

# Feelings, Emotions and Christian Truth

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We are living in a very interesting time in the history of the Christian Church. While the teaching and preaching of biblical doctrinal truth should be, according to Scripture, our primary emphasis, human feelings and spiritual experience has assumed center stage. Many modern Christians seek a church that provides a positive experience rather than one that stands for doctrinal truth. Preachers today in order to appeal to these "modern" Christians, offer principles for experiencing the Christian life rather than the doctrinal presentation of sin and grace. Worship has become an expression of how we feel about God rather than a response to what God has done for us. Jesus Christ is no longer primarily the suffering sacrifice for sin, but rather an example for living. He is the one who gives meaning to life. It is not strange that movements that ignore doctrinal distinctives and promote unity on the basis of "we all love Jesus" have widely captured the imagination of modern evangelicals.

This past April, a gathering called *The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals*, made up of leaders and theologians from a wide range of Protestantism met in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The purpose of the gathering was to assess these present conditions within Evangelicalism and to call the church back to the truths of the Reformation. (1) This is a positive development. Let us pray that it produces positive results. The present conditions within evangelical Christianity have not only created doctrinal chaos but have also put into jeopardy the eternal salvation of many.

The question is: **How do we confront an experience-driven, feeling-based Christianity?**

## THE THEOLOGICAL PENDULUM

Some years ago I heard a Charismatic Bible teacher give a reason for promoting and teaching an over-emphasis upon spiritual authority and submission in the church by stating, "If the theological pendulum is way over on the left, you must push it way over to the right in order to eventually get it into the middle."

As you assess the history of Protestant Christianity since the Reformation, this seems to have been the guiding principle. There have been numerous movements and counter-movements. If the church is leaning too heavily in one direction, the solution has been to emphasize the opposite extreme. The answer, for example, to what was perceived as post-Reformation dead dogmatism was German pietism and mysticism. Nineteenth century liberal theology, which elevated human reason, was countered by Fundamentalist theology. As Fundamentalist theology alienated the church from modern society, culture-embracing neoEvangelicalism arose in the 1940's.

More often than not, this pendulum principle has not led to balance but rather to alienation. Those on one side of the issue are usually not willing to embrace the alternative emphasis in order to produce balance. Their position often hardens in

response to the alternative, creating a deeper division.

The present emphasis within the church upon feelings and experience is also a pendulum-pushing reaction against what some have perceived to be a doctrinally-correct, spiritually-dead Christianity. As a former active participant in the Charismatic Movement, I have heard much from those who assess mainline Protestantism as "spiritually dead." Perhaps by outward appearance they are right, but what they embraced as an alternative was "dead" wrong. Experience is not an alternative to doctrine. You dare not say, "I do not need doctrine. I have the Holy Ghost." The question is: Without doctrine, how do you know you have the Holy Ghost? Attempting to create unity among believers around the notion that "we all love Jesus" is to expose the church to all sorts of distortions and deceptions.

How should those of us concerned with preserving the vital emphasis upon objective, doctrinal theology confront the feeling and experience emphasis within evangelical Christianity? Should we now promote sound doctrine and theology as an *alternative* to experience and feelings?

Should we push the pendulum to the other side and create a situation in which one group of Christians claims to have sound theology while another group of Christians claims life-changing experience? Would this be beneficial? Must it be an either/or situation?

Dr. Mike Horton of *Christians United For Reformation* accurately assessed the dilemma by stating:

*The divorce between doctrine and piety, the mind and the heart, characteristic of both orthodox Reformation folk today on one side and pietists and charismatics on the other, is a course for disaster, not for either reformation or revival.(2)*

## **DEALING WITH FEELING**

I believe that we must recognize the legitimate role of feelings and experience in the Christian life. Those who attend churches which offer a feel-good brand of Christianity are not wrong in doing so. Can we blame people who come to the church seeking the experience of love, joy, peace, hope, and contentment in the midst of a world of confusion? Are we willing to acknowledge that perhaps in our zeal to be doctrinally correct we have ignored or even put down feelings and emotions? If visitors who are seeking a life-affecting experience with God come to our churches and observe that the people sitting in the pews express no different attitudes and emotions than the people in the world and that their worship of God is devoid of any feelings or emotions, can we blame them for going elsewhere?

There is nothing wrong with Christians desiring feelings, emotions, and experience. In fact, the lack of any experience is in itself an experience. The lack of feeling is a feeling. The lack of emotion is an emotion. Any cursory reading of the New Testament

demonstrates that love, joy, peace, hope, contentment are to be the Christian's experience, feeling, and emotion.

