

REFORMED SPIRITUALITY & RELATIONSHIPS

by

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In his book *The Presbyterian Way of Life*, published in 1960, John A Mackay described Presbyterians as ‘a theologically minded people’ (p 34). For Presbyterians and all Reformed Christians, theology addresses the human mind. But Calvin’s crest testifies that Reformed Christians also experience theology as energising the heart. The design depicts an outstretched arm with the hand grasping a heart in flame being offered to God, encircled and interpreted by the words: ‘My heart I give You, Lord, eagerly and sincerely.’ Reflecting on Calvin’s crest, Mackay comments: ‘deep in the heart of Calvinism ... resides a profound piety, that is, a personal experience of God linked to a passionate devotion to God.’ (JAM: 9).

The topic ‘Reformed Spirituality’ was suggested and this paper has been prepared with a view to promoting and stimulating creative discussion between reformed and charismatic Christians in light of some recent rapprochement between these two groups (*Young, Restless, Reformed*, C. Hanson). This essay recognises that both reformed and charismatic Christianity regard spirituality essentially to be seeking to obey and fulfil the Great Commandment: to love God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and to love our neighbour as ourselves (Mark 12:28-31; Matthew 22:34-40). This presentation is set within the broad parameters of traditional reformed theology as articulated in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646), with a special focus on the work of Jonathan Edwards (1703-58), the famous preacher-theologian of New England in the 18th century, whose book *The Religious Affections* (Banner of Truth republication, 1961) is widely regarded as an outstanding examination of reformed spirituality. Reference is also made to the writings of contemporary Anglican theologian, J I Packer.

Although there have been and there still are among the denominations affirming the Reformed confessions, those which seek to restrict their membership to people showing accredited evidence of being among the elect, the *Westminster Confession* recognises that Churches on earth are ‘more or less pure’ and even the purest are ‘subject to mixture and error’ (XXV.3,4). In the Preface to *Affections*, Jonathan Edwards acknowledges ‘that so much good, and so much bad, should be mixed together in the church of God’ is a mystery (16), a reality which prompted him to preach and write on what he calls ‘the distinguishing signs of truly gracious and holy affections’ (120). For Edwards the term ‘affections’ includes inclinations of the human mind as well as well as emotions such as love, hope, fear, anger and zeal.^[1]

The essence of this paper is an exploration of five of the key elements in classic reformed spirituality together with a preliminary investigation as to how each of these might resonate to a greater or lesser extent with facets of charismatic devotion in ways which might mutually enhance dialogue between reformed and charismatics. These elements are: the glory of God, the humiliation of sinners, the activity of the Word, the indispensability of the Holy Spirit, and the duty of self-examination. We shall see that, despite significant differences, there is more common ground between charismatics and reformed in the case of the doctrines of God, Scripture and the Holy Spirit, while the commonality in relation to humiliation and self-examination lies in the fact that they are largely neglected by both groups.

We now turn to the first of these: the glory of God.

God is glorified

The nerve centre of reformed spirituality is captured in the answer to the first question in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*: ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever.’^[2] Glorifying God is the supreme aim of every aspect of human living, and Christians are called to make every effort to give God the highest honour in everything they do.

There is no doubt that Jonathan Edwards’ spirituality focuses on the glory of God. He recognises that God is glorified when we love him according to the Great Commandment. He regards love as the chief affection and the source of all other affections (35). He asserts that the primary reason why a true saint glorifies God is that the saint loves ‘the divine excellency and the glory of God’ (166). ‘The first foundation of a true love to God is that whereby he is in himself lovely, or worthy to be loved, or the supreme loveliness of his nature. This is certainly what makes him chiefly amiable’ (168).

A few pages further on in *Affections* Edwards writes: ‘True and holy love in the saints arises not because they first see that God loves them, and then see that he is lovely, but they first see that God is lovely, and that Christ is excellent and glorious, and their hearts are first captivated with this view, and the exercises of their love are wont from time to time to begin here, and to arise primarily from these views; and, then, consequentially, they see God’s love and great favour to them. The saint’s affections begin with God; and self-love has a hand in these affections consequentially and secondarily only’ (172).

