

FROM SAD AND MAD TO GLAD: THE PILGRIM'S PASSIONS

When I first became a Christian, I was taught that my spiritual life operated a lot like a train. The *engine* which pulls the train is powered by the historically verifiable facts of Jesus' life, death and resurrection; he embodies the objective promises of God. The *carriage* which follows next represents our faith, responsive to covenantal promise, and dependent on the certain and validated claims of Christ. Last of all comes the *caboose*, which in this model represents our feelings, or emotional life, which must be relegated to last position behind facts and faith, as they are the least trustworthy feature of human experience, and need guidance from higher-order faculties for their true expression. To seek locomotion or momentum for our Christian life in an order other than this is to court disaster. We are sinners because we neglect to value this divinely-ordered sequence, and are prone to give to feelings a place of leadership which they are unable to assume without dethroning Christ. It stands to reason: a caboose cannot pull a train. James Dobson appears to take up this model when he criticises much contemporary psychology: 'Reason is now *dominated* by feelings, rather than the reverse as God intended ... emotions must always be accountable to the faculties of reason and will.'¹ We must of course beware the influence of a therapeutic culture in shaping our understanding of anthropology (as Dobson warns), yet nevertheless ask afresh questions to see if such an attenuated account of emotion is theologically justifiable, or indeed pastorally healthy. Is emotion in the Christian life really so dangerous?

This lecture is addressed both to Christians who are seeking to review the part that emotions play in their daily walk with the Lord, and to pastors as they guide those in their care toward greater human maturity and Christian sanctification. I am no expert in pastoral theology, but I do have thirty years' experience in living as a Christian, so I want to be quite intentional in addressing issues most commonly faced by Christian believers from the perspective of a fellow traveller. I will assume much of the exposition already heard in these presentations, without rehearsing the details again, to try to weave together a pastoral approach to emotions drawing on theological and historical debates. The structure of the talk is quite transparently a tool for us to use in growth towards the fullness of life in Christ. In short, this paper demonstrates a *model of care* within a *theology of hope*, for we are pilgrims with passions and have not yet reached our awaited destination. It is my basic contention that emotions have

¹ James Dobson, *Emotions: Can You Trust Them?* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1980), 10, 11.

great value as maps and resources to help us travel towards the heavenly city, and conversely knowing our destination helps us to prepare our emotions for residence in our new home. As Isaiah says, we are the redeemed of the Lord and one day we shall come to Zion with singing, everlasting joy shall be upon our heads, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away (Isa 51:11). Though life is for us now often saddening or maddening, one day we shall know nothing but gladness forever.

RECOGNISING EMOTIONS AS A CREATED GIVEN

Acknowledging our createdness helps us to recognise that there are features of our lives which we have had no input to determine: our gender, our ethnicity, our place in the course of history, are all beyond our capacity to choose. As the psalmist has reflected, we are fearfully and wonderfully made, for it was God who knit us together in our mother's womb (Ps 139:13-14). Our emotional capacities as human beings are understood by God, for just as a father has compassion for his children, so God knows 'how we were made; he remembers that we are dust' (Ps 103:13-14). Our individual experience as *emotional* creatures is a natural part of our lives as human beings, for the heart (in the language of the Scriptures), where our inner life, emotional states and intellectual capacities cohere, is at the centre of who we were created to be.² God has just such a heart too (Gen 6:6). Consequently, as bearers of the image of God, we reflect to the world something of the qualities of the Creator, who not only deputises us to rule over the creation in his place (Gen 1:26-27), but expects us to exercise dominion representing his own character as Ruler as well. We have great dignity as the image and likeness of God, which in Psalm 8 prompts our extravagant praise.

Therefore, it does us no service to ignore our emotions, to pretend that they are not powerful, to relegate them to an optional extra, or to marginalise them as a leisure pursuit. Some of us choose not to look inside that Pandora's box for fear that, once it is open, we will never be able to fit the emotions back in again. We would rather leave them alone in the hope they will find some equilibrium of their own accord. We fear emotions and their power, but in doing so we take a path which dishonours God. We acquiesce to the view that emotions are more powerful than God, that God is incapable of reshaping them or de-fanging them, or that God cannot experience emotion himself. We may secretly harbour the opinion that having a particular emotion in the first place is a remnant from a pre-sanctified life that we would prefer to keep hidden. Some see

² Matthew A. Elliott, *Faithful Feelings: Rethinking Emotion in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic and Professional, 2006), 83.

