

The Sufficiency and Sovereignty of the Holy Spirit in Jonathan Edwards' Religious Affections

“And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from he Lord, who is the Spirit.”

— 2 Corinthians 3:18

From these words Jonathan Edwards, the most noted American philosopher and theologian of the eighteenth century, saw a dynamic from God that changes lives. He insisted that "no other means can make such a profound change in the soul" as the Holy Spirit of God (Religious Affections, p. 141).¹ Without the presence of God's Spirit in the heart, religious activity is mere pretense. With the presence of the God's Spirit, however, affections and passions are ignited and the likeness of God begins to flare gradually as holy fire in the soul.

Edwards wrote his Religious Affections as a defense of genuine Christianity. It was written against the aftermath of emotional excesses from a great revival in Northampton, as well as politically motivated traditionalists in the church. He believed that there is an inseparable connection between genuine Christian behavior and the activity of the Holy Spirit. This behavior must strike a balance between the external and the internal; the subjective and the objective. External practice without the internal impulse of the God's Spirit is the height of hypocrisy. A supposed internal experience of God's Spirit without external practice is false piety.

The thesis of Edwards' Religious Affections is rudimentary, yet profoundly relevant: In the same way the influence of the Spirit is effectual unto salvation, so too the Spirit's influence is effectual unto sanctification. Authentic religious activity is a response to the Spirit of Christ who indwells every believer. For Jonathan Edwards, and the Apostle Paul, this is the only proper and biblical pattern for godliness (Rom. 8:9-14). Committed to theology being rational as well as practical, Jonathan Edwards was careful in organizing his arguments and defining his terms. He said the religious affections are "the more vigorous and practical exercises of the inclination and will of the soul" (p. 5). The "soul" is a composite of understanding and inclination; inclination being either approval or disapproval; acceptance or rejection of any given behavior. And, "the affections will either motivate the soul to seek and cleave to what is in view, or turn away the soul and oppose what is in view" (p. 7). The affections, therefore, are what's behind the cognitive and volitional elements of the soul. But what arouses, inspires, and empowers the affections? For Edwards, as well as for every Christian, it must be the Holy Spirit of God.

Edwards insisted upon the supremacy of the Spirit in the believer's life. Like Augustine, he viewed the activity of the Spirit both in terms of illumination and infusion. Illumination is that activity of the Spirit whereby the believer is able to understand the things of God. It is spiritual apprehension of God's truth. As "holy affections do not have heat without light" (p. 105), so the mind receives from God a supernatural understanding of divine things.

Infusion is that operation of the Spirit whereby he takes up his dwelling place in the life of the believer such that the activities of the subject are indistinguishable from God's activity. It is God living his life in and through the believer (Gal. 2:20). Infusion, then, is that principle of and basis from which the new life in Christ is lived.

Illumination is particular to the saints. Those things of God that his Spirit sheds light upon are unknown to the natural person.² This supernatural perception is different in kind from all other knowledge; it is a "spiritual understanding" that is "spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14; Col. 1:9). This divine light first comes to saints as the glory of the gospel that the unbelieving world cannot grasp (2 Cor. 4:3-4, 6). It is seeing the gospel for the gracious message that it is and placing the highest value upon it (Mt. 13:44-45). Though unbelievers can have a "deeper apprehension of the character of sin and of evil, they are still left without any real understanding of the glory of God" (p. 110; cf., Jn. 16:8).

In addition, spiritual understanding is not merely being informed by the Scriptures or even God (e.g., Balaam, Num. 22). It is possible one could explain the whole of Scripture and not have spiritual understanding (1 Cor. 13:2). Doctrinal knowledge is no guarantee of spiritual comprehension. Being informed by the Bible is no substitute for being led by the Holy Spirit. Divine illumination provides the means for viewing all of life from heaven's angle; a glimpse from God's perspective. This can only come from the one Who "searches all things, even the deep things of God" because "no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God" (1 Cor. 2:10-11). The Holy Spirit is as vital to spiritual understanding as the sun is to the light of day.

Jonathan Edwards also insisted upon the sovereignty of the Spirit in the believer's life. This principle of new life has its origin in God's nature and is beyond the essential life given all people. God communicates his life to the believer such that those traits that once characterized the individual are replaced with the qualities of himself. The Spirit is "represented as being so united to the faculties of the soul that He becomes a principle or spring of new nature and life" (p. 78; cf., 2 Cor. 5:17).

The Holy Spirit is not merely an influence who occasionally prompts the soul unto godliness. The believer is said to be the permanent place where the Spirit of God takes up residence (Jn. 14:17; 1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16). This is precisely how the Apostle Paul can say "For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). Although he influences the believer, the Spirit is far more than just an influence. God's Spirit is the basis of life that communicates his own divine character to the believer (2 Pt. 1:3).

