



Introduction

Jonathan Edwards (1703-58), America's greatest theologian, wrote his *Treatise concerning religious affections* against the background of the First Great Awakening, the American equivalent of what the British call the Evangelical Revival. Edwards himself played a prominent part in the Awakening as pastor of a Congregational church in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Edwards' desire to distinguish between true and false religious experience arose out of his pastoral concern in the context of revival. He preached a series of sermons on 1 Peter 1:8 dealing with this subject in 1742-3. The *Treatise* was the text of these sermons revised for publication in 1746.

Edwards had to fight on two fronts. On the one hand, he had to argue against those who dismissed the entire revival as mindless hysteria. On the other hand, he had to argue against those who seemed to think everything that happened in the revival was 'of God', no matter how strange, wild or unbalanced it was. Do these two opposite reactions sound familiar?

In his attempt to chart a middle path between these equal and opposite extremes, Edwards confronted a series of fundamental questions. What does it mean to be a Christian? Is Christianity a matter of the intellect alone? What about





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desires, feelings, and experiences? What is conversion? How do we know that people have been converted? How far should we go in testing an apparent conversion to see if it is real? What place does assurance of salvation have in Christian experience? Which religious experiences should we encourage, and which should we discourage? How can we test the sincerity and reality of our own faith? What are the signs of religious hypocrisy and delusion?

We may not be living in the midst of a revival, but these questions, and the answers Edwards gives to them, are profoundly relevant to us today. Feelings and experiences have perhaps never been emphasised so strongly and sought so eagerly as they are among Christians in our generation. The results have too often been unbalanced, undiscerning and spiritually harmful. Reacting against this, others have retreated into a hard, cold, dry orthodoxy, looking with deep suspicion on anything 'emotional'.

In Edwards we will find 'a guide for the perplexed' – a voice of clear Biblical and spiritual sanity to lead us safely through the maze of contemporary confusion in this crucial area.

A note on 'Affections' and 'Emotions'

The word 'affections' appears in the original title of Edwards' book and throughout its pages. To us today, 'affection' means a certain kind of love. In Edwards' day, however, it had a far wider meaning. So I have decided to modernise the word as 'emotions', which seems the best modern equivalent of what Edwards meant by 'affections'.

The Oxford English Dictionary lists thirteen definitions of 'affection'. The second and fifth show us what Edwards had in mind when he used the word: 'an emotion, or feeling'; 'state of mind towards a thing; disposition towards'.





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'Emotions' for Edwards were movements of the will. In fact, in Part One, chapter 2, Edwards clearly defines emotions as the more vivid, powerful and lively movements of the will. With our intellect or reason, we 'see' things; with our will, we like or dislike what we see. So 'emotion' always involves both the intellect and the will. It simply means (for Edwards) a strong response of the will to what the intellect sees – whether that response is desire, hope, joy, love, zeal, pity, grief, fear, anger or hatred.

Edwards called these strong responses of the will 'affections'. I have called them 'emotions'. As long as we bear in mind the realities Edwards was talking about, it does not greatly matter what we call them. But because of the rather narrow meaning that 'affection' has gained in popular speech today, it seemed less misleading to drop the term and employ 'emotion' instead. Wherever the word 'affection' does appear in this abridged version, it has its modern meaning of 'love'.

N.R.N.

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Preface

The most crucial question for the human race, and for every individual person, is this: *What are the distinguishing marks of the people who enjoy God's favour – those who are on their way to heaven?* This is just another way of asking: *What is the nature of true religion? What sort of personal religion does God approve of?*

It is hard to give an objective answer to such a controversial question. It is even harder to *write* about it objectively. And it is hardest of all to *read* about it objectively! It will probably hurt many of my readers to find that I have criticised so many religious emotions and experiences in this book. On the other hand, others may be angry about the things I have defended and approved. I have tried to be balanced. It is not easy to support what is good in religious revivals, and at the same time to see and reject what is bad in them. Yet surely we have to do both, if we want Christ's kingdom to prosper.

There is something very mysterious about it, I admit. So much good and so much bad are mixed up in the Church! It is as mysterious as the mixture of so much good and bad in an individual Christian. Still, neither of these mysteries is new. It is no new thing for false religion to flourish at a time of revival, or for hypocrites to appear among true believers. This happened in that great revival in Josiah's time, as we see from Jeremiah 3:10 and 4:3-4. It was the same in the days



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of John the Baptist. John aroused all Israel by his preaching, and yet most fell away soon afterwards. John 5:35 – ‘you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light.’ It was the same again when Christ Himself preached. Many admired Christ for a time, but few were faithful to the end. And the same was true again when the apostles preached, as we know from the heresies and divisions that troubled the churches during the apostles’ lifetime.

This mixture of false religion with true has been Satan’s greatest weapon against the cause of Christ. This is why we must learn to distinguish between true and false religion – between emotions and experiences which really come from salvation, and imitations which are outwardly attractive and plausible, but false.

