CHAPTER FOUR
EDWARDS ON THE AFFECTIONS

All spiritual and gracious affections are attended with, and do arise from some apprehension, idea, or sensation of mind, which is in its whole nature different, yea, exceeding different, from all that is or can be in the mind of a natural man; and which the natural man discerns nothing ... conceives of no more than a man without the sense of tasting can conceive of the sweet taste of honey, or a man without the sense of hearing can conceive of the melody of a tune, or a man born blind can have a notion of the beauty of the rainbow.¹

Jonathan Edwards

4.1 Historical Background

Followed by the very ‘sudden and awful death of a young man’ that stirred up all kinds of upheaval,² the Connecticut Valley Revival in America began in the early 1730s due to religious enthusiasm within the Northampton community. Accompanied by a glorious outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Northampton parish in 1734–1735, these series of events led to another great spiritual renewal in 1740–1742. This renewal was partly fostered through the English revivalist George Whitefield who, together with Edwards, was at the center of these eighteenth-century revival activities.³

Edwards wrote A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections during the Awakening in America but, contrary to common perception, the revival was in fact—as Susan O’Brien has argued—a transatlantic phenomenon.⁴ Both sides of the Atlantic were very much aware of the other’s revivalistic activities and this was especially the case among the Calvinist evangelicals who created the “durable chain of correspondence” that built a “community of saints that cut across physical

¹ Religious Affections, WJE, 2:207–208.
² For a historical account of this tale, see Marsden, Life, 150–163.
The friendship between Whitefield and Edwards can be seen as the principal link in this transatlantic network and was established over the course of the seven preaching tours that Whitefield conducted in America.

In addition to Religious Affections, Edwards wrote three other works aimed at interpreting the work of the Spirit of God in New England: A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God (1737), The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God (1741), and Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England (1741). Each of these treatises was a commentary on the revival and attempted to distinguish true piety from the false. The Awakening that rippled throughout New England was complicated by lay preachers, critics of the learned clergy, and by the over-zealous, even bizarre, behavior on the part of alleged converts. These extraordinary manifestations subsequently became the point of contention between the camps of the Old Light and those of the New Light. One of the principal criticisms of the revival, as represented by the Old Light, came from Charles Chauncy (1705–1787), who denounced overt enthusiasm and called for a return to what he described as sane, rational religion. In response to Chauncy, Edwards defended the revival against the Old Light as a divine work. Because of the growing controversy over the nature and signs of the gracious operation of God’s Spirit, Edwards preached a long series of sermons based on 1 Peter 1:8. Some of the core ideas from these sermons gave expressions to the nature of true religion, which later became the foundation for Religious Affections.

At this point, there are some historical parallels between the setting of Religious Affections and Andrew Fuller’s Strictures on Sandemanianism. Just as Religious Affections responded to Chauncy’s reaction to the worst kind of emotionalism, the rejection of affections of the heart in the nature of Sandemanian faith may have had its origin in similar historical circumstances (see 5.1). Haykin reports, “Sandeman does appear to have been responding to the unduly introspective temper of some circles of eighteenth-century Evangelicalism.” As Walter Eversley points out, while in the minds of many Edwards personifies

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5 Ibid., 813.
6 In addition to Religious Affections, Fuller read Faithful Narrative and Some Thoughts on the Revival, see WAF, 2:123; Ryland Jr., The Work of Faith, (1st ed), 371.