strong emotions as a threat to ongoing sanctification.³ Despite any of these default reactions, we can't pretend that there will ever be a Christian, a congregation or a church without powerful emotions, and we must not allow ourselves to hold the view that emotions necessarily get in the way of ministry. The most basic lesson for the believer or the Christian pastor is to recognise that ***emotions are a given*** in human life and Christian experience.⁴

Recognising emotion in every part of the Christian pilgrimage seems to me to be the most healthy and godly course, even when it makes life and ministry messy or less conducive to the streamlined efficiency of modernist programming. It may appear superficially safer and more attractive to approach life's challenges with a kind of *air war*, dealing principally with higher orders of rationality, and thus avoiding the messiness of 'unconscious processes, because once it dips its foot in that dark and bottomless current, all hope of regularity and predictability is gone,⁵ but this is a strategy of easy yet short-lived progress. The danger of inhibiting or denying emotion can be to create an environment in which rationalism rules. Less emotion and more rationality however does not make us more moral.⁶ Nor can it be said of the New Testament, or of the Old for that matter, that the goal of our pilgrimage is unalloyed rationality. It is however ultimately more productive to deal with emotions in terms of a *ground war*, where territory is won slowly and steadily, though significant energy and human resources must be expended to feel and frame them in this kind of combat. If we have learned anything from the postmodern priority of the local over the universal, it is surely an openness to recognise that an individual's emotions are the *sine qua non* of life, as a human being and as a Christian, and that their untidy reality cannot be avoided. Augustine defends the place of emotions in the life of the Christian:

Among us Christians ... the citizens of the Holy City of God, as they live by God's standards in the pilgrimage of this present life, feel fear and desire, pain and gladness in

³ Robert C. Roberts, *Spirituality and Human Emotion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 14.

⁴ Because of the pastoral scope of this paper, I use the language of emotion, passion and feeling more or less as equivalents, though philosophically they may be distinguished by appeal to the presence of physical sensation, or through the degree of self-awareness which they assume. See Robert C. Roberts, 'Feeling One's Emotions and Knowing Oneself', *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 77/2-3 (1995): 319-338. It should also be recognised that the word *emotion* is itself generated by the development within the nineteenth century of psychology as a science: Thomas Dixon, 'Theology, Anti-Theology and Atheology: From Christian Passions to Secular Emotions', *Modern Theology* 15/3 (1999): 297-330, especially 301-305.

⁵ David Brooks, *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement* (New York: Random House, 2011), 227.

⁶ The point is often made that psychopaths display no emotion but are overly rational in planning or recounting their crimes.

conformity with the holy Scriptures and sound doctrine; and because their love is right, all these feelings are right in them.⁷

Many congregational leaders fear the power of emotions and their destabilising potential. I recently met an acquaintance in Melbourne who told me that he wanted to be a church-planter but not one who had responsibility for pastoral tasks. Perhaps formal ministry training has not adequately empowered pastors to face emotions squarely, or hasn't provided them with the skills to draw the sting from emotional crises. Besides, those in pastoral ministry are all too frequently activists, for whom the tedious work of analysing, reframing, and tending emotions is too time-consuming. We may neither prize nor cultivate the gift of pastoral care at all. In the schema for ministry espoused at Mars Hill Seattle, for example, Mark Driscoll suggests that we need more *kings* to set agendas and develop strategies, and more *prophets* or visionary leaders to make the Word of God known.⁸ He identifies *priests* as pastoral carers, whose task it is to exercise compassion, encourage reconciliation after disagreement and promote grace-centred living.

It is however unfortunate that the loaded term 'priest' as a synonym for those engaged in personal ministry is used by Driscoll, for amongst Protestant hearers who are uncomfortable with the term it has the potential to create antipathy towards the cultivation of this gift-mix. He removes this term from its Old Testament context where the priest was not the counsellor but the teacher of the law. Ezra *the priest* didn't comfort his audience but on one particular occasion through his preaching made them cry (Neh 8:9)! Likewise, the language of priest inadequately serves our pastoral responsibility, for we are not able to imitate Christ as our Great High Priest when he makes a 'sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people (Heb 2:17), nor are we asked to copy him because he can 'sympathise with our weaknesses' (Heb 4:15). In the book of Hebrews, the only fitting response to Christ as High Priest is to approach the throne of grace with boldness. We rightly want to recruit more *kings* and *prophets* for the reevangelisation of the West, but we should recognise that one of them might be sufficient in a congregation, whereas every congregation needs dozens of soul-physicians, employed or not, whether we use the term *priest* or not.

REINTERPRETING EMOTIONS AS A CHRISTIAN GIFT

⁷ Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. H. Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), XIV/9.

⁸ Mark Driscoll, *On Church Leadership* (A Book You'll Actually Read; Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 66-68.