As such, the Spirit of God produces those effects that are indicative of his own nature. Just as "heat is the property of fire" so too the children of God produce those properties that are true of their new nature (p. 79). God's Spirit is called "holy" and so the saints are said to be "holy" (1 Pt. 1:15; 2 Pt. 1:4). This is what is meant by having fellowship or communion with God; allowing God's life Principle to manifest in and through the believer (1 Jn. 1:3). Thoughts, affections, motivations, actions – all are governed by and expressed in accordance with the Spirit's life. Holy affections, passionate inclinations to know God deeper, and an unquenchable desire to experience the joy of God's presence each moment are just a few of the effects and benefits of divine illumination and infusion of God's Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.

"Christ lives in the heart and the Holy Spirit dwells there in union with the faculties of the soul as an internal, vital principle that exerts God's own proper nature If God dwells in the heart and is vitally united to it, He will show that He is God by the efficacy of His operation" (p. 169). This is the sum of Edwards' argument presented thusfar. Without the agency of the Holy Spirit there is no hope for true Christian behavior. But is there a distinguishing characteristic or effect of God's Spirit in the believer's life? If so, what would it be?

The one "distinctive influence of the Spirit of God" is what Edwards called "evangelical humiliation" (pp. 126ff.). This form of humiliation begins with a personal sense of inadequacy and unworthiness. Some may have a general sense of religious awe, be convicted by sin, and even fear God's anger. Yet, the possibility of loving God for his moral excellencies and beauty, viz., loving him for his own sake despite the returns on such an investment, remains impossible without evangelical humility. Self-love – the antithesis of Edwards' evangelical humiliation – will prevail over love for God without the understanding of personal unworthiness.

While the indications of evangelical humiliation begin with a sense of personal insufficiency, they do not end there. The "inclination of the heart is altered," the "will is broken" and a "gentle yielding in freedom and delight to lie prostrate at the feet of God" mark the truly humble. In fact, evangelical humiliation is "a low esteem of self, and sees self as indeed nothing, with no desire to feel self-sufficient, and freely renounce[es] all self-glory" (p. 128).

The zenith of Christian duty, according to Edwards, is self-denial. The primary effect of the gospel of grace is humility. It must also be the distinguishing mark of God's children (Ps. 34:18; 51:17; 138:6; Pr. 3:34; Mt. 5:3; 18:3-4; Jm. 4:6; 1 Pt. 5:5). True humility causes members of God's house to think of others as more important (Phil. 2:3), consistently submits to others (Eph. 5:21), and seeks to exalt God at every moment, even at the expense of exalting self. True humility is a resignation of the will to the priorities of the Spirit of God. True humility finds that "the more the vision of God grows in a saint, the more he [or she] is convinced there is much more to see." True humility proclaims "how small is the love of the most eminent saint in comparison to what God deserves" (p. 133).

Contemporary Relevance of the Religious Affections

As we have seen, Spirit-enabled holiness and evangelical humility are the distinctive signs of new life in Christ. Yet in modern evangelicalism there are many activities that masquerade as signs of personal holiness and humility, yet appear to supplant God's Spirit. Political activism, the tidal wave of high self-esteem/self-sufficient attitudes, church leadership models consisting of personality, management ability, counseling technique, rhetorical skill, and, worst of all, the seeming irrelevance of theology in the pulpit are just a few of the vital signs of what it means to be "Christian" today.

If Jonathan Edwards were alive today he might write a book entitled *The Disciple According to Jesus*. Since Jesus is the Head of the Church, then personal holiness begins with obedience to him. And, since the Spirit is sovereign over every aspect of faith as it pertains to entering the Kingdom, then Edwards would contend that we need to acknowledge the Spirit's sovereignty over every aspect of faith as it pertains to remaining in the Kingdom. Apart from this there can be no personal holiness. It is as true for us now as it was for the Apostle Paul that "he who began a good work . . . will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6). After all, "it is God who is at work in [us], both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13).

Few would question the emphasis upon the Spirit of God in the life of the believer. But how is one actually changed by the sovereign Holy Spirit? Does the believer have any responsibility in his/her own growth? If so, what activities could facilitate personal holiness in a day where obedience is taunted as legalism rather than an indicator of true spirituality? The categories Jonathan Edwards employed in describing the components of the human soul provide some

insight into the Spirit's activity. In addition, yielding to the Spirit's powerful presence is the beginning of personal holiness.

If it is true that the Spirit's influence is effectual unto sanctification, then the believer may as well begin by surrendering to this truth. God will have his way! Granted, the flesh does war against the Spirit (Gal 5:17; Rom. 8:5-9) and the struggle with sin may be intense at times. But God does prevail in the end (Rom. 8:29-30). By way of confession and repentance, the believer is forgiven and restored to a progressively enduring relationship with God. This is not only cause for great hope but provides every Christian a proper understanding of their relationship to the Spirit's working against the flesh or sinful nature. In essence, the believer is not "the helpless battle ground of two opposing forces" (Bruce, Galatians, p.245).

