

There has been a great deal of debate these days about “true” and “counterfeit” revival. Toronto Blessings, Pensacola revivals and more are discussed in literature, radio, and over the internet. The topic is “in.” Although the conversations have, at times, been less than cordial, the questions raised in these debates are important ones. We don’t want to “quench the Spirit” by refusing to encourage the experience of God. But on the other hand we don’t want to promote mere emotionalism. Some of us may have had powerful experiences in the midst of revival meetings. What do we make of them? How do we know if they are from God? How do we respond to God’s ministry to us? Some of us are uncomfortable to open up ourselves to God in such environments - if all this revival fervor is just manipulation or a deception of the devil, to what might we be opening ourselves? The decision to participate or to promote a given movement can touch some of the most sensitive parts of the human spirit.

Jonathan Edwards was aware of these issues. Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), father of American evangelicalism, was one of the premiere leaders of the Great Awakening: the first and most significant revival in American history. He witnessed and interviewed hundreds who were deeply touched by the Spirit of God. He preached some of the most famous sermons in history. During this Great Awakening different factions developed - some promoting the movement (and the manifestations associated with it) as a work of God and others condemning it as emotional excess or worse. During this Awakening, the ministry of prophetic gifts, the means of discovering and following the leading of the Holy Spirit, the place of experience and order in a congregation, the strategies of evil spirits and other similar issues were discussed. Edwards himself steered a difficult middle course between these factions.

In the midst of the glory and tensions of the Awakening Edwards wrote a set of treatises related directly to these issues. These essays are among my favorite spiritual writings. In these treatises Edwards gives valuable insights for evaluating revival movements “in general,” and for navigating our own experiences in the context of a work of God’s Spirit. I would like to share a couple of these insights here. My conviction is that by reading Edwards’ works on revival carefully, being especially aware of his approach to discernment, we can become not only better able to evaluate current movements, but also more able to prevent the short-circuit of future revivals.

1. Discerning Revivals in General: Edwards’ *Distinguishing Marks*

When Edwards published his second treatise, *Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741), interest in revival was high. Churches were holding special meetings all throughout the American colonies. Critics of the event were silent, but Edwards’ knew that this would not last. He printed the first evaluation of the revival with *Distinguishing Marks*. Edwards’ aim was to model an appropriate procedure for discernment and then to apply that model to the Awakening “in general” to determine whether or not the movement be, on the whole, a work of the Spirit of God. It is a procedure we can follow today.

Edwards’ first step is to present a list of *negative signs*, “what are not signs that we are to

judge of a work by.” Just because the work is very unusual, that it greatly effects the bodies of those involved, that it occasions a great deal of noise or that it is mixed with imprudences and even errors does not mean that the work is not a work of God. On the contrary, Edwards argues that “extraordinary” affections might be expected in a general work of God. Concerning effects on the body, Edwards demonstrates “that a true sense of the glorious excellency of the Lord Jesus Christ should be such as very much to overcome bodily strength.” He states that “a thousand imprudences won’t prove a work not to be a work of the Spirit of God.”

But just as the negative signs do not prove that the movement cannot be a work of God, neither will they certainly demonstrate the divine origin of the work. So in the second part of the essay, Edwards identifies five *positive signs*, showing “what are the sure distinguishing Scripture evidences and marks of the work of a Spirit of God.” He asks,

É Does association with the movement “raise the esteem” of Jesus and of the Gospel among those involved?

É Do we find people laying aside attachments to the world?

É Does it cause a “greater regard to the Holy Scriptures?”

É Does it lead people to truth and away from error?

É Does it bring with it an increase of love?

If so, then we can be confident that this is a work of God. Thus by carefully observing aspects of the feelings and behavior which arise in the midst of a movement, and by comparing these with tendencies we might expect in light of biblical teaching, Edwards clarifies the procedure by which a work of God “in general” is evaluated. In the third part of the treatise, Edwards evaluates the Great Awakening in light of the biblical criteria given in Part Two, giving many examples of the transformation cultivated by the Awakening. His conclusion is that the work is indeed in general a work of God.

Edwards’ interest in *Distinguishing Marks* was in empowering his readers to discern whether a movement be of God or not. He encouraged them to avoid evaluating a movement by inappropriate criteria, by the presence of superficial phenomena that fail to really identify what is *distinctive* about God’s work in a people. Edwards presented a set of biblical criteria to use in our discernment process. By comparing the course of a movement with these biblical criteria, Edwards claims, we can be more sure of knowing the spiritual source of the movement in general.

2. Discerning Revival Experiences: Edwards’ *Religious Affections*

By the time Edwards published his influential *Treatise on Religious Affections* (1746), the Great Awakening was essentially over. Imprudences associated with the promoters of revival fervor had damaged the reputation of revival concerns. Churches had split, people had been unfairly judged and presumption regarding revival experiences had led some seekers into harmful situations. The critics of the revival had harshly attacked these imprudences, calling into question the character of the movement as a whole. Ultimately, people gradually returned to life as usual. *Religious Affections* was written less to evaluate aspects of a current revival but to instruct the church to prepare for future revivals. He states in the preface, “Therefore, it greatly concerns us to use our utmost endeavors clearly to discern wherein true religion does

consist. Till this be done, it may be expected that great revivings of religion, will be but of short continuance.” Edwards noticed a pattern in the dynamics of God’s work, and he had seen it manifested in his lifetime. The Spirit initiates a mighty work of God, and in the early course of that work many people are drawn to the things of religion. But when least suspected, the Devil introduces spiritual pride, false principles concerning the promotion of the revival, and similar errors. People are led to extremes concerning their valuation of the work in general, leading to factions, discontent, and disorder. Finally interest in revival and hope in God are both damaged. Edwards wrote *Religious Affection* to prevent this cycle in future awakenings.