Once we have determined to engage with our own emotions or the emotions of members of our congregation, we must take another step, for merely to acknowledge the *presence* of powerful, obscure, or complex feelings does not require acknowledgement of their *value*. It is easy to think of emotions as a problem to be solved or dissolved through the use of higher reason, and so fundamentally to denigrate their intrusion into our lives. I want to suggest instead that ***emotions are a gift to be received*** and not essentially a problem to be solved. Though warped by sin, they are nevertheless a creation good. Emotions are an involuntary, though not morally neutral, reaction to some stimulus, either internal or external, and only sometimes leading to physical affect.⁹ Of course sometimes particular emotional experiences may not be the kind of gift I want, and we might prefer to remove them from our life, though Paul cautions us against hasty excision. In his estimation even painful experience can be thought of as a gift when consecrated to the cause of Christ: 'He has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well' (Phil 1:29). John Piper recently described his own experience of cancer in terms of a gift not to be wasted.¹⁰

While it would be easy to accept the presence of emotions in our lives as Christians as necessary, it does not then necessarily follow that they are noble or valuable. In this paper, I do not follow the faculty psychology espoused by some seventeenth century Puritan or Roman Catholic writers, which gave priority to the mind over will and emotions, the emotions being the least praiseworthy or noble aspect of the human constitution. It assumed that there can be nothing rational about emotions, but rather their power to distract from Christian obedience or to undermine godly decision-making is so great that they need both the guardian of the mind and the gaoler of the will to keep them in check. Following recent consideration of the emotions amongst Christian philosophers and psychologists, I rather adopt a less hierarchically defined cognitive understanding of human anthropology, which sees the role of emotions as integrally related to the mind and the will; and so, with the mind and the will, emotions provide us with opportunities to engage in a more nuanced and positive way with our context, relationships or environment.¹¹ The Scriptures simply do

⁹ See D. J. Atkinson, 'Emotion', in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (eds. D. J. Atkinson and D. H. Field; Leicester: IVP, 1995). Roberts also holds emotions to be prompted by 'something that happens to us.' Robert C. Roberts, 'Emotions among the Virtues of the Christian Life', *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 20/1 (1992): 37-6843.

¹⁰ See <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/taste-see-articles/dont-waste-your-cancer>.

¹¹ Elliott demonstrates the distinctions between non-cognitive and cognitive theories of emotion, and argues that cognitive theories are presently gaining traction amongst psychologists and philosophers. Cognitive theories make 'thought, appraisal and belief central elements in emotion.' See Elliott, *Faithful Feelings*, 31.

not make hermetically sealed distinctions between our responsibility to think and our capacity to emote. Elliott suggests that:

Emotion is not an illogical reflex, unreliable and fickle. Emotions cut through all our talk, all our spin, and take us right to the truth of the matter. That is what God created emotions to do, and that is why ... God so freely commands emotions all through the Bible.¹²

The Lord Jesus can command love (John 13:34). Paul ends the self-consciously *doctrinal* section of Romans with paeans of *praise* to God's wisdom (Rom 11:33-36), and begins the *paranaetic* passages with an appeal to transformed *minds* (Rom 12:1-2). Christian ministry involves *comforting* cheek by jowl with *catechising* (2 Cor 1). The Scriptures through the medium of words do engage us rationally, but simultaneously can engage us volitionally and emotionally, dependent on the eloquence of the particular text at hand.¹³

Indeed, emotions and their positive place in human experience and Scriptural testimony are one of the distinctive values with which Christianity stared down rival philosophies in the ancient world, buying into a debate which predated the rise of the Christian movement between Aristotle's and Plato's views of the role of cognition in appraising emotion. Matthew Elliott is surely right to assert that 'The idea of extirpating the emotions is an idea unknown in the New Testament ... The Stoic would not accept or understand either Jesus' or Paul's passionate commitment to the Gospel, to others, or their emotional language. Where the Stoic idea of happiness was a life free from emotion, Paul's joy was an emotional celebration of God and his work of sharing the Gospel.'¹⁴ Early Christians provided an alternative to magic or immorality by appealing to emotions as a motivator and ethical construct.¹⁵ During the Enlightenment period, Descartes, in ways similar to Plato, presented a case for emotions as a sphere disconnected from rationality. In this non-cognitive framework, emotions are merely physical sensations, sometimes known as passions, which represent animal spirits.

Roberts defines emotions as 'concern-based construals,' that is a unified complex of propositional content and felt states: Robert C. Roberts, 'What an Emotion is: A Sketch', *The Philosophical Review* 97/2 (1988): 183-209, especially 183-184. Such construals, or ways of seeing things, are shaped by the individual's social significance, relational matrix, character, and Christian conviction. See Roberts, 'Feeling One's Emotions,' 326.

