

GERALD McDERMOTT

Roanoke College

SORTING OUT THE GENUINE FROM THE COUNTERFEIT: JONATHAN EDWARDS ON TESTING THE SPIRITS

Jonathan Edwards (1703-58) was one of the five or so greatest theologians in the history of the Christian church. Like Luther, he was a master of the Bible, and determined to make Scripture his final rule for faith and practice. But unlike Luther, he promoted the work of the Holy Spirit through revival. In fact, he believed that the key to secular history is the history of revival. For example, the revival of the early church eventually converted the Roman Empire. The revival of the Reformation, he pointed out, helped form what became modern Europe.

Edwards was himself a theologian of revival. When liberals said true religion is essentially a matter of belief, and enthusiasts said true religion is basically a matter of the emotions, Edwards said No, true religion is a matter of the affections, that deepest source of the self which we used to call the soul, that inspires not only the thoughts of the mind but also the feelings and choices of the heart. Revival is needed, he said, to revive the soul's affections, so that people see the beauty of God and have their minds and wills and emotions transformed.

Edwards wrote several treatises defending the Great Awakening, a massive series of revivals that swept up and down the American colonies in 1740-41, brought a new unity to what had been divided colonies, and led indirectly to the American Revolution thirty years later.

The Great Awakening saw both heaven and hell come to earth. Edwards said that when the Holy Spirit sends revival, the first one to get revived is the devil. So while there were spirits of light from God that brought new life and truth and beauty to thousands, there were also spirits of darkness that sowed division, confusion and craziness at the same time.

Therefore, a few years after the Awakening had passed, Edwards wrote a book on how to test the spirits, the *Religious Affections* (1746). It was a work of spiritual discernment. Some have said it was the most comprehensive and penetrating work of spiritual discernment ever written in the history of Christian thought.

Edwards presented two series of twelve—twelve unreliable signs of true faith, and twelve reliable signs of true faith.

The first set of twelve signs were those that Christians often use to determine whether the Spirit is present in a person or movement. But Edwards said every one is unreliable. None is supported by Scripture as a reliable sign that the Spirit has truly come with his indwelling presence.

Let me go through these unreliable signs very briefly.

1. Intense religious affections. Edwards said the Galatians would have been willing to pluck out their eyes for Paul, but Paul said he feared he may have labored in vain over them. Those who saw Lazarus wept and rejoiced over his resurrection, but then only days later joined the crowds crying, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

2. Much fervent talk about religion. Edwards said false religious affections are more likely to talk all the time about their spiritual experiences than are true affections. Peter and Jude both told their readers to beware of false teachers who are full of talk but empty of life.

3. Many religious affections at the same time. Edwards said the stony ground hearers in the sower and the seed parable had faith and joy at first but later revealed they did not have true faith.

4. A certain sequence or order in the affections, such as going from terror before God to comfort after learning of the gospel promise. Edwards pointed out that Cornelius had no grief over his sin but came to true faith. We are told by Jesus to discern by looking to the nature of the fruit, not the Spirit’s method or order when bringing a person to faith.

5. Spiritual experiences not produced by the self. It is true that most conversions in the NT were dramatic and not self-generated, but there are other powers that can counterfeit true religion such as Satan, angels of light and the human psyche itself. Both Balaam and Judas were used by the Spirit in dramatic ways, but

neither had the indwelling Spirit; both were wicked men.

6. Scriptures coming miraculously to mind. Satan can do the same, as he showed in the desert with Jesus.

7. Physical manifestations. True faith will manifest itself physically from time to time, but the mere presence of bodily effects does not guarantee the presence of the Holy Spirit. King Saul was slain in the Spirit twice but proved to be a wicked man.

8. Frequent and passionate praise for God. At the Red Sea the Israelites sang to and praised God, but shortly after worshipped the Golden Calf.

9. The appearance of love. All good things, especially love, are counterfeited. Even love for Jesus, as John shows in his letter to the church at Ephesus, saying they lost their first love. Jesus said that in the coming times of trial, the love of many would grow cold.

10. Zealous or time-consuming devotion to religious activities. Jesus talked at the end of the Sermon on the Mount about those who prophesied, cast out demons, and performed miracles, but of whom he said, "I never knew you."

11. Being convinced one is saved. Edwards pointed out that our hearts are easily self-deceived, as were the Pharisees about their own salvation.

12. Others being convinced that someone is saved. Jesus said the weeds and wheat look alike until harvest time, and that, as Scripture reminds us, man looks at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart.

So if none of these oft-used criteria are reliable, which criteria are? The answer is Edwards' twelve positive signs. These, he said, usually all hang together, and when taken as an interconnected chain of characteristics, point reliably to the presence of the indwelling Spirit.

1. A divine and supernatural source. This is the presence of the indwelling Spirit of God, who lives in the saint (which means any true Christian) on a permanent basis. Edwards said the Spirit can move through a natural man (one who has not been regenerated), or use him in some way, but will not give him a new principle of action from the inside. Balaam is a good example: the Spirit spoke through him truly of the future of Israel, but he remained a wicked man whom the NT condemned as the author of idolatry and immorality. In the true saint, the Spirit remakes the person from the inside out, imparting a new power, a new spiritual sense, and a gradual increase of holiness.

