

Preface

The most crucial question for the human race, and for every individual person, is this: *What are the distinguishing marks of the people who enjoy God's favour – those who are on their way to heaven?* This is just another way of asking: *What is the nature of true religion? What sort of personal religion does God approve of?*

It is hard to give an objective answer to such a controversial question. It is even harder to *write* about it objectively. And it is hardest of all to *read* about it objectively! It will probably hurt many of my readers to find that I have criticised so many religious emotions and experiences in this book. On the other hand, others may be angry about the things I have defended and approved. I have tried to be balanced. It is not easy to support what is good in religious revivals, and at the same time to see and reject what is bad in them. Yet surely we have to do both, if we want Christ's kingdom to prosper.

There is something very mysterious about it, I admit. So much good and so much bad are mixed up in the Church! It is as mysterious as the mixture of so much good and bad in an individual Christian. Still, neither of these mysteries is new. It is no new thing for false religion to flourish at a time of revival, or for hypocrites to appear among true believers. This happened in that great revival in Josiah's time, as we see from Jeremiah 3:10 and 4:3-4. It was the same in the days

The Experience That Counts

of John the Baptist. John aroused all Israel by his preaching, and yet most fell away soon afterwards. John 5:35 – ‘you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light.’ It was the same again when Christ Himself preached. Many admired Christ for a time, but few were faithful to the end. And the same was true again when the apostles preached, as we know from the heresies and divisions that troubled the churches during the apostles’ lifetime.

This mixture of false religion with true has been Satan’s greatest weapon against the cause of Christ. This is why we must learn to distinguish between true and false religion – between emotions and experiences which really come from salvation, and imitations which are outwardly attractive and plausible, but false.

A failure to distinguish between true and false religion produces terrible consequences. For example:

- (i) Many offer to God a false worship which they think is acceptable to Him, but which He rejects.
- (ii) Satan deceives many about the state of their souls. In this way he eternally ruins them. In some cases, Satan deludes people into thinking they are outstandingly holy, when really they are the worst hypocrites.
- (iii) Satan spoils the faith of true believers. He mixes deformities and corruptions into it, and so causes believers to grow cold in their spiritual emotions. He also confuses others with great difficulties and temptations.
- (iv) The outright enemies of Christianity are encouraged, when they see the Church so corrupted and distracted.
- (v) Men commit sin under the illusion that they are serving God. So they sin without restraint.

- (vi) False teaching deceives even the friends of Christianity into doing, without realising it, the work of its enemies. They destroy Christianity far more effectively than outright enemies can do, under the illusion that they are advancing it.
- (vii) Satan divides Christ's people and sets them against each other. Christians quarrel with great heat as if this were spiritual zeal. Christianity degenerates into empty disputes. The quarrelling parties rush off into opposite extremes, until the right path in the middle becomes almost totally neglected.

When Christians see the terrible consequences of false religion passing for true religion, it unsettles their minds. They do not know where to turn or what to think. Many doubt whether there is anything real in Christianity at all. Heresy, unbelief and atheism begin to spread.

For these reasons, it is vital that we should do all we can to understand the nature of true religion. Until we do this, we cannot expect revivals to last long, and we can expect little good from our religious discussions and debates, since we will not even know what we are arguing for!

My plan is to contribute what I can in this book to an understanding of true religion. I aim to show the nature and signs of the Holy Spirit's work in converting sinners. I will also try to show how we can distinguish the Spirit's work from everything which is not a true experience of salvation. If I succeed, I hope this book will help to promote the interests of genuine Christianity.

May God accept the sincerity of my efforts, and may the true followers of the meek and loving Lamb of God accept my offering with open minds and with prayer!

Jonathan Edwards