A failure to distinguish between true and false religion produces terrible consequences. For example:

- (i) Many offer to God a false worship which they think is acceptable to Him, but which He rejects.
- (ii) 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.
- (iii) 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.
- (iv) The outright enemies of Christianity are encouraged, when they see the Church so corrupted and distracted.
- (v) Men commit sin under the illusion that they are serving God. So they sin without restraint.





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- (vi) False teaching deceives even the friends of Christianity into doing, without realising 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.
- (vii) 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 quarrelling parties rush off into opposite extremes, until the right path in the middle becomes almost totally neglected.

When Christians see the terrible consequences of false religion passing for true religion, it unsettles their minds. They do not know where to turn or what to think. Many doubt whether there is anything real in Christianity at all. Heresy, unbelief and atheism begin to spread.

For these reasons, it is vital that we should do all we can to understand the nature of true religion. Until we do this, we cannot expect revivals to last long, and we can expect little good from our religious discussions and debates, since we will not even know what we are arguing for!

My plan is to contribute what I can in this book to an understanding of true religion. I aim to show the nature and signs of the Holy Spirit's work in converting sinners. I will also try to show how we can distinguish the Spirit's work from everything which is not a true experience of salvation. If I succeed, I hope this book will help to promote the interests of genuine Christianity.

May God accept the sincerity of my efforts, and may the true followers of the meek and loving Lamb of God accept my offering with open minds and with prayer!

Jonathan Edwards





PART ONE.
The nature of emotions and their
importance in Christianity.







1. Opening remarks about emotions.

The apostle Peter says of the relationship between Christians and Christ: ‘though you have not seen him, you love him, and though you do not see him now, but believe in him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory’ (1 Pet. 1:8, NASB).

As the previous verses make clear, the believers to whom Peter wrote were suffering persecution. Here he observes how their Christianity affected them during these persecutions. He mentions two clear signs that their Christianity was genuine:

- (i) *Love for Christ.* ‘Though you have not seen him, you love him.’ Non-Christians were amazed that Christians were ready to expose themselves to such sufferings, and to forsake the joys and comforts of this world. These Christians seemed mad to their unbelieving neighbours. They seemed to act as if they hated themselves. Unbelievers saw nothing which could inspire them to suffer like this. Indeed, the Christians saw nothing with their bodily eyes. They loved someone whom they could not see! They loved Jesus Christ, for they saw Him spiritually, even though they could not see Him physically.



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- (ii) *Joy in Christ*. Though their outward sufferings were terrible, their inward spiritual joys were greater than their sufferings. These joys strengthened them and enabled them to suffer cheerfully.

Peter notes two things about this joy. First, he tells us its origin. It came from faith. ‘Though you do not see him now, but believe in him, you greatly rejoice.’

Second, he describes the nature of this joy: ‘inexpressible and full of glory’. It was inexpressible joy, because it was so different from the joys of the world. It was pure and heavenly. There were no words to describe its excellence and sweetness. It was also inexpressible in its extent, because God had so freely poured out this joy on His suffering people.

Then Peter describes this joy as being ‘full of glory’. This joy filled the minds of the Christians, as it were, with a glorious brightness. It did not corrupt the mind, as many worldly joys do, but gave it glory and dignity. The suffering Christians were sharing in the joy of heaven. This joy filled their minds with the light of God’s glory, and made them shine with that glory.

Now, the doctrine Peter is teaching us is this: *True religion consists mainly in holy emotions*.¹

Peter singles out the spiritual emotions of love and joy when he describes the experience of these Christians. Remember, he is speaking about believers who were suffering persecution. Their sufferings were purifying their faith, causing it ‘to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ’ (v.7 NASB). Thus they were in a spiritually healthy condition, and Peter highlights their love and joy as evidences of their spiritual health.

¹ See the special note on *Emotions* in the Introduction – N.R.N.





2. What are emotions?

At this point, it might be asked: 'What exactly do you mean when you speak about emotions?'

I answer as follows: 'Emotions are the more lively and intense actions of the soul's inclination and will.'

God has given the human soul two main powers. The first is *understanding*, by which we examine and judge things. The second power enables us to look at things, not as indifferent spectators, but as liking or disliking them, pleased or displeased by them, approving or rejecting them. We sometimes call this second power our *inclination*. In its relationship to our decisions, we usually call it the *will*. When the mind exercises its inclination or will, then we often call the mind '*the heart*'.

Human beings act by their wills in two ways. (i) We can move *towards* the things we see, by liking them and approving of them. (ii) We can turn *away* from the things we see, and reject them. These acts of the will, of course, differ greatly in degree. There are some inclinations of like or dislike which move us only slightly beyond total apathy. There are other degrees in which the like or dislike is stronger, until the strength is so great that we act in an energetic, deliberate way.

It is these more energetic and intense acts of the will which we call 'emotions'.

Our will and our emotions are not two different things. Our emotions differ from casual acts of choice only in their energy and vividness. However, I admit that language can express only an imperfect sense of this difference. In one sense, the emotions of the soul are the same as its will, and the will never moves from a state of apathy unless it feels. Yet there are many acts of the will which we do not call 'emotions'.