Edwards was not concerned, in *Religious Affections*, to defend the divine origin of the Great Awakening, having already accomplished this in his previous treatises. Rather he turns his pen to the “operations” of the Spirit in particular, the experiences which are given to people *in the midst* of a work of God. Just because a movement “in general” is a work of God, does not mean that everything that happens within that movement must be from God. Thus, it is important to discern those experiences that arise in the midst of the revival in order to affirm and follow God’s leading. It is Edwards’ conviction that it is the erroneous assessment and response to revival experiences that has caused the shortening of revival and great damage to the name of Christ and Christ’s work.

The treatise is divided into three parts. The first is a presentation of the value and importance of “affections” (more than simply “emotions,” but certainly “emotive” experiences) for the Christian life. This section is the best biblical defense of experiential religion I have ever read. The second part develops a list of *negative signs* or false criteria, as in *Distinguishing Marks*. But in *Religious Affections* the events being evaluated are not the work in general but individual experiences arising within the work. Thus Edwards’ *method* of discernment is similar even though the *objects* of discernment differ. The fact that experiences are great, that they effect the body, that they follow a certain order or that they come with texts of Scripture to the mind provides no sure evidence for (or against) their divine origin. These superficial phenomena can simply be indications of a person’s temperament, the deception of the enemy, or the common invitation of the Lord, and therefore not a true sign of the transforming activity of the Spirit. So, in the final, and largest, part of the book, Edwards shows how one evaluates religious experience in the light of authentically biblical and “certain signs of holy and gracious affections.” True religious affections:

- É “arise from influences that are spiritual,”
- É “are founded on the moral excellency of divine things,”
- É “arise from the mind’s being enlightened.”
- É They are attended with humility and with a change of nature,
- É They have their exercise and fruit in Christian practice.

Edwards’ list of signs provides a format for examining the beginning (how does the experience “arise?”), the middle (with what are they “attended?”), and the end of our experience of God (what is the “fruit?”). By observing our feelings and tendencies that develop in religious experiences, and by comparing them to tendencies that we would expect to occur in a saving relationship with God in light of biblical teaching (rather than simply looking to the surface of the experience) we can more surely discern God’s work in our lives. Consequently, we can follow God more closely and promote God’s

renewal more truly in our own life and in the lives of others. Edwards is quite harsh in *Religious Affections* upon those who look to the fact of impressions from God arising in the mind or to the powerful experiences of tears or joy for their sense of relationship with God. While it is fine to receive and to respond to these experiences, should they be from God, it is wrong to rest our assurance of faith or sense of religious self-worth upon such phenomena. A transformed life is the *real* evidence of God's Spirit at work.

3. Discerning Revival Today

Now, having given you a long history lesson, I will try to apply Edwards' thoughts to our situation today. This is only my opinion on the subject from my own experience of revivals, but here it is anyway.

First let us ask the question of the divine origin of the work "in general." What do we say of Toronto, Pensacola, and other similar movements? First, we must be careful not to judge these events by the wrong criteria. The few references to laughing in the Bible, the emphasis on experience in renewal meetings, the presence of imprudences and errors, and even the fact that some fall away after hours of being "prayed for" in the meetings - all these are inappropriate criteria upon which to judge a work of God. We must look for more certain signs of God's Spirit. Is there a greater interest in the things of Christ as a result of the movement? Is there an increase in respect for the scriptures? Are people battling with or gaining victory over sin in their lives? Is there an increase of love? In my experience of the renewal, and in my interviews with people who have participated, I have found much to commend the movement. I have seen people converting to Christ, giving up sins, lifting up Christ and His Word, and striving to love. Yes, there have been cases of people having been led astray following a season of renewal prayer. But on the whole, I think it is fair to say that God has given us a powerful work of invitation in these movements. Without going into detail, I would say that these are works of God.

But just because a movement can be confirmed as a general work of God does not mean that everything experienced within that movement is to be regarded as the saving work of God. And that is where other problems lie. I have seen person after person get "blasted" by the Spirit in a time of prayer, only to get so caught up in the repeated experience of God's invitation, overjoyed to be a part of the Spirit's work, that he or she loses track of attending to the response that the experience may be leading the person into. And this is where the question of the proper discernment of experiences arising in the context of a work of God comes up. Once again, we must not judge by inappropriate criteria. Just because you saw images while being prayed for, or because a stranger prayed a prayer over you that was surprisingly relevant to your life-situation, does not necessarily mean that you are now a child of God (or have achieved a significant step of growth, a new calling, etc.). That may or may not be the case. Examine the beginning, the middle, the end of your experience. From what does it arise? With what is it attended? To what is it leading? In the end, it is the response and transformation fostered by the experience which is the most accurate sign of God's work. And this is where we must place our focus. We must follow the power of God into the pursuit of God. Renewal movements which encourage people toward experience with God must support that encouragement with

appropriate pastoral care to help believers to make sense of their experiences and to respond to the invitations of God. To cultivate Christian experience without moving the next step of discernment and response is to leave the believer with nowhere to go. It will lead to spiritual elitism, factions, and the degeneration of the very revival the leaders suppose to promote.

I have much more to say about these things, but no more room. Let me close with this. I am all for revival. For this reason I beg of you not to shrink from promoting revival whenever and wherever possible. And it is for this reason that I also beg of you not to shrink from discerning revival. Don't look simply to the outward appearance, but observe carefully the beginning, middle, and end, of religious experiences, comparing them with biblically derived criteria. And please have mercy on your brothers and sisters who may not think like you.

May God the Father bless you with His riches in Christ Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit.

By God's Grace,

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