Anticipating later biblical scholars, Edwards regards holiness to be the primary divine attribute, for, it is God’s holiness that ‘renders his other attributes glorious and lovely.’ He goes on to assert: ‘A true love to God must begin with a delight in his holiness’ (183). For Edwards it is the beauty of God’s holiness that captivates the saint. This Edwardsian emphasis is reflected in Jim Packer’s *Knowing God* (20) which urges us to ‘turn each truth that we learn about God into matter for meditation *before* God, leading to prayer and praise *to* God.’ For Packer, as for Edwards, there is no more exalted and no more compelling human goal than knowing God! Knowing God produces in those who know him likeness to God, or ‘godliness’ which Packer asserts to be ‘true religion’ and describes as ‘responding to God’s revelation in trust and obedience, faith and worship, prayer and praise, submission and service’ (*Knowing God*, 1973: 16).

We now ask whether to any significant extent charismatic piety resonates with this reformed focus on glorifying God:

- In what ways might the prominent role of praise in charismatic worship echo Edwards' exhortations to love God in the beauty of holiness?
- Why has the delight of enjoying God's presence highlighted in the two Westminster Catechisms become an untapped vein in most reformed worship?
- How might we in our reformed ivory towers rediscover that a key logical outcome of theology is praise?
The second element of reformed piety I wish to highlight is humiliation.

People are humbled

The *Westminster Directory of Public Worship* (162-164) makes provision in certain circumstances for the churches to observe a day of public fasting, and on both sides of the Atlantic some churches in the reformed tradition have appointed days of humiliation and prayer. These special days were held 'when some great or notable judgments are either inflicted upon a people, or apparently imminent, or by some extraordinary provocations notoriously deserved' (*Directory*: 162).

In the reformed tradition humiliation in the sense of being humbled before a holy and sovereign God is seen as a personal as well as a public act, for it is regarded as a preparatory phase in what the *Shorter Catechism* entitles 'effectual calling' (Answer to Q 31). The Catechism reminds us that prior to persuading and enabling us to embrace Jesus Christ, God's Spirit convinces us of 'our sin and misery.'

This personal humiliation is highlighted by Edwards. For him, one of 'the distinguishing signs of truly gracious and holy affections' is that they are 'attended with evangelical humiliation' (237). He distinguishes evangelical humiliation from legal humiliation. While legal humiliation may lead to evangelical humiliation, it lacks the dynamic of the Holy Spirit's indwelling, arising rather from the 'common influence' of the Spirit in assisting conscience. It is not a sign of gracious affections because 'there is no spiritual understanding, the will is not bowed nor the inclination altered.' The conscience may be convinced, but only in the sense that 'the consciences of all will be most perfectly [convinced] at the day of judgment' (238). 'Men may be legally humbled,' he says, 'and have no humility: as the wicked at the day of judgment will be thoroughly convinced that they have no righteousness, but are altogether sinful, exceedingly guilty, and justly exposed to eternal damnation' (238). Edwards warns that legal humiliation can produce a legal spirit: 'Some who think themselves quite emptied of themselves, and are confident that they are abased in the dust, are full as they can hold with the glory of their own humility, and lifted up to heaven with a high opinion of their own abasement' (245)

On the other hand, evangelical humiliation arises from 'a sense of the transcendent beauty of divine things in their moral qualities' (237) which brings people 'voluntarily to deny and renounce themselves' and to mortify the pride of their hearts (238). Evangelical humiliation embraces 'the great Christian duty of self-denial' which consists in two things. It consists first in 'a man's denying his worldly inclinations, and in forsaking and renouncing all worldly objects and enjoyments.' Secondly, it consists in a man 'denying his natural self-exaltation, and renouncing his own dignity and glory, and in being emptied of himself' (241). The eminent saint who is evangelically humiliated is thereby convicted of 'the high degree in which he ought to love God' by 'the greatness of his remaining corruption' (251).

Confronted by the holy, transcendent beauty of God, the sinner is convicted of both his smallness and his sinfulness. A common physical posture in Old Testament worship was bowing down. For example, in Psalm 95 the congregation declares the supreme majesty of God: 'The lord is the great God, the great king' and immediately responds with the exhortation: 'Come let us bow down in worship' (Psalm 95:3, 6).

Rightly or wrongly, services of public humiliation and prayer are today out of fashion. This is certainly the case in many reformed churches, and also I suspect in charismatic fellowships.

- In what ways might reformed and charismatic Christians help one another to recover evangelical humiliation?
- How might the strengths of charismatic and reformed Christianity combine to combat (and humble) contemporary humanism?
- Could charismatic enthusiasm temper reformed introspection and reformed solemnity moderate charismatic excitement?
The third facet of reformed spirituality I wish to consider is the centrality of Scripture in public and private worship.

The Word is active

In its chapter on Religious Worship, the *Westminster Confession* highlights, along with Prayer, Praise and Sacraments, 'The reading of the scriptures with godly fear, and conscionable hearing of the word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith and reverence' (XXI.5). The centrality of reading and hearing the Word is the primary emphasis in the reformed family of churches.

