



***Martin, Ryan J. Understanding Affections in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards: “The High Exercises of Divine Love.” (T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology, 33) New York: T&T Clark, 2019. x + 281pp. ISBN 978-0-567-69486-7. Paperback. \$39.95 USD.***

In this published form of his doctoral dissertation, Ryan Martin addresses the theme of affections in Jonathan Edwards’s theology. Primarily, he aims to correct some common misunderstandings of Edwards’s “affective psychology” that are present in some interpretations of Edwards’s work.

Martin argues that Edwards does not use the term “affections” as a synonym for “emotions,” as we often use the term today, and as some interpreters have claimed. Nor does Edwards owe his understanding of affective psychology to the philosopher, John Locke. Rather, Edwards’s understanding and use of concepts like affections, passions, will, and soul come from his own Christian theological tradition.

The book begins by surveying an array of sources from authors who have either misunderstood Edwards’s influences and associated him with Locke, or who have misunderstood Edwards’s use of affections by associating them with emotions/feelings in some sense. This sets up Martin’s thorough engagement with Christian sources from the patristic, medieval, Reformation, and Puritan eras. This latter survey demonstrates that Edwards’s language and thought about matters of affective psychology come from this rich Christian tradition, and not from recent philosophical notions. Martin concludes this survey by stating, “most contemporary understandings of emotions have little in common with the portrait of affections and passions” that one sees in the history of Christian thought (88). The tradition has been much less interested in bodily feeling (emotions) and much more interested in “affections” and “passions” understood as movements of the soul or will, “toward or away from rational or spiritual good and evil”(88). That is, affections and passions refer to higher and lower inclinations of the will and understanding, with “religious affections” being inclinations of the soul toward the highest good, namely God himself. These affections are not bodily in nature, though they may affect the body, but are given by the Holy Spirit to the truly regenerate in order to lead them

to love and enjoy God, reflecting that love to the world around them. For Edwards “affections were the soul’s inclinations toward spiritual realities” (195).

Following his historical survey, Martin then examines Edwards’s own writings, in chronological order, to demonstrate both how Edwards understood and used “affections” and related terms, and how his understanding of these concepts remained consistent throughout his life. This section is especially useful to Edwards’s scholars, pastors, and even those new to Edwards’s thought. Martin provides excellent and thorough summary-analyses of all of the major works. Through this, Martin shows just how central the notion of affections is to Edwards’s whole theological system, especially his soteriology. Edwards stressed “gracious affections,” as true signs of the Holy Spirit’s presence and work in a person, to distinguish them from bodily passions or natural affections. The latter may not be evil in themselves, but are often made to serve sinful purposes, and are certainly subject to sinful distortion. They are thus unreliable for life or as indicators of true religious experience. *Gracious affections* are important to understand, as inclinations of the soul toward God and all that God loves, because these are necessary for Christian confidence and living. More than that, humanity needs these things in order to be healed. As Martin states, “grace orders the soul” (202). The soul is disordered by sin and needs to be set right.

Additionally, these new affections/inclinations of the soul are not contrary to reason. Reason itself is renewed by the Spirit, and now works together with these new “high exercises of divine love” in the soul in a harmonious way, overruling all contrary desire. Citing Edwards, Martin highlights this reality, “Grace tends to tranquility, as it mortifies tumultuous desires and passions, subdues the eager and insatiable appetites of the sensual nature and greediness after the vanities of the world” (*WJE* 25:544, p. 202). Martin clarifies this by adding, “saints’ souls are restored, and peaceful affections reign reasonably over the sense passions” (202).

The book concludes with a short section commending Edwards as a source for a more thorough theology of affections. This is needed in general, but also in the realm of Edwards studies, because sufficient understanding of affections in Edwards has been lacking.

The work is extensively researched and well-arranged. Its argument is both convincing and compelling. It uses many technical terms and concepts, and so may be better understood by those with some theological and philosophical training. However, those who seek to engage with Edwards's theology, or who preach on Edwards's' take on these themes, cannot afford to miss this book. Martin has made a genuine and important contribution to the extensive community of scholars and pastors currently studying this great early eighteenth-century pastor-theologian. Given the expansive interest in Edwards's thought, seen in study centers committed to his work in both North America and South Africa, Martin's book is essential reading for understanding the theme of affections, so central to all of Edwards's thought.

Those with academic interests will need to reckon with this work, and not continue to repeat the misunderstanding that Edwards was utilizing a Lockean psychological scheme. And those with pastoral or ministerial interests will need to understand that Edwards is not talking simply about an emotional aspect of Christian faith. Edwards proves to be a first-rate theologian capable of great philosophical sophistication, always subject to scripture and interested in the holiness of God's people and the glory of God throughout all time and history. Those with similar interests will find Edwards, and his faithful interpreter, Ryan Martin, to be an inspiration and guide.

***Jonathan R. Huggins***  
***Berry College, Rome GA US***