¹² Matthew A. Elliott, *Feel: The Power of Listening to Your Heart* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 2008), 52.

¹³ For the value of Scriptures in forming Christian emotions, see Robert C. Roberts, 'Emotions as Access to Religious Truths', *Faith and Philosophy* 9/1 (1992): 83-94, especially 90.

¹⁴ Elliott, *Faithful Feelings*, , 241.

¹⁵ Elliott, *Faithful Feelings*, 236-268.

By way of contrast, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) and his New Light colleagues in the North American Great Awakening rejected such dichotomising.¹⁶ For Edwards emotions, alongside reason, are constitutive of all human flourishing, and furthermore are not apportioned along gender lines.¹⁷ Edwards provides us with perhaps the most potent theological defence of the cognitive theory of emotions in the modern era. One of his greatest responsibilities in the period of the revivals was to interpret Christian experience both for the revived and for the detractors of the awakening. Edwards takes a mediating position in which emotion is regarded as essential to true religion, so long as emotion is proportionally responsive to an object which has God's blessing, or is God himself.¹⁸ The enthusiasm of the revivals was not necessarily an experience generated by human instability. Rational opposition to enthusiasm did not necessarily represent God's mind. Edwards reacted to the received model of faculty psychology espoused by some of his Puritan forebears, and instead bundled all the constituent parts of the regenerate believer together, and used the label 'affections' to describe their cumulative impact, suggesting that passions belong with our volition and with our understanding to comprise the human heart.¹⁹ He wrote early in his ministry: 'How the Scriptures are ignorant of the philosophic distinction of the understanding and the will, and how the sense of the heart is there called knowledge and understanding.'²⁰ Edwards wrote to praise the place of emotion in the human constitution:

We should realize, to our shame before God, that we are not more affected with the great things of faith. It appears from what we have said that this arises from our having so little true religion ... When it comes to their worldly interests, their outward delights, their honor and reputation, and their natural relations, they have warm affection and ardent zeal ... They get deeply depressed at worldly losses, and highly excited at worldly successes. But how insensible and unmoved are most men about the great things of another world! ... Here their love is cold, their desire languid, their zeal low, and their gratitude small. How can they sit and hear for the infinite height, depth, length, and

¹⁶ The recent rediscovery of cognitive factors in construal of emotional life leads us back to eighteenth century insights: Dixon, 'From Christian Passions to Secular Emotions,' 311. Edwards is sometimes assumed to create a wedge between passions and emotions, the former belonging to our animal spirits, and the latter belonging to our sanctified self, or even occasionally Edwards is said to espouse a sharp division between body and soul. While at the beginning of the *Religious Affections* he makes some philosophical distinctions to aid clarity, his intent throughout is to defend the unity of the human person against his detractors who splice them up. Extreme passions are dangerous in as far they render the Christian passive, not because they represent an intrusion of a lower self into the higher faculties. See Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections* (The Works of Jonathan Edwards 2. Edited by John E. Smith; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969), 98.

¹⁷ Marilyn J. Westerkamp, *Women and Religion in Early America, 1600-1850: The Puritan and Evangelical Traditions* (Christianity and Society in the Modern World; London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 135.

¹⁸ Jamie Dow, *Engaging Emotions: The Need for Emotions in the Church* (The Grove Renewal Series; Cambridge: Grove Books, 2005), 10, 22.

¹⁹ Brad Walton, *Jonathan Edwards, Religious Affections and the Puritan Analysis of True Piety, Spiritual Sensation and Heart Religion* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 220.

²⁰ Jonathan Edwards, 'The Mind', in *Scientific and Philosophical Writings* (The Works of Jonathan Edwards 6; ed. W. E. Anderson; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), 389.

breadth of the love of God in Christ Jesus ... and yet be so insensible and regardless! Can we suppose that the wise Creator implanted such a faculty of affections to be occupied in this way?²¹

Affections represent the deepest part of a person. All of me is drawn towards God or is repelled from God. All of me is impacted by sin, including mind, will and feelings, and all of me needs rescue.²² Edwards's great work *Concerning the Religious Affections* is not simply a handbook on healthy church life but rather a philosophical tool of analysis to determine the roles played by reason, will, emotions and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of the revived. As a work of pastoral theology, it is both dense and daring. He wants to assert that emotions interact with our will and mind, and are not simply dangerous and independent decoys seducing us from the path of truth. In so doing he combines the best of Puritan spiritual insight with revivalist devotion.²³ He asserts that 'True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections ... That religion which God requires, and will accept, does not consist in weak, dull and lifeless wouldings, raising us but a little above a state of indifference.'²⁴ Affections are an expected part, a given, of Christian experience, which have great value in the life of the saint.