There is no doubt that Edwards stands fullsquare in this tradition. He continually supports his arguments from Scripture as well as affirming the importance of the Word in both preaching and personal devotion, as is evidenced in the following quotation: 'The impressing of divine things on the hearts and affections of men is evidently one great and main end for which God has ordained that His

Word delivered in the holy Scriptures should be opened, applied, and set home upon men in preaching' (44). Good commentaries and theological literature may supplement preaching by imparting good understanding of the things of the Word of God, but they lack 'an equal tendency to impress them in men's hearts and affections' (44). Edwards regards preaching as having a unique capacity 'to stir up the pure minds of the saints and quicken their affections,' particularly love and joy. (44).

While affirming that personal, prayerful, and meditative reading of Scripture enlightens the mind and warms the heart, Edwards insists that the reading of Scripture calls for care and attention on the part of the reader. He complains that most persons read in an 'inattentive, unobserving way' (*Works*, quoted in *Evangelical Spirituality: From the Wesleys to John Stott* by James M Gordon, London, 1991: 49). Our full attentiveness is required because 'The Word of God enables the saints to see the excellency of Christ's person and to appreciate the preciousness of his blood and its sufficiency to atone for sin' (200).

Edwards distinguishes between a notional understanding of Scripture and its teaching on one hand and a heart-felt engagement with the text on the other. 'There is a distinction to be made between a mere notional understanding, wherein the mind only beholds things in the exercise of a speculative faculty, and the sense of the heart, wherein the mind does not only speculate and behold, but relishes and feels' (198). A couple of pages later Edwards pleads for more than an academic approach to Scripture: 'Take away all the moral beauty and sweetness of the Word, and the Bible is left wholly a dead letter, a dry, lifeless, tasteless thing' (200). Yet in his *Works*, Edwards affirms that 'Even the most apparently arid parts of Scripture are "mines and treasures of gospel knowledge"' (quoted in *Evangelical Spirituality*: 49).

Most charismatics like many reformed profess a high view of the role of Scripture in the church (e.g. *Liquid Church* by Pete Ward, 2002: 67). However, two differences are apparent. For charismatics 'worship' (continous praise for up to twenty minutes) replaces the sermon as the focal point in the service.^[3] Secondly, there is an important difference regarding the sufficiency of Scripture. The reformed believe that Scripture is sufficient to instruct us concerning the way of salvation. Charismatics on the other hand supplement Scripture with prophecies and other revelations. In any conversations WRF might have with our charismatic brethren will it be possible to learn from one another in this area?

- Has praise become too perfunctory in reformed worship?
- How might charismatics and reformed meaningfully explore together the relation between preaching and praise?
- Might the use of the term *apokalypsis* in 1 Corinthians 14:26 and Ephesians 1:17 allow us to speak of 'revelation' in two senses – with a capital 'R' and with a lower case 'r'?

The fourth feature of reformed spirituality I wish to consider is the indispensability of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is at work

The Shorter Catechism asserts 'We are made partakers of the redemption purchased by Christ, by the effectual application of it to us by his Holy Spirit' (Answer to Q 29). Christ's Spirit does this by 'working faith in us, and thereby uniting us to Christ in our effectual calling' (Answer to Q 30). The Catechism goes on to explain effectual calling as 'the work of God's Spirit, whereby convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel' (Answer to Q 31).

Edwards' treatment of affections is in line with Westminster theology. He contends that gracious exercises and affections (as distinct from natural or carnal affections) are wrought in the minds of the saints through the saving influences of the Spirit. He distinguishes the 'saving influences' of the Spirit from the 'common influences' of the Spirit which only affect natural human principles. While exercising his common influences, the Spirit may convict, but he does not indwell. Edwards was convinced of this distinction from both Scripture and from pastoral experience. 'Not all those persons who are subject to any kind of influence of the Spirit of God are ordinarily called spiritual in the New Testament' (126). And from the revivals he had observed that 'not everyone who is religiously affected has true grace' (54).

In Edwards view the saving influences of the Spirit go very much deeper as the following rather lengthy quotation makes clear. The Spirit of God is given to the saints 'to dwell in them as his proper lasting abode; and to influence their hearts, as a principle of new nature, or as a divine supernatural spring of life and action. The Scriptures represent the Holy Spirit not only as moving and occasionally influencing the saints, but as dwelling in them as his temple, his proper abode, and everlasting dwelling place, 1 Cor iii.16, 2 Cor vi.16, John xiv.16,17. And he is represented as being there so united to faculties of the soul that he becomes there a principle or spring of a new nature and life. So the saints are said to live by Christ living in them, Gal ii.20. Christ by his Spirit not only is in them, but *lives* in them; they live by his life' (127-128).