Jonathan Edwards insists that the Spirit illuminates the understanding with spiritual insight and that this insight is more than an exercise in discursive or speculative reasoning. Spiritual insight moves from apprehension of God's truth to the conviction of his truth. It is a discerning use of knowledge toward some godly end or purpose (Paul may have been relying upon this type of insight in counseling the Philippian believers, Phil. 3:15). The source of this spiritual insight is God (Mt. 11:25; 16:17). Spiritual understanding is not simply a product of human deduction but divine disclosure. (2 Cor. 4:6).

Spiritual insight moves the mind and soul from admiration to adoration of God's excellencies. Persons who are "spiritually enlightened . . . [do] not merely rationally believe that God is glorious, but [have] a sense of the gloriousness of God. . . . There is not only a rational belief that God is holy, and that holiness is a good thing, but there is a sense of the loveliness of God's holiness" (Works, Vol. II, Sermon I, p. 14). Spiritual insight is having a profound sense of God's perfections and beauty. This Spirit-illumination does not stop at the corridor of the mind but moves into the deep caverns of the soul where authentic spiritual worship takes place (Jn. 4:23-24).

How does the believer grasp this spiritual insight? While the various disciplines (prayer, study, fasting, meditation, et al.) do serve to enhance communion between the Spirit and the saint, the bottom line is to ask God and trust that he will give heavenly wisdom (Ps. 119:18, 33-37; Jm. 1:5-6). The disciplines of silence and solitude also nourish the soul significantly in our overly-stimulated, frenetic Western lifestyle. In an age where more facts are accessible in a few short nanoseconds than one could possibly use in a lifetime, it would serve us well to pause and seek God for depth of knowledge rather than breadth of knowledge (Ps. 46:10a).

Though we have so much information available and it becomes easy to pride ourselves on being informed, we simply must depend upon the Spirit for proper use of information. Looking to the sovereign Spirit for understanding and wisdom is the only hope for genuine spiritual insight (Job 32:8; Pr. 20:27; 1Cor. 2:11; Eph. 1:17). For the Christian, knowledge should always be a means to an end; not an end in itself. The only proper end is to glorify Jesus (Phil. 2:10-11), which is being achieved by the Spirit's illumination in the believer's life (Jn. 16:14-15).

Knowledge alone causes pride and self-aggrandizement (1 Cor. 8:1). Humility, that which only the Spirit can give, should be sought over knowledge. Contrary to some Christian counsel, which maintains self-love is necessary before love for others is possible, the biblical pattern is: God, others, self. Continuous humility before God and others is the true road to continuous spiritual blessing and grace for living (1 Pt. 5:5-6. Note: The present tense: "God [continually] graces the [continually] humble").

Following the appeal to God for his Spirit to illuminate the mind with divine wisdom for living and trusting he will deliver, every believer must rely upon God to empower the will/inclination to live each moment in the presence of the Almighty God. Personal holiness comes by way of "every-increasing glory" and the Spirit not only shows the way but endows the will with power and discipline (2 Tim. 1:7). God knows that, left to ourselves, knowledge is not enough (contra Socrates; cf., Jm. 4:17); we need help every step of the way.

The Apostle Paul understood the disparity between knowing, doing, and being. He personally struggled with a degree of discontinuity in his own life (Rom. 7:14-25). However, he discovered, just as Edwards had, that personal holiness is found in complete reliance upon Spirit-illumination and infusion (Eph. 1:18-19). Enlightened inner eyes along with empowered holy activity is the work of God in the believer. God's power is that dynamic, energetic, and supernatural ability to progressively accomplish in the believer those qualities and characteristics that conform to the likeness of his Son (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 4:13).

Jonathan Edwards has a great deal to say to God's people as we approach the twenty-first century. His passion for insisting upon genuine religious affections and personal holiness is crucial for a culture submerged in information and smothered by pragmatism. We must, moment by moment, look to God's Spirit for renewal and reformation. For it is by the Spirit of God that we have hope (Rom. 15:13). May this hymn be our daily prayer as we seek to align our religious affections with the affections of God.

Breathe on me, Breath of God
Fill me with life anew;
That I may love what thou dost love
And do what thou wouldst do.
Breathe on me, Breath of God
Till I am wholly thine;
Until this earthly part of me
Glows with thy fire divine.

Soli Deo gloria!

–ENDNOTES–

1. All quotes are taken from Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1984).
2. This is not to ignore the unique, though limited, role of God's Spirit in general revelation. Edwards spoke a great deal about the "common influence" of the Holy Spirit.