

The “Emotionally Relevant” Congregation

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In a presentation to an annual gathering of “tall steeple” Presbyterian pastors, I had offered “A Case for Culturally Relevant Congregations.” Culture, I had suggested, is “the silent language;” as we know to communicate in the people’s language, so we must communicate via the other “message systems” of their culture. Likewise, culture is the “the software of the mind;” the forms of our messages have to adapt to the audience’s cultural “programming” to be received, and understood. As a cardinal principle of Christian mission, “indigenous” Christianity is about as indispensable for reaching pre-Christian people in our communities in the USA as in any other mission field on earth.

The other teacher for this gathering was Archibald Hart, dean emeritus of Fuller’s School of Psychology. Hart affirmed my case for “cultural relevance,” but he suggested the need for an additional “relevance” case. “Who is making the case,” he asked, “for the ‘emotionally relevant’ congregation?” I sensed, instantly, that he was right. Indeed, I had studied the rationale for “emotional appeals” in rhetorical theory for years, but had under-connected those studies to my broader interests in how the Gospel spreads and how churches engage pre-Christian people.

The case for emotional relevance is more easily made than for cultural relevance. Simply stated, the emotional lives of a great many pre-Christian people (and many Christian people) are dysfunctional, out of control, and crippling their lives. We meet people (and families) every day whose lives are hijacked by powerful emotions they do not understand, and may even deny. David Seamands exposed the fact that many people exist with “damaged emotions,” such as guilt, depression, low self-esteem, and perfectionism, which need healing.¹

Furthermore, Christian salvation essentially involves “being made whole;” this involves deliverance from emotions that were destroying our souls and deliverance into the life of the Kingdom of God in which we experience a new emotional world. I have interviewed many people who report such a change. Christian experience has liberated them from such emotional conditions as narcissism, unmanaged anger, low self-esteem, envy, shame, or the pervasive Anxiety that were undermining their happiness; and Christian experience has freed them to experience (say) gratitude, hope, empathy, altruism, and appropriate self-love, and to become (as promised in Reinhold Neibuhr’s “Serenity Prayer”) “reasonably happy in this life”-- as a foretaste of being “supremely happy with Him forever in the Next.”

¹ See David A. Seamands, Healing for Damaged Emotions (Chariot Victor Publishing, 1981).

Crash Course in Human Emotion Theory

Scholars have struggled to make sense of human emotional experience at least since Aristotle first reflected on “the passions”, though the quest became (somewhat) more “scientific” with the reflections of William James and Sigmund Freud. In twenty-five centuries, the quest has not reached any thing approaching a unanimous understanding, though the following insights may represent a near-consensus.

We are both “rational” and “emotional” creatures, though we have often stressed one to the near-exclusion of the other. As in Descartes’ “I think, therefore I am,” the ideology of the European enlightenment defined human beings essentially as rational. While we still experience emotions, they represent a “lower” part of human nature from which evolution has only partly delivered us. Nevertheless, human reason can trump emotion, and Education’s mission is to perfect humans for a life of reason. In time, the Enlightenment separated western humanity from nature and seemed to warrant people’s exploitation of nature. The Enlightenment invented the “nation state,” and paved the way for Nationalism (and unprecedented warfare). The Enlightenment produced the culture of “Modernity,” and a more scientific, planned, even mechanized “modern world” in which, especially in cities, many people experienced alienation and depersonalization.

While the Enlightenment promoted the way of reason, logic, and science in all matters, the Romantic movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries challenged the then-pervasive climate of Modernity; in literature, drama, music, and the visual arts, the Romantics rediscovered “the heart,” and the roles of intuition, imagination, passion, mystery, the supernatural, the mystical, and harmony with nature. Wordsworth invited us to disengage from the scientific worldview, and engage Nature, “and bring with you a heart that watches and receives.” Blake invited us to “see a World in a grain of sand, and a Heaven in a wild flower.”