If emotions are essential to the nature of affective and true religion, and are to be experienced as a gift from God, like any gift they might involve some *unpacking*. The twelve certain signs and the twelve not certain signs of *Religious Affections* are, for example, an aid to the interpretation of experience. This process of reinterpreting emotions may only be achieved slowly because some default reactions are deeply engrained into our patterns of behaviour, which are themselves frequently sinful.²⁵ Emotions are subject to the effects of the race's fall from grace into sin, along with reason and volition, and are not easy to isolate and unknot. Some Christians may alternatively have such a positive view of emotions and their therapeutic role that no expectation of reinterpretation or provisionality is ever entertained. It may be difficult to reinterpret or retrain emotions because we assign the gift-like quality of *positive* experiences or *pleasurable* emotions to our own discipline, luck, or breeding. In both instances, new patterns of response must be encouraged to demonstrate the *reality* along with the *contingency* of our emotional life. Emotions are something we must learn,

²¹ Edwards, *WJE* 2: 27.

²² Mark R. Talbot, 'Godly Emotions (Religious Affections)', in *A God Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* (eds. J. Piper and J. Taylor; Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 231, note 26.

²³ Bruce Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition: Between the Conversions of Wesley and Wilberforce* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 237.

²⁴ Edwards, *WJE* 2: 95, 99.

²⁵ Dow, *Engaging Emotions*, 19.

unlearn, or relearn, and this in itself reflects on their cognitive connections.²⁶ To agree with Edwards's model of affections is to provide space for their malleability and reconstruction. For Edwards, the joy which anchors our experience of Christian discipleship, appealing to 1 Peter 1:8, is itself 'a prelibation of the joy of heaven, that raised their minds to a degree of heavenly blessedness.'²⁷ The emotion of joy, then, can be seen as a gift of grace generated from our glorious future inheritance, and consequently capable of animating our pilgrim path and encouraging us in a theology of hope.

The *gift of emotions* runs in parallel with the *gift of pastoral friendships*, which help us in our bleak moments to achieve this task of reinterpretation (Prov 17:17, 18:24). It may be the friend's or pastor's task to give perspective on a trial or a positive experience. A reminder that other emotions have been transitory, or have required nurture, are health-producing words from a trusted adviser. At other moments, a pastor may have to help a friend facing debilitating crisis by intervening on their behalf to restore some order or balance. Perhaps at other times the mentor says nothing, in order to show that he or she is not afraid of the power that a particular emotion can unleash. *Timely words* are of the essence of wisdom, and are tools to reframe the concern. Gifts need to be unwrapped. This can be accomplished not just by individual carers, but by corporate ritualised moments of leverage as well:

[c]ulture also ... educates the emotions. It consists of narratives, holidays, symbols, and works of art that contain implicit and often unnoticed messages about how to feel, how to respond, how to divine meaning.²⁸

Some emotions do indeed have physiological causes. Neural misfiring has been identified as the cause of some types of depression, which medications can treat. Biochemical aspects of mood disorder must be recognised alongside cognitive contributors, which together constitute treatment guidelines for medical practitioners. A godly response to depressive illness is not merely to encourage positive thinking, or to remind a friend that God disciplines those whom he loves. Nor is it necessarily helpful, as one trainee of mine once did, to

²⁶ A recent development within psychology is known as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which recognises the difficulties of recognising and changing the patterns of emotional response in the immediate context. However, in the medium term this therapy encourages the reinterpretation of unpleasant emotions in line with the value system of the person seeking change and driven by concerted effort to create new patterns. This approach seems to offer a therapeutic structure in parallel with the pastoral and theological framework offered in this paper for consideration. For a popular exposition of this modification of cognitive-behavioural therapy, See Russ Harris, *The Happiness Trap: Stop Struggling, Start Living* (Wollombi: Exisle Publishing, 2007). Conversely, if we were to understand emotions as merely wild and purely physiological reflexes, we would be unlikely ever to domesticate them, even if we saw value in taming them.

²⁷ Edwards, *WJE* 2: 95.

²⁸ Brooks, *The Social Animal*, 149.

set before someone suffering from depression a set of tasks for the week ahead to restore routine and therefore healthy social functioning, without first sitting with his friend to learn to grieve with those who grieve, and to understand the contours of the sadness. Pastors who once were engineers can be prone to this shortcut. Pastors who were once philosophers can make the mistake of rationalising the pain away. Melancholy, as the great Puritan physicians of the soul would describe it, is a complicated ailment to diagnose and to treat. But despite these caveats, during my own limited experiences of depression, friends served me well by helping me to reflect upon my environment, my age and stage, and emotional blind-spots which otherwise may have remained in the dark. With counselling, I was able to learn through the painful experience and allow God to recreate me a little and to be used by him a little more in listening to those who are granted similar afflictions.

