveliness of spiritual things, not our self-interest.
 - c. Religious affections result in Christian practice because they are based on the moral excellence of divine things.
 - d. Religious affections result in Christian practice because they arise out of spiritual understanding (a heart by which a person sees the supreme beauty of divine things.)
 - e. Religious affections result in Christian practice because they bring a conviction of the reality of divine things.
 - f. Religious affections result in Christian practice because they always exist alongside spiritual humiliation.
 - g. Religious affections result in Christian practice because they always exist alongside a change of nature.
 - h. Religious affections result in Christian practice because they promote a Christlike spirit – love, humility, peace, forgiveness, compassion etc.
 - i. Religious affections result in Christian practice because they soften the heart and exist alongside a Christian tenderness of spirit.
 - j. Religious affections result in Christian practice because of their beautiful symmetry and balance. The Christian will not obey some of God's commands and ignore others.
 - k. Religious affections result in Christian practice because they produce a longing for deeper holiness.
 3. From all of this it is clear that Christian practice is a distinguishing feature of true conversion.
- L. Christian practice is the chief sign to others of a convert's sincerity.
1. Scripture is clear that Christian practice is the chief sign by which we are to judge the sincerity of professing Christians. It is not infallible, but it is the best sign.
Matthew 7:16 – "Ye shall know them by their fruits."

2. Of course Christian practice does not deny the importance of doctrine. If a person rejects the essential Christian doctrines he is not a Christian no matter how pious his life may seem.
- M. Christian practice is a sure sign of conversion to a person's own conscience.
1. John says we can have assurance of our salvation if our consciences testify to our good works.
 2. Obedience is an act of the whole man. Obedience is truly an act of the heart. Christian obedience is really and properly an act of the soul. There are two ways the Christian's soul can act (ibid 119):
 - a. The soul can act in a purely **inward** way that does not result in outward bodily actions. When we simply meditate on God's truth, our minds rest in that truth, and do not go beyond it to some outward act.
 - b. The soul can act in a **practical** way. This results in outward bodily actions.
 3. Christian practice is evidence to ourselves of our faith and we can see the inward motives behind our outward actions. We must examine both the action and the motive. This is how God judges us.
NAS **Jeremiah 17:10** - "I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, Even to give to each man according to his ways, According to the results of his deeds."