

**BOOK REVIEW**  
of  
Jonathan Edwards,  
*Faith Beyond Feelings: Discerning the Heart of True Spirituality,*  
Victor, 2005.

This book is in the Evangel Library,  
and this review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

There are Christian classics that perhaps all of us should read. But the reality is that some Christian classics are long and difficult to read, and perhaps a little dated. Without wanting to discourage people from reading the complete work, some have edited and shortened an original classic with the desire of broadening the influence of the book. While such an effort does have the danger of distorting the original work by perhaps adding bias from the editor, when carefully done it may introduce a classic to those who may otherwise completely miss out on the original. *Faith Beyond Feelings* is an edited (by James M. Houston) and shortened version of the classic by Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections in Three Parts*, first published in 1746 in response to some phenomena that accompanied the Great Awakening. The Yale University Press printing of the original work (Edwards was a graduate of Yale), volume 2 in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, published in 1959, is over 500 pages long. By the way, Yale is still working on additional volumes of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, having published volume 25 in 2006: *Sermons and Discourses, 1743 – 1758*. Fortunately, Edwards wrote his *Works* much more rapidly than what Yale seems to be able to reprint them! *Faith Beyond Feelings* has about 250 pages, so some significant editing has taken place. The book also includes an introduction by Charles Colson who writes that “I deeply admire Edwards, a man generally regarded as the greatest theologian of American history, and described by some as the greatest intellect North America has produced.” The editor, James Houston, writes of Edwards that “Like Augustine and Calvin, he stands as one of the greatest leaders of the Church universal.” Houston continues, “True religion for Edwards was a supernatural gift of God’s Holy Spirit, and will be evidenced in responsive affections. Until man has the presence of the Holy Spirit in his life, all his natural, spiritual desires and activities remain carnal in the Pauline sense that is described in Romans.” In some locations, the Great Awakening had great outpourings of emotions and claims of visions and spiritual blessings that did not stand the test of time nor were they accompanied by “true” religious affections. Since Edwards was a leader in the Great Awakening, and ever the careful observer, he struggled to understand what had happened. The book *Religious Affections* was the result. The book is probably second only to *Freedom of the Will* as Edwards’ most influential book. And since one can hardly turn on the TV set without being confronted with emotional claims of visions and spiritual blessings that seem at least questionable, perhaps giving a little time to what Edwards observed and wrote about may be worth our effort. The book, *Faith Beyond Feelings*, has ten chapters. Chapter 1 is The Affections as Evidence of True Religion. Chapter 2 is False Signs of True Religious Affections. Chapter 3 is How Truly Gracious Affections Are Known. Chapter 4 is The Object and Foundation of Gracious Affections. Chapter 5 is The Formation of Gracious Affections. Chapter 6 is Certainty and Humility in Gracious Affections. Chapter 7 is Gracious Affections Change Us to Be More Christlike. Chapter 8 is Gracious Affections Are Balanced, Yet Dynamic in Growth. Chapter 9 is Gracious Affections Are Intensely Practical. Chapter 10 is The Affections Are the Chief Evidence of a Saving Sincerity in True Religion. The chapter titles fairly well summarize the book. Edwards will not let us get away with a simple profession or claims of spiritual phenomena (and certainly not a recounting of some decision we have made). He wants, and insists that all of us should also require, true religious affections that back up our claims. That makes it a challenging book to read, but also one from which, hopefully, we can gain much.

Edwards begins right away on the first page with things that we would rather not hear, such as the value of trials in our lives. He writes that “trials tend to distinguish between what is true and what is false. . . . These trials, then, are a further benefit to true religion because they not only manifest its truth but they also enhance its genuine beauty and attractiveness. True virtue is loveliest when it is oppressed.” Now isn’t that a wonderful message for us fat and happy Americans! This is on the first page! Further on in chapter 1 Edwards writes “We are nothing if we are not in earnest about our faith, and if our wills and inclinations are not intensely exercised. The religious life contains things too great for us to be lukewarm. True religion is always a dynamic thing. Its power is in the inward exercises of the heart. So true religion is called ‘the power of godliness,’ to distinguish it from those mere external appearances of religion that are just ‘the form of godliness.’ . . . Every true disciple of Christ ‘loves Him above father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, houses and land; yes, even more than his own life.’ True religion intensely exercises the will.” It is easy to see why Edwards was not everyone’s favorite preacher!

In chapter 2 Edwards cautions us that “To condemn people for being enthusiasts and to assume that their affections are only emotional is a great error,” but goes on to write that “It should always be noted that the more excellent something is the more likely it will be imitated. Thus there are more counterfeits of silver and gold than of iron and copper. There are many false diamonds and rubies, but who goes about making counterfeit pebbles? . . . The devil and men’s own deceitful hearts tend to imitate those things that have the highest value. So no graces are more counterfeited than love and humility. For these are the virtues where the beauty of a true Christian is seen most clearly.” In chapter 2 Edwards lists several things that are *not* evidences of true religious affections. A few are as follows: intensity of religious affections, much fluent and fervent talk, exhibition of love, time and effort spent, verbal worship, and self confidence.

Edwards begins chapter 3 by explaining that if truly gracious affections are not known this does not imply that truly gracious affections are absent. “Christians who are living in a low state of grace or have fallen away from God into a dead and worldly condition can never expect to have such signs. It is not agreeable to God’s purpose that they should know their true condition. . . . It is thus God’s purpose that man should obtain assurance in no other way than by the mortification of what is corrupt and by increasing in grace and the exercising of it.” Edwards does not offer any easy path. But then, neither did Jesus!

This is a challenging and demanding read! But it is very well written and has the ring of truth to it.