The quest to understand emotionality within human nature has become more nuanced in the last century. We can almost summarize the state of our basic “emotional intelligence” in the following “baker’s dozen” statements:²

1. We can define an emotion as a rather specific, internal, affective state; a “mood,” by comparison, is a less specific and more background internal affective state.
2. Many scholars conclude that there is a limited number of “Basic Emotions” that all (or most) people experience—such as Happiness, Anger, Sadness, and Fear. (Some pop psychologists refer to them as “glad, mad, sad, and anxious!”) Some scholars add Disgust, Shame, and/or Guilt to their list of basic emotions.
3. We are thought to have “families” of related emotions, and family members may vary from one another (in part) in their intensity. So, Sadness is related to Grief, and Happiness to Ecstasy, and Anger to Rage; in each pairing, the latter is more intense.

² Robert C. Solomon’s lecture series entitled The Passions: Philosophy and the Intelligence of Emotions (Chantilly, Virginia: The Teaching Company, 2006) is a useful discussion of emotion theory, though his understanding of (and appreciation for) Christianity’s contribution is thin.

4. Some emotions may be blends of basic emotions. So, Rage is thought to be a blend of Anger and Fear; and Jealousy a blend of Fear, Anger, and Sadness.

5. An Emotion may not be stable; so Love, for instance, can morph into Jealousy, or Grief.

6. Emotions typically vary in their duration. So, the experience of being Surprised may be brief, Fear may last much longer, while the experience of Anxiety or Vengeance may stretch over years, or a lifetime.

7. Many scholars have been clear, since the publication of Aristotle's Art of Rhetoric, that these internal affective states are responses to objects or events in the external world. So, for instance, Anger is typically a response to a perceived slight, offense, or wrong. An emotion, therefore, is a way in which we inwardly respond to the world, or engage with the world.

8. Emotion is not an opposite of Reason, nor is it appropriate to put them at opposite ends of a spectrum; if someone's feelings toward something change, their thoughts about it change, and visa versa. Human emotion actually contains its own kind of intelligence. We often reach insights intuitively than we could not have reached through deductive or inductive reasoning. We learn to trust our "gut" as well as evidence and reasons. Emotion, however, is not always intelligent; Love can be fooled, Fear can slide into phobia.

9. We now know what once we would have never guessed: that our powers of reason are dependent upon our emotions to function effectively. At one level, we have known that (say) strong fear or anger makes our best thinking unavailable to us; but we now know that effective reasoning is dependent upon emotions conducive to thinking. Antonio Damasio studied people who had brain damage in the brain's emotional centers; he discovered that the loss of the capacity to feel distorts a person's decision making. Emotionally-impaired people can still do math or understand a puzzle, but without the relevant emotional support, they do not make rational decisions—like where to invest their savings, because they do not care.³

10. Our emotions do not "just happen to us," nor are they usually an automatic response to a stimulus. The field of Symbolic Interactionism (pioneered by George Herbert Mead) has helped us to see that our own internal conversation often "constructs" the emotion with which we respond to a situation. Essentially, when something happens, our internal conversation stimulates an emotional state—in which our continuing internal conversation (now influenced by what we are feeling) governs the action we will take. The process can be graphed:

Event-----Self-Talk-----Feelings-----More Self-Talk-----Action

11. We are now clearer than before that we can have more control over our emotions than we once thought-- largely by controlling our internal conversation. So, students have learned to "psyc" themselves up for an exam, and the "sports psychologists" who teach and counsel athletes to prepare for peak performance are becoming as indispensable to championships as strength coaches.

12. Some emotions, such as Fear and (maybe) Anger may be physiologically "hardwired" within us, though we interpret an emotional experience through our language, and our culture shapes how we express our emotions. (Arabic peoples, for instance, typically express Anger very differently than Chinese people.) Most of our other emotions are shaped more by our enculturation and life experience than by physiology.

³ Damasio, an influential scholar in neuropsychiatry, undermines the "Cartesian split" between reason and emotion in Descartes' Error (New York: Putnam, 1994).

13. The terms “Emotions” and “Feelings” are not synonymous. Emotions are more primary and run deeper; feelings are related to the physiological symptoms (as in increased heart rate or sweaty palms) of our emotions.

Some of this near-consensus has percolated its way into folk wisdom. I noticed this line of (what is now almost) common sense on a bulletin board in my chiropractor’s waiting room:

Change

If you always think what you’ve always thought,
then you will always feel what you’ve always felt,
and you will always do what you’ve always done.

If you always do what you’ve always done,
Then you will always get what you’ve always gotten.

