

May, 1998 Discerning Revival II

There was one aspect of Jonathan Edwards' "revival discernment" that I reluctantly left out of the last *Newes Letter*; there was just not enough space. Even so, I fear my reflections were too long and technical to be of help to many. In order to be fair to Edwards and to have a second try at communicating, I will continue my reflections here.

One problem I have seen surrounding revival or renewal meetings is a slight confusion concerning "what happened." We attend a meeting and experience a powerful touch of God. We may experience emotions at an intensity seldom experienced. We may cry, laugh, dance. We may hear the voice of God, revealing the depths of our hearts, revealing God's saving love. We may see the glory of God. Our eyes may be opened to see God in a way we have never before. Wonderful things may happen.

However, when we wake up the next morning we must answer for ourselves "what happened." Often, the strength of the experience, the affirmation of those around, and the implications provided by those teaching at or leading the meetings lead us to assume that the condition of our relationship with God is changed. That word someone spoke over me means I will be an evangelist to thousands. That grief I felt for my sin means my sins are forgiven and I can expect a transformed life. That trembling I felt during prayer is a sign of an intercessory gift imparted to me. The work is done, and all I need now is to rest and await the results.

The reason this is a "problem" or a "confusion" is that the results don't always necessarily follow as expected. The thousands do not immediately respond to my initial evangelistic efforts. I may find myself still plagued by sinful temptations. Prolonged intercession becomes, after a few weeks, tedious or boring. Nevertheless, I look to the power of the experience and cling "in faith" to the assumption that God has changed me—but there often remains, either within our hearts or among our peers, a slight confusion that needs to be resolved.

Jonathan Edwards witnessed the same problem in the Great Awakening. As I mentioned last *Newes Letter*, Edwards interviewed hundreds who had come to meetings and experienced powerful things. People cried, fainted, danced, saw visions, heard voices, and found words of scripture entering their minds in the midst of these meetings. The critics of the Awakening passed these experiences off as mere emotionalism. Some proponents of the meetings, however, saw in these experiences the sure sign of the hand of God. Many individuals, after a powerful series of experiences from a week of meetings, assumed that their eternal salvation was assured. Some, sensing the call of God upon them for ministry, felt confident to proclaim the gospel of revival, splitting churches and censuring other ministers. In time it became clear that the results didn't always follow as one might expect from the character and power of the experience. It was to clarify this confusion that Edwards wrote his *Treatise on Religious Affections*.

Edwards' concern in *Religious Affections* was that the erroneous evaluation and response to revival experiences had contributed to the shortening of the Awakening and had caused great

damage to the name of Christ and Christ's work. He wanted to lay proper foundations for lasting revival. One of these foundations was the distinction between *common* and *saving* grace. In his preface to *Religious Affections*, Edwards notes that his purpose in his previous treatise *Distinguishing Marks* was to "show the distinguishing marks of a work of God, including both his common and saving operations." However, his focus in *Religious Affections* was clearly upon God's saving works. He states that "what I aim at now, is to show the nature and signs of the gracious operations of the Holy Spirit, by which they are to be distinguished from all things whatsoever that the minds of men are subject of, which are not of a saving nature." The issue in *Religious Affections* is not the determination of *whether* God is active in a given experience, but rather *how*. The distinction was not merely between that which is or is not from God, but rather between a certain type of divine work—saving grace and everything else.

Puritan theology, the Christian tradition from which Edwards was nourished, carefully distinguished between God's grace given to everybody (*common* grace) and that grace used in saving and sanctifying Christian believers (*saving* grace). *Common* grace included God's work of preserving the earth and of revealing Himself as Creator through that work. It also included those works by which the Holy Spirit invites, convicts, and woos a person prior to initial conversion to Christ. *Saving* grace referred to those transforming works which the Spirit accomplishes at the rebirth of a believer and thereafter. The Holy Spirit may awaken the heart of an unbeliever to feel the love of God or the pain of sin as a means of convicting, inviting, or wooing the person to salvation. This awakening may be experienced only subtly or it may be experienced with tremendous emotional or physical accompaniment. For example, a man may attend a revival meeting and find himself painfully reminded of the sins of his life. He sits there in the pew as scene after scene of his life appears before his memory like a video screen. He feels a deep regret for his past behavior, and finds himself crying like a baby. Another man attends the same meeting and does not experience any of the fervor of the first man. Yet in the meeting he may hear a word in the message or see something in the worship that sparks a little interest in spiritual things. Each of these can be understood as the common grace of God working in the heart of the unbeliever. Yet this work of wooing is not salvation itself. Although the human heart is often softened as a result of God's touch, at times the heart of the unbeliever may actually harden in response to God's preparatory work of grace. Each of the men in our examples can shrug off the inspiration given at the meeting and return to their avoidance of God's grace.