2. Attraction to God and his ways for their own sake. Edwards argued that a true saint will be attracted to God primarily because of what she sees in God, not primarily for the benefits God confers. When Satan told God that Job's worship

was based on love for self rather than love for God, God conceded the point. He allowed Satan to take away all that Job had, in the hope of proving that Job's faith was *not* based simply on self-interest. This is why, Edwards charged, saints rejoice in God and His beauty, while the merely presumptuous rejoice in themselves and their own spiritual experiences.

3. Seeing the beauty of holiness. The scriptures often describe the knowing of the regenerate as a kind of seeing. John writes, "No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has *seen* him or knows him," and "the one who does evil has not *seen* God" (1 John 3.6; 3 John 11). Jesus said, "I have come into this world so that those who do not see may see" (John 9.39). But what do the saints see? The answer is the glory or beauty of divine things—which the Bible calls "the beauty of holiness" (Ps 29.2; 96.9). According to Edwards, this is the beauty that makes the person of Jesus so ravishingly beautiful, that has drawn the hearts of billions to Himself for thousands of years. The devil and the damned, he added, see the holiness of God, but they do not see the beauty of that holiness. How can that be? When I was in high school a teacher took me to an art museum. While he gazed with love and delight at one painting after another, I looked at my watch. I saw the same paintings my teacher saw, but I did not see their beauty. I could not "see" because my heart and mind did not have the capacity to see and enjoy the art. Seeing the beauty of Jesus Christ and the glory of redemption is similar. People without the Spirit don't see the glory of God and Christ because they are not *able* to. Their eyes have not been opened to divine beauty, so they cannot see it or enjoy it.

4. This means a new knowing. It is not merely knowledge of doctrine, or conviction of conscience. Nor is it knowledge of the mystical meaning of a biblical passage, for Paul said that I can have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries, but without love I am nothing (1 Cor. 13.2). Neither is it hearing a voice or seeing a vision, for the unregenerate can experience both of these things. Instead, it is a "sense of the heart" that sees that the wounds of Christ on the cross are not ugly but beautiful and is now able to see that Christ and his redemption are the inner meaning of all the Scriptures.

5. Deep-seated conviction. True faith is not just an intellectual conclusion but also a gift given by revelation: "No one knows who the Father is but him to whom the Son has revealed it" (Lk 10.21).

6. Humility. True saints are truly humble. They do not seek position and prestige, and are willing both to confess their sins and to clean toilets. They know that God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble (James 4.6).

7. Change of nature. The Bible describes conversion as being born again, be-

coming a new creature, rising from the dead, being renewed in the spirit of your mind, dying to sin and living to Christ, being partakers of the divine nature. Therefore those who claim faith but are not being gradually “transformed by the renewal of their minds” (Rom 12.2) must examine themselves to see if they be in the faith (2 Cor 13.5).

8. A Christ-like spirit. Jesus said his disciples were to be like children—which means not to be immature but to be willing to admit publicly when they are wrong, to be teachable, and to realize they deserve and need discipline. Children also forgive more easily than adults, and so disciples must imitate Christ who forgave even his enemies.

9. Fear of God. This is the “beginning of wisdom.” It is not servile terror, but the desire to please and not offend a loving Father. It remembers that even the angels cover their faces before God’s throne (Isaiah 6), and that God looks for those who tremble at his word (Is 66.2).

10. Balance. True saints, said Edwards show godly “proportion” and a beautiful “symmetry” in their lives. By this he meant a balance between fear of God and assurance of salvation, between joy in God and mourning for sin, between love for God and love for neighbor, between love for friends and love for strangers, between love for neighbor and love for family, between caring for others’ material needs as well as their souls, between trusting for God for salvation and trusting God to provide for our other needs, between following Jesus in good times and following in bad, between public worship and secret prayer.

11. Hunger for God. True saints do not rest on their laurels, contenting themselves with knowing that they have been saved, but forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead (Phil. 3.13-14). They are not complacent, but hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matt 5.6).

12. Christian practice. This, for Edwards, is the most important sign of grace. Jesus said it is the only way we can pick out false prophets, and James said it is the way we can show that we have faith. It means, among other things, crucifying our favorite sin—the total surrender of which Mother Teresa spoke—and perseverance until the end of life. We will stumble and fall, and even backslide, but saints pick themselves up off the ground, ask forgiveness, and plead for grace to continue walking. For Paul tells us that Messiah Jesus has reconciled us in his body of flesh by his death “*provided that you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard*” (Col. 1.28).

Edwards warned that these reliable signs of grace are not meant for us to become spiritual detectives, denouncing others for not showing the fruit of the Spirit

and therefore damned to hell. For God alone knows the hearts of men and women. But they are important to pastors, to warn them not to give assurance of salvation on the basis of spiritual experience alone, rather than the whole constellation of signs of grace here described. They also help us to discern in ourselves, and in our own ministries, the difference between genuine works of the Spirit and works or experiences coming from other spirits altogether.

What I have just outlined is merely the jacket, as it were, of Edwards' *Religious Affections*. I trust that you can see the body under the jacket is a powerful source of spiritual discernment that will be immensely useful for the global Christianity that is now emerging in this new century.

A b s t r a c t

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