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GENUINE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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MINDLESS HEARTS AND HEARTLESS MINDS

There can be no question but that today Christ's professed disciples must be challenged to flee from a mindless lust after vague experience-centered "spirituality" to pursue a discipleship thoughtfully rooted in the "faith once delivered unto the saints." Yet taking seriously this concern we dare not fall into another trap—supposing that experience is unimportant, or that it is not, in a sense, *primary*, in the Christian life. The truth we declare is not an end in itself, but is held forth so that it may be delighted in, trusted, and obeyed. We must receive, not merely the truth, but the *love* of the truth, if we are to be saved (2 Thes. 2:10). As John Murray so ably warned in another context, "We do no honour to Christianity when we fall into . . . confusion. Here, as elsewhere, the line of distinction between right and wrong is not a chasm; it is a razor's edge."

Confusion can be avoided. The razor-sharp mind of one of America's finest pastor-theologians was employed just to this end. Jonathan Edwards gave sustained attention to the complex questions surrounding mind and heart, truth and experience, doctrine and devotion. With God's blessing his biblical insight and pastoral wisdom can keep us from being lost in the labyrinth-like perplexities that have beset this issue in all ages of the church.

KNOWLEDGE OF THE TRUTH FIRST

Edwards insisted that from our point of view knowledge of the truth is at the beginning of all faithful discipleship. "Such is the nature of man, that nothing can come at the heart but through the door of the understanding: and there can be no spiritual knowledge of that of which there is not first a rational knowledge" (*Works*, II:158).

Nevertheless, Edwards taught, knowledge, though necessary, is not sufficient for genuine discipleship—were this true the devil would be a model Christian. From James 2:19 Edwards preached that "the devil has undoubtedly a great degree of speculative knowledge in divinity; having been, as it were, educated in the best divinity school in the universe, *viz.* the heaven of heavens. . . . The devil is orthodox in his faith [a Calvinist, Edwards would say!]; he believes the true scheme of doctrine; he is no Deist, Socinian, Arian, Pelagian, or antinomian. . . ." (*Works*, II:42-43).

By "speculative knowledge" Edwards means a knowledge of the truth that remains only in the head. The hypocrite, professing orthodox faith, and as yet unmasked in his lack of sincerity, provides another example. "[H]e that has doctrinal knowledge and speculation only . . . never is engaged in the business of religion." What more is needed? The truth must touch the heart.

Now here it must be said that the truth cannot produce the needed heart-work of itself. The fallen son or daughter of Adam hates the truth, suppresses it, and exchanges it for a lie (Rom. 1:18f). Only by the power of the Holy Spirit can the heart be changed—brought to delight in what

it formerly found to be repugnant. Edwards unfolds this central scriptural teaching powerfully in his sermon, “A Divine and Supernatural Light, Immediately Imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God, Shown to be Both a Scriptural and Rational Doctrine” (*Works*, II:12-16). However, when the Spirit does sovereignly work immediately upon the heart to bring it to life, it is for the sake of enabling one of Christ’s chosen to know and *love* Him—to know the truth and to *experience* the freedom that knowing aright brings.

#### RELIGIOUS AFFECTIONS THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Edwards’ most extended treatment of heart-religion is found in *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*. The *Treatise* is a sustained meditation on the text 1 Pet. 1:8, “whom having not seen, ye love: in whom, though ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable, and full of glory.” From this text he concludes: “True religion, in great part, consists of holy affections.”

Such a doctrine, if true, must be of great importance to the believer. But what are the *affections*? Edwards supplies the answer in a somewhat technical form in the first part of his treatise: “the affections are no other, than the more vigorous and sensible exercises of the inclination and will of the soul.” Put more simply, he speaks of affections as the “fervent exercises of the heart” or a “vigorous engagedness of the heart in religion”. Today we might say that affections are the more powerfully experienced desires of the heart. With care, we might thus speak of affections as religious feelings. That the heart should be so moved is the goal of divine revelation according to Edwards. The renewed heart’s desire is held forth, and in desire the heart is drawn to the object of its love. Thus Edwards argued, “True religion is evermore a powerful thing; and the power of it appears, in the first place, in the inward exercises of it in the heart. . . . wherever true religion is, there are vigorous exercises of the inclination and will, toward divine objects. . . .”

Edwards labors mightily in the treatise to demonstrate his doctrine. Surveying a host of texts he shows that Scripture places the Christian life very much in the affections of fear, hope, love, hatred, desire, joy, sorrow, gratitude, compassion and zeal, and sums up true discipleship in love, the chief and fountain of all other affections. He confirms his doctrine from the nature and design of the means appointed by God as expressions of faith (e.g., prayer, praise, sacraments, preaching) as tending very much to stir the affections.

#### BIBLICAL BALANCE

In arguing thus Edwards helps us to understand and maintain that balance so necessary to a genuine living faith. “As there is no true religion, where there is nothing else but affection; so there is no true religion where there is no religious affection. . . [W]here there is heat without light, there can be nothing divine or heavenly in that heart; . . . where there is a kind of light without heat, a head stored with notions and speculations, with a cold and unaffected heart . . . that knowledge is no true spiritual knowledge of divine things.” Biblical faith must have an object, and the perception of that object stirs faith to action.

In this doctrine Edwards introduced no novelty. The Westminster Standards had long before established its place in confessional orthodoxy: “By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word . . . and acteth differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; *yielding* obedience to the commands, *trembling* at the threatenings, and *embracing* the promises of God. . . .” (Confession of Faith, 14.2. Emphasis added). In each age a faithful biblical theology has maintained the same standard. A century after Edwards, Robert L.

Dabney, in his essay “Spurious Religious Excitements” (a brief but penetrating analysis that could profitably be read by all pastors at least once a year), argued that “the efficacious . . . movement of the feelings is just as essential a part of a true religious experience, as the illumination of the intellect by divine truth.” *Feeling* is as essential to a person, as ever present, as *knowing*. “Feeling is the temperature of thought” (*Discussions*, III:456-475).

The key then, is not to repudiate or abandon experience. On the contrary, our calling is to distinguish—to “prove all things and hold fast that which is good” (1 Thes. 5:21). Edwards counseled: “There are false affections, and there are true. . . . The right way, is not to reject all affections, nor to approve all; but to distinguish between affections . . . separating between the wheat and the chaff, the gold and the dross, the precious and the vile.” Dabney too counseled discernment: instead of rejecting powerful religious excitements, “we should rather ask ourselves whether the right feelings are excited, and excited by a divine cause.” Or, as a younger contemporary of Dabney, Thomas E. Peck, taught: “religious excitements . . . are not to be indiscriminately condemned.” Some are to be nourished as a work of the Spirit of God—but their distinguishing characteristic is that the “emotions in this case are the offspring of *truth*, produced by the *realities* that are suited to move the soul” (*Miscellanies*, I:207. Emphasis added.). Here we return full circle.

#### CONCLUSION

My friends, not only must we beware of subjectivistic religion—the vacuous selfishness of the New Ager, and the blind zeal of the apocalyptic cultist. Peril is equally present in a barren orthodoxy that does not feel aright, deeply and powerfully, about the One who is Truth and about the truth He taught. When Christ speaks through His Word, by the power of the Spirit, should not our hearts burn within us? (Luke 24:32) Jonathan Edwards’ work on religious experience helps us to see that “God disposed things, in the affair of our redemption . . . as though everything were purposely contrived in such a manner, as to have the greatest, possible tendency to reach our hearts in the most tender part, and move our affections most sensibly and strongly. How great cause have we therefore to be humbled to the dust, that we are not more affected!” (p. 124).