Yet, that same reading of the New Testament will also demonstrate that feelings and emotions are an **effect** and not a **cause**. All of the imperatives or commands of Scripture are based upon the indicatives, or the doctrinal statements of what God has done for us. In other words, the subjective feelings and emotions commanded in the Word of God *must be* the result of embracing in faith the objective doctrinal facts of what God has done in Christ Jesus. Feelings and emotions that arise because of a group dynamic involving lively music and expressive demonstrations are no different than the feelings and emotions that arise at a rock concert. They are not the fruit of the Spirit.

For example:

I know that my sins are forgiven because the Bible says that Jesus Christ took upon himself my sins and suffered the just penalty for those sins. My sins are forgiven because the blood of Christ has been shed. My faith rests upon the objective truth taught in the Word of God. As a result of believing and confessing that my sins are forgiven, the Holy Spirit removes my guilt and cleanses my conscience. Paul writes in Romans 5: 5 that God has poured his love into my heart through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, my feelings and emotions are the result of a faith that clings to the objective facts of the Word of God.

If, for example, I should say, "I know that my sins are forgiven because my formerly guilt-ridden conscience is now clear, I am basing my assurance of forgiveness upon my experience. If perchance the devil should succeed in stirring up the old feelings of guilt and condemnation, my assurance of the forgiveness of my sins is gone.

Martin Luther put it this way:

*We must not judge by what we feel or by what we see before us. The Word must be followed, and we must firmly hold that these truths are to be believed, not experienced; for to believe is not to experience. Not indeed that what we believe is never to be experienced but that faith is to precede experience. And the Word must be believed even when we feel and experience what differs entirely from the Word. (3)*

Luther further writes, "Feeling must follow, but faith, apart from all feeling, must be there first. (4)

Rather than coming against a feel-good faith, we should clearly teach that true Christian feelings, emotions, and Holy Spirit experience are the product of sound theology.

Rather than confronting imbalance in the church by promoting the alternative and pushing the pendulum to the other side, we should begin with a balanced perspective which means recognizing that feelings will follow a faith that clings to the objective

promises of God in Scripture. The person who believes and confesses that his sins are forgiven because Jesus died on the cross should feel guilt-free and experience the joy of having a cleansed conscience. Feelings and emotions, while not the cause of our faith, are the expression of our faith. Martin Luther writes, "We can mark our lack of faith by our lack of joy; for our joy must necessarily be as great as our faith." Again he writes, "You have as much laughter as you have faith."(5)

### "APPLYING THE TRUTH..."

Martin Luther, because of his frequent bouts with depression, recognized the importance of using the Word of God as the means for adjusting feelings and emotions. For example, he wrote:

*I still constantly find that when I am without the Word, Christ is gone, yes, and so are joy and the Spirit. But as soon as I look at a psalm or a passage of Scripture, it so shines and burns into my heart that I gain a different spirit and mind. Moreover, I know that everybody may daily experience this in his own life. (6)*

He said, "Hear God's Word often; do not go to bed, do not get up, without having spoken a beautiful passage two, three, or four of them to your heart." (7)

It is one thing to teach people the objective, doctrinal truths of God's Word. It is something quite different to teach them how to use that Word, speak and confess that Word, and apply that Word to their daily living. Truth must have application. The application of the truth of what God has done for us in Christ Jesus will have an effect upon our lives. Our feelings, and emotions will be adjusted. Our daily experience will no longer be directed by the world and our sinful nature but rather by the Holy Spirit producing in us love, joy, and peace through the powerful Word of God. Peter encourages us to give an answer to anyone who asks us to explain the hope that is within us (I Peter 3: 15). If we have no experience of hope, no one will ever ask. Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (John 8: 32)."

Hopefully the present conflict between sound doctrine and feel-good experience will lead to a balanced perspective on both sides. Those who minimize sound doctrine and promote feelings and experience must recognize that they are plotting a course for deception and disaster. Those who focus on sound doctrine must begin teaching people to apply those great truths of Scripture to their daily living so that the experience of God's people matches what the Word of God commands.

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### Table of References

1. Out of this gathering came a document called *The Cambridge Declaration*. We have copies of this document available for the asking.
2. Michael S. Horton, "Wanted: Apathetic Lutherans and Calvinists," *Reformation and*

*Revival*, Spring 1994, p. 26.

3. Ewald Plass, *What Luther Says*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), Vol. 1, p. 513.

4. *ibid.* p. 514

5. *ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 692.

6. *ibid.*

7. *ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 1485