Emotions are a gift, so that we might engage more authentically or more comprehensively with the reality in which we live, and to which they are responses. Emotions don't always adequately reflect or convey that reality, of course. Like the human conscience, they are an expression of the Creator's design which may nevertheless require nurture (Rom 2:14-16), and they too must be educated by divinely revealed will. Retraining emotions is a complicated task in which we attempt to change the course of an affective river which has eroded a path through a mental terrain over a long period of time. The river might run through several generations before we are shaped by its course, as is suggested by the study of epigenetics. Plotting a new course may be painful and require much input to achieve, though recent studies in neuro-plasticity reflect both the impediments and the possibilities of personal transformation. Being open to the task of retraining emotions has the further helpful concomitant that we disconnect emotion from assurance of salvation, which when coupled too closely leads to pastoral disaster.

Taking the emotional life seriously is an opportunity to receive the gift of spiritual growth. Many psalms begin with lament but end with praise, as does the Psalter as a whole, and correspondingly the Christian pilgrim must learn to handle his or her emotions so that the experiences which confront us, and the emotional reactions which are produced, ultimately contribute towards a safe arrival at our spiritual destination. As the psalmist says, 'Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning' (Ps 30:5). We often make the mistake to assume that emotions must be our master on the journey, giving marching orders and like the sergeant-major brooking no response, but we should not remain passive before

them upon their arrival, nor smitten by them in their presence. They are not God. They are however great servants, helping us to come to terms with our environment and providing opportunity for recalibration of life on the road.²⁹ As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his fiancée, Maria von Wedemeyer, while incarcerated in the Gestapo prison on Prinz-Albrecht-Straße:

Stifter once put it very beautifully: "Pain is the holiest angel, who reveals treasures that would otherwise have remained hidden in the depths for ever. People have become greater through it than through all the world's joys." It is so, as I keep telling myself in my present predicament: the pain of deprivation, which is often physically perceptible, must exist, and we should not and need not argue it away. But it has to be overcome anew every time, so there is an even holier angel than pain, and that is joy in God.³⁰

Bonhoeffer's experience of confinement opened him up to explore the passions of the pilgrim with new insight. His own impending end was part of a bigger divine reality. He learnt to be brutally honest with the givens of his situation, to nurture his reactions within them, and ultimately to dedicate them to God. Hope was cultivated in the midst of horror. His emotional life challenges ours. He learnt to interpret his turbid experience in the clear light of divine reality:

Who am I?

Who am I? They often tell me
I step out from my cell
calm and cheerful and poised,
like a squire from his manor.

Who am I? They often tell me
I speak with my guards
freely, friendly and clear,
as though I were the one in charge.

Who am I? They also tell me
I bear days of calamity
serenely, smiling and proud,
like one accustomed to victory.

Am I really what others say of me?
Or am I only what I know of myself?
restless, yearning, sick, like a caged bird,
struggling for life breath, as if I were being strangled,
starving for colours, for flowers, for birdsong,
thirsting for kind words, human closeness,
shaking with rage at power lust and pettiest insult,
tossed about, waiting for great things to happen,
helplessly fearing for friends so far away,
too tired and empty to pray, to think, to work,
weary and ready to take my leave of it all?

Who am I? This one or the other?
Am I this one today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? Before others a hypocrite,
and in my own eyes a pitiful, whimpering weakling?

²⁹ Talbot, 'Godly Emotions,' 244.

³⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Maria von Wedemeyer, 'Letter, 21 November 1943', in *Love Letters from Cell 92* (eds. R.-A. von Bismarck and U. Kabitz; trans. J. Brownjohn; London: Harper Collins, 1994), 96.

Or is what remains in me like a defeated army,
Fleeing in disarray from victory already won?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest me; O God, I am thine!³¹

Emotions are an integral part of being human, and necessary to Christian identity as we turn our experiences in this world towards the merciful embrace of God, both now and forever. It is to him that we must ultimately render an account for the way we have appropriated his generosity.