The problem arose for Edwards when God's common work of preparatory grace was confused, by reason of being associated with inappropriate signs, with God's saving work itself. When these works were confused, people sought for the signs of common grace (often more visible and "powerful" due to the need to shake unbelievers out of their sin), thinking they found in them the salvation of God. Strong experiences of conviction such as tears or visions were considered evidence of conversion and life decisions were made (erroneously) based on these conclusions, often to the detriment of the person's faith and the revival's reputation both. When people erroneously assumed that "what happened" at the meeting was a finished work of

salvation, they failed to recognize what was their appropriate response to God's work. In the end they failed to receive the benefits the common grace was ultimately given to cultivate. *By mis-judging the experience people missed the blessings the experiences were given to convey.*

I think it is possible to understand Edwards' categories a bit more broadly. I would like to suggest that we differentiate between God's works of *invitation* and God's works of *transformation*. God often invites, initiates a new dimension of relationship. God saves us from Egyptians and brings us into a promised land. The Lord is incarnated as a human person and dies for us. The Spirit touches our heart. Yet God's initiation demands a response, a transforming response. We are invited to respond to God's deliverance by obedience to the law of life. We are invited to believe in Jesus as our Lord and Savior. We are invited to yield to the leadings of the Spirit. The work by which God invites and the work through which God enables our response are two different works, akin to Edwards' common and saving grace. Yet I think that works of invitation can be found among believers as well as unbelievers. The Lord "stands at the door and knocks" (Rev 3:20). At times that knock can be experienced as a mere tap, for example in a quiet but growing interest in God's love. At other times God's knock can be experienced as a loud bang on our door, for example when we are struck to our knees weeping in a revival meeting. But the fact of a knock, even a loud knock, does not mean the door is open. And when the knock and the open door, the invitation and the transformative response, are confused, people (believers and unbelievers) are often led to base their assurance of faith and religious self-image upon the fact and circumstances of God's invitation, rather than upon the transformative work of the Spirit itself. We erroneously imagine that God has already accomplished those things into which He actually is inviting us to grow through responsive commitment. *Just because you get the invitation doesn't mean you're at the party.*

Edwards' solution to the problem in *Religious Affections* was to point people to "more certain signs" of the *saving* grace of God. While all God's works, common and saving, may be legitimate indications of a work of God in general—as discussed in his *Distinguishing Marks*—the evaluation of individual experiences in the midst of a work of God demanded criteria that were both biblical and appropriate to God's saving ministry. Thus real saving experiences are those that (a) arise from influences that are spiritual, (b) are founded on the excellency of divine things, (c) arise from this mind's being enlightened, (d) are attended with humility and a change of nature, (e) and have their fruit in Christian practice. As I mentioned in the last *Newes Letter*, Edwards' list amounts to a means for examining the beginning, middle, and end of one's experiences to determine precisely how the Lord has been present.

I think Edwards' approach is appropriate for today. I have no doubt but what God can and will cause us to have powerful experiences of His Spirit. But the fact or circumstances of these experiences is no certain indication that we are now new people. I have shaken and cried under the conviction of God's Spirit, deeply moved by my own state of sin, only to show soon thereafter that nothing was really new. There are times when we hear the truth of God fresh and clear, deeply touching our heart and mind. Thanks be to God for His enlightening work! In times of God's invitation our hearts are moved, awakened, and touched. We must allow this

work to increase our interest in and response to God. We must be careful, however, not to assume that just because we have had a powerful experience that God has completed a great work in us and we can rest passively. If it is truly a transforming work (and not simply an invitation) it will become clear not only in the character of the experience, but also in the fruit of our lives which follows. We must pay attention, watch, and learn the ways of the Spirit of God. *Though it is not always easy, we must learn to recognize by the proper signs when we are being invited to change and when we are being changed.*

I do not want to place too strong a dichotomy between these “graces.” There is an important connection between God’s call and his conversion, His invitation and His transformation, His enlightenment and His effectual salvation. God’s healing, enlightening, saving, transforming work are all one gift to us. But this one gift of salvation from the one God through the one Spirit is distributed differently to different people at different times, demanding different responses and results. There are times when God does impart new, transformed habits into our lives during powerful experiences (as well as during experiences so subtle they are unnoticed). We can rejoice in these times, learning to walk in the newness of life given by God. There are times when powerful experiences are simply glorious invitations, calling us into a transforming response. But what about those times when we feel a powerful invitation and find no transformation? In these times we can call upon the Lord and ask for more of Him. “You came to me, Lord!” you cry out. “You invited me to a new life. Where are the results? Come, Lord, and bring the transformation.” Thus, by carefully discerning the presence and the manner of the Spirit’s work, we can encourage responses that cooperate with the particular works of God’s Spirit and thereby avoid the problems of confused evaluations.

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