Edwards resists the idea that the witness of the Spirit is either a personal revelation that one is converted (despite Romans 8:16!) or the gift of extraordinary signs. Rather, the witness of the Spirit is closely connected with the Spirit's interpretation of the Word: 'If a sinner be once convinced of the veracity of God and that the Scriptures are his Word, he will need no more to convince and satisfy him that he is invited' (151). In this Edwards is in accord with the *Westminster Confession* which identifies the witness of the Spirit as coming 'by and with the word in our hearts.' The Confession goes on to elaborate as follows: 'The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, is either expressly set down in scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men' (I.5, 6). Edwards

seems to regard the witness of the Spirit, the seal of the Spirit and the earnest of the Spirit as synonymous terms describing the Spirit's vital dwelling in the heart of the saints (161). For him, the virtues or fruits of the Spirit are surer evidence of true spirituality than are possessing the gifts of the Spirit (127)

In *Knowing God*, Packer complains that 'The doctrine of the Holy Spirit is the Cinderella of Christian doctrines' (70).^[4] That may possibly be true of mainstream evangelicalism, but it cannot be directed at either reformed or charismatics. Both have the highest regard for the work of the Spirit. Calvin is known as 'the theologian of the Holy Spirit' and all the reformed confessions testify to the indispensable presence of the Spirit to bring light and energy in both evangelism and Christian nurture. While many charismatics may hold an Arminian view of conversion and the new birth, all of them lay huge stress on the Spirit, focusing especially on his supernatural gifts such as prophecy, healing and tongues. The very real differences between the reformed and charismatic doctrines of the Spirit prompt many on both sides to dismiss as futile any creative doctrinal dialogue between the two. However, the very strength of affirmation of the Spirit by both reformed and charismatics should surely enable meaningful and respectful discussions to take place. Some of the issues that might be discussed include the following:

- As the Holy Spirit bears witness 'by and with the word in our hearts'? (*Westminster Confession*, I.5), does he energise the text of Scripture as well as illuminate it?
- How might both reformed and charismatic evangelistic and discipling programmes be reviewed (and revised) in the light of Edwards' distinction between the 'common' and 'saving' influences of the Spirit?
- To what (if any) extent might the reformed identification of the preached sermon with the Word of God overlap with the charismatic understanding of prophecy?

The final characteristic of reformed spirituality to be considered here is self-examination.

The Soul is examined

Question 80 of *The Westminster Larger Catechism* asks: 'Can true believers be infallibly assured that they are in a state of grace, and that they shall persevere therein unto salvation?' The answer given is as follows: 'Such as truly believe in Christ, and endeavour to walk in all good conscience before him, may, without extraordinary revelation, by faith grounded upon the truth of God's promises, and by the Spirit enabling them to discern in themselves those graces to which the promises of life are made, and bearing witness with their spirits, that they are the children of God, be infallibly assured that they are in the estate of grace, and shall persevere therein unto salvation.' In the light of both his own early rather tortuous spiritual journey and his later attempts to cope with multiple manifestations during two revivals, Edwards in his *Affections* seeks to evaluate religious experience by theological insight and perceptive spiritual analysis. For him the affections are the route to the soul. However, he freely acknowledges that religious affections can be true or counterfeit. For this reason Edwards sought in the spirit of Paul's exhortation in 2 Corinthians 13:5 to help his congregation and later his readers to examine themselves in order to evaluate their religious affections. *Religious Affections*, is made up of three parts. In the first, Edwards deals with the nature of affections and their importance in religion. In the second he details twelve common features of the New England revivals in the 1735 and 1740 which, he contends, cannot be taken as certain signs of true spiritual life. He then goes on in the final part to identify twelve signs that are evidence of 'truly gracious and holy affections,' all of which reveal a sense of sin, a longing for holiness, a living faith in Christ and obedience to the will of God.

Edwards was especially wary of people founding their religious hope on elevated spiritual experiences. In his work *Original Sin*, he writes: 'What they are principally taken and elevated with, is not the glory of God, or beauty of Christ, but the beauty of their experiences. They keep thinking of themselves, what a good experience is this! ... and so they put their experiences in place of Christ, and his beauty and fullness; and instead of rejoicing in Christ Jesus, they rejoice in their admirable experiences.' (*Original Sin*. Ed C A Holbrook, New Haven, 1970, quoted in *Evangelical Spirituality*: 251).