RELATING EMOTIONS TO THE GLORIOUS GIVER

Dealing with emotions is a profoundly theological enterprise, for if they are a gift, we find ourselves *answerable to their Giver* for their exercise.³² Emotions are not just theological in the way some Puritans might have conceived them: an opportunity to reconcile in human experience dilemmas (for example election and human freedom), which were proving too difficult to reconcile using traditional rational and systematic categories. More profoundly, we are stewards *coram deo* of our emotional life (just as we are stewards of our financial and material life), and we are participants in the life of God, Father, Son and Spirit, whose own emotional life we encounter and whose resources we share. Being the body of Christ, the church shares all the fullness of God (Eph 1:23) and is central to God's purposes in the world. As Roberts points out, '... there is a necessary connection between the Christian emotions and the Christian story.'³³ We are given *theological permission* to enjoy an emotional connection to God, when we presume human rationality alone is not the bearer of the divine. We are also given a *theological warning* not to expect absorption into the divine, for the mystical must not equal the emotional: there will eternally be a glassy sea between the worshippers and the Lamb (Rev 4:6). Extravagant worship involves serving our neighbour, but no less waving palm branches in adoration (Rev 7:9-12). Life's meaning does not consist in the indulgent pursuit of emotion for emotion's sake. Our emotional life must be given back to God the Giver, as indeed all our gifts should be. He is to be praised as the Giver of all good things: Every perfect gift is from above (Js 1:17).

I have to be honest. All too often my duty towards God displaces my free and emotion-rich devotion to him. I prefer patterns of obedience which make me

³¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'Who Am I?', in *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 8; ed. J. W. De Gruchy; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 459-460.

³² Brian S. Borgman, *Feelings and Faith: Cultivating Godly Emotions in the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009), 25.

³³ Roberts, *Spirituality and Human Emotion*, 21, 25.

feel safe, even when they displace the adventure of daily trust in God's guiding hand and surprising provision. Walking in the freedom which Christ brings takes energy and emotional engagement which is easy to divert or invest elsewhere. I can offer repeated sacrifice but my heart is far from him. Of course this is a universal human dilemma spoken of by Amos as well as Jesus. The modernist philosophy of Kant (refracted through nineteenth-century Victorian morality) may even encourage us along this path, by which we are encouraged to pursue a deontological ethic that gives an account of human flourishing in terms of *duties for God* rather than a *vision of God* towards which we are moving. A stiff upper lip and 'doing what we must' wrings emotional vibrancy from our experience. As Calvin so succinctly warns:

Now he who merely performs all the duties of love does not fulfill them, even though he overlooks none; but he, rather, fulfills them who does this from a sincere feeling of love. For it can happen that one who indeed discharges to the full all his obligations as far as outward duties are concerned is still all the while far away from the true way of discharging them.³⁴

At another level, recognising the divinely instituted role that emotions play in our experience, and not categorising them in some Darwinian fashion as merely physical sensations which are adaptive to our survival needs,³⁵ introduces an ethical imperative which encourages us all the more to fashion them in godly paths. Rather than excusing emotions, we educate them, and put ourselves in places where they will be seconded by virtues, where *moral muscle memory* is developed.³⁶ They ought to motivate us towards the good and not the base. Ethical decision-making ought not to be reduced to laws to be obeyed, but involve the character of the agent as well. Recent ethical inquiry has again seen the need to draw attention to *human moral formation* in order to complement the categories of either *deontological* or duty-based ethical deliberation, or *consequentialist* and utilitarian positions which have been particularly suited to Enlightenment foundations.³⁷ Virtue theory is making a comeback, for discussion of liminal ethical dilemmas is seen as reductionist and dissatisfying without giving an account of the moral life and the transformed character of the agent facing

³⁴ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. F. L. Battles (Library of Christian Classics vols 21-22; McNeill ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), III/7/vii. According to Walton, Calvin can also use the language of the *heart* to represent the entire soul, 'in which reason, will and emotions were all simultaneously operative.' See Walton, *Jonathan Edwards, Religious Affections and Puritan Analysis*, 177.

³⁵ Elliott, *Faithful Feelings*, 21-22.

³⁶ Brooks, *The Social Animal*, 290.

³⁷ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue? A Study in Moral Theology* (3rd ed.; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

such dilemmas.³⁸ To aspire to transformation however requires a vision of what we ought to be. Perhaps connecting our emotions to theological and ethical categories can do more than we imagine to lead us towards God. C. S. Lewis is an advocate for working to embolden our desires in order to steer us along the pilgrim way:

If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.³⁹

We could see ourselves as passive victims before the unassailable power of emotions, which leaves us with the cultural assumption that the only course of action is to emote. A therapeutic worldview would encourage their expression. On the other hand, we could agitate to make sure that emotions play an increasingly impotent role in our experience, in which case our pastoral aim is unquestionably self-denial, of either repressive or suppressive variety. In neither instance do we accept any responsibility for moral evaluation or education. If on the other hand emotions are unavoidable, valuable, and malleable, then in our own life we have to model a new way of being emotional in a culture where emotion is prized but opportunities for taking a path of expression different from the majority culture are limited. They are experienced as a function of event, perception, belief and biochemistry, but can provide a *provisional and instantaneous insight* into relational dilemmas, which may nevertheless in time give way to other more adequate interpretations. Emotions may not be *infallible* guides, but they can nevertheless function as *alarms* or *permissions* to orient us to the reality that we inhabit, whether by choice or by imposition, and to ‘motivate appropriate reactions to a wide variety of circumstances.’⁴⁰ They have a veridical element.⁴¹ According to Roberts’s understanding of the Christian vision: ‘if the Christian propositions are true ... emotions are the way in which that truth is perceived, and thus a crucial aspect of the highest quality knowledge of the propositions.’⁴²

³⁸ Phil C. Zylla, *Virtue as Consent to Being: A Pastoral-Theological Perspective on Jonathan Edwards's Construct of Virtue* (McMaster Ministry Studies Series; Eugene: Pickwick, 2011), 2.

³⁹ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory, and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 3-4.

⁴⁰ Graeme M. Griffin, ‘Emotion’, in *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (eds. J. F. Childress and J. Macquarrie; London: SCM, 1986), 190.

⁴¹ Roberts, ‘Emotions among the Virtues of the Christian Life,’ , especially 40. This is not to suggest however that any claim to access truth through emotions can be allowed to stand without further critique or contextualising.

The Apostle similarly speaks of the ‘eyes of your heart [being] enlightened’ (Eph 1:18).

Emotions are a given, which we do well to acknowledge, even if the sensation is potentially destabilising, for without owning them, they too easily own us, whether in conscious or subconscious ways. If humans are a bundle of mind, will and emotion, and we are able to recognise the place of each in our lives as part of our creatureliness, indeed as a gift from a Giver, then we will not resent our emotions, but rather expect that they will provide us as Christians with some useful orientation towards honouring God with all that we are. They can be like an *immune system*, helping us to identify or to fight off invading physical or spiritual threats. They can be like *boundary-riders*, helping us to defend the territory of our dignity as made in God’s image. They need to be trained for the task for which God has created them, but this is no less true of our intellect or our volition. Emotions may appear outside of our immediate voluntary control, but they are not ultimately impervious to cooperation with mind and will.⁴³ Indeed, an account of human feeling which is nuanced in this way could actually function as an evangelistic starting-point.

Thoughtful expression together with constrained freedom is the most desirable outcome. I want to create a church culture in which there is safety to be honest about our feelings, with encouragement to express a wide range of emotions in ordered ways in the regular meeting of Christians. There needs to be regular opportunities for emotional release, both in public and private settings, so that it feels normal without being required. The conversations, prayers, sermons, and liturgical leadership of a minister model powerfully and regularly our own attitudes. Interestingly, the generation who followed Edwards in church leadership in New England (known as the New Divinity) believed that the best mechanism for catechism in things rational came through private reading, but it was the task of the public exposition of the Scriptures to inspire passions and develop emotions! Just like a coach of a sporting team, the leader of the emotional community has to work out how to get the most out of each player, when to push and when to let off, what exercises to assign and how to give tips for game-day. A great measure of wisdom is required to produce an emotionally functioning, winning fellowship.

⁴² Roberts, ‘Emotions as Access to Religious Truths,’ 90.

⁴³ Dow, *Engaging Emotions*, 12.

I want to put forward this simple model for Christian living as a distillation of larger theological and philosophical themes, a model which has served me well as a pilgrim with passions. At its heart, it sets before us the challenge to see our Christian perseverance not merely as a fight in which we beat our bodies, or a race in which we set our mind simply on the unchanging heavenly prize, but to broaden our expectation of growth in *emotional* maturity while we travel the course towards the City of God: we must learn to rejoice for it is a foretaste of glory. Being transformed from one degree of glory into another, being conformed to the image of Christ, is not achieved without being emotionally reformed according to the arts of affective equilibrium. The Christian life is *spiritually* dynamic, but the *emotional* dynamism of the journey is no less to be prized. We should not approach our emotions with disdain, but nevertheless not leave them where we found them. We want to be real when we feel sad or mad, and then to coach these very feelings towards the ultimate destination of glad in the City of God. Caring for emotions, whether ours or others', is a theological opportunity to align our lives afresh with what it means to be citizens of the commonwealth of heaven, even if the best illustration of the means of transport for the journey is not a train with an emotional caboose in the last place.

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