For Edwards as a Calvinist, biblical self-examination was of great importance. First, because some of the revival conversions were proving to be spurious. Second, because conversion is God's work, not man's. Yet Edwards argues that assurance of salvation is possible. 'All those who are truly gracious persons have a solid, full, thorough and effectual conviction of the truth of the great things of the gospel; I mean, that they no longer halt between two opinions' (217). Again, 'It is unreasonable to suppose that God has provided for his people no more than probable evidence of the truth of the gospel. He has with great care abundantly provided and given them the most convincing, assuring, satisfying and manifold evidence of his faithfulness in the covenant of grace – ordered in all things and sure' [230].

However, many Christians find that assurance is not easily come by. One major impediment to being assured of one's salvation is what the *Westminster Confession* identifies as our 'remaining corruption' militating against perfect obedience to God (IX.4). Edwards frequently refers to the corruption that remains in all believers until they are glorified (251). Although an awareness that God's love persists despite our remaining corruption can stimulate a great love for God in the believer (251), the continuing existence of sin in the earthly life of the saints means that self-examination by itself is unlikely to lead to assurance. 'Although self-examination be a duty of great use and importance, and by no means to be neglected,' Edwards writes, 'yet it is not the principal means by which the saints do get satisfaction of their good estate. Assurance is not to be obtained so much by *self-examination* as by *action*.' (123). Two actions highly commended by Edwards are mortifying our corruption and living holy lives.

The Scriptures call on us to mortify our corruption and its indicators (Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:5). Becoming aware of this corruption

is an integral dynamic of the evangelical humiliation we have already noted. Mortifying that corruption consists of voluntarily and sincerely denying oneself. He takes mortification in its literal sense when he describes the believer as someone committed 'freely and from his very heart' to 'renounce and annihilate himself' (241)

For Edwards, mortification is a healthy, though negative, manifestation of the new nature where there is 'a holy breathing and panting after the Spirit of God to increase holiness, which is as natural to a holy nature as breathing is to a living body' (307). The presence and power of the indwelling Spirit will inexorably express itself in transformed living. This why Edwards deplores a lack of symmetry between faith and conduct, which, in his view invalidates any profession of faith (292-302), and contends that Christian practice is 'the chief of all the evidences of a saving sincerity in religion.' (347; cf 308-382).

Today neither self-examination nor mortification feature prominently, if at all, in our church lifestyle. These practices are seldom encouraged. Both the *Confession* and Edwards are urging us to reclaim these biblical practices.

- In attempting together to recover today the art of self-examination, how might reformed and charismatic theologians become a foil to each other so as to ensure dialogue engages both the right and left hemispheres of the brain?
- How might we reformed, who pay lip service to mortification, rediscover it by exploring it together with charismatic brothers and sisters who may scarcely recognise the term?
- In what ways might the charismatic focus on subjective experience and the reformed concentration on theology become counterpoints to one another?

Conclusion

In brief summary, this paper draws from the Westminster documents and Jonathan Edwards' *Christian Affections* to focus on five of the spiritual activities identified in the reformed tradition as key indicators of vital spirituality. These are: God is glorified; people are humbled; the Word is active; the Holy Spirit is at work, and the soul is examined. The paper goes on to ask whether these key indicators would create a meaningful agenda for any conversations WRF might initiate with interested charismatic brothers and sisters.

[1] In his *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith* (Jossey-Bass, 2000) James W Fowler re-introduces the Edwardsian meaning of the term 'affections.' Fowler distinguishes Christian affections from 'the contemporary sense of transient clusters of feelings or labile moods' and clarifies them as 'emotions in the sense of a *deep-going, pervasive, and long-lasting set of fundamental dispositions of the heart* (italics original) (96). They are 'by-products of the will's interaction and commitment to the gracious love of God' (97).

[2] The answer in the *Larger Catechism* adds 'fully' before 'to enjoy him for ever.'

[3] 'As the Mass is for Catholics and the sermon is for Protestants, so the singing of songs for charismatics' (*Selling Worship: How what we sing has changed the Church* by Peter Ward, 2005: 199)

[4] Some eleven years later in his *Keeping in Step with the Spirit* (1984) Packer offers a revised view: 'The power of Christ, not only to forgive sin, but also, by his Spirit, to deliver from enslaving evil is becoming again what it was in the first Christian centuries, a major ingredient in the church's evangelistic message' (25).