If you always get what you’ve always gotten,
Then you will always think what you’ve always thought!

(author unknown)

Many rhetorical theorists since Aristotle have almost assumed that human beings are essentially emotional creatures who are sometimes capable of thinking! Or at the least, any public persuader must take human emotions seriously, and include appropriate “emotional appeals” in speaking or writing. A speech’s introduction needs to be sufficiently emotionally engaging to even secure the attention of many auditors; and the speech’s conclusion must elicit enough emotional response for many auditors to act on what they (now) believe. As Reinhold Neibuhr once reported from pastoral experience (in Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic), many (or most) people will not act in response to a proposal if they are merely convinced that the message is true and that acting on it is their “duty;” they must be sufficiently “moved” to act. George Campbell, in The Philosophy of Rhetoric (1776), declared, “To say that it is possible to persuade without speaking to the passions is but, at best, a kind of specious nonsense. . . . Passion is the mover to action, reason is the guide.”

Understanding human emotions is not important to us only because their dysfunctional forms can be so destructive. Understanding emotions help us to empathize with each other, and to live in community. Understanding emotions help us to enjoy animals—who lack our intelligence but share much of our emotional repertoire. A healthy emotional life fills our lives with much meaning and satisfaction. How we manage, and act upon, our emotions--repeatedly and habitually over time, substantially shapes our character and the kind of person we become.

Protestant Christianity's First "Pioneer" in Emotionally Relevant Ministry: Jonathan Edwards

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), leader of America's first "Great Awakening" and arguably America's greatest theologian and philosopher, also pioneered as a de facto "Church Growth scholar." As the reflective leader of an "Awakening," he employed field observation, interviews, and historical analysis (in addition to biblical and theological reflection) to make sense of a Christian Movement, and to lead and advance Christian movements, and also to make sense of a movement's subsequent decline and the reversion of many of its "converts."

In the 1730's, Edwards was pastor of the church in Northampton, Massachusetts. Northampton, Edwards tells us, was a town of approximately 200 families (a "big" town in the colonial era); the church also served people who lived in several outlying hamlets. An "Awakening" broke out among some young people in 1733, and spread to others in 1734 and 1735. Edwards observed, "more than 300 souls were savingly brought home to Christ in this town in the space of half a year."⁴ In one five or six-week period, about 30 people per week became Christians.

Edwards studied this movement that God entrusted to him; he wrote case studies of a number of converts and he discerned, with remarkable sophistication, a number of patterns that helped account for the Awakening. He presented his insights in his Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God (1737). (The book rapidly became the text for expanding the Awakening across much of colonial America and, through many translations, across much of Europe as well.)

For instance, Edwards rooted his analysis in the county's history and demographics. Compared to many communities, he observed that Northampton's people were fairly sober, orderly, reasonable, less prone to vice, "a good sort of people." Edwards noticed that the people "dwell more compactly together"⁵ than in most towns; he perceived that when several people experienced conversion, their proximity to their neighbors contributed to the movement's contagion. The church in Northampton had a history of sound doctrine, and no history of serious divisions, and had already experienced several "ingatherings" in its history, so the church and people knew what was possible and perhaps expected God to act again. In the period right before the Awakening, however, the town deteriorated into hostile factionalism and increased immorality; then the people experienced a period of greater religious seriousness and receptivity.

The Awakening actually broke out in Pascommuck—a village three miles from Northampton. Following the deaths of a teenage boy and a young married woman, "there began evidently to appear more of a religious concern on people's minds."⁶ Edwards gathered Pascommuck's young people for

⁴ Jonathan Edwards, "A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God (1737," in John R. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema. Eds., A Jonathan Edwards Reader (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995) 65.

⁵ "Faithful Narrative," 58.

⁶ "Faithful Narrative," 60.

teaching, after which they met in lay-led small groups for “social religion.” The youth groups continued meeting, and adult groups also formed. “There were, very suddenly, one after another, five or six persons who were to all appearance savingly converted.”⁷ These converts profoundly influenced others, and Pascommuck Christians then visited Northampton to report what God was doing.

These reports apparently catalyzed the Awakening in Northampton, and Edwards similarly deployed laity from town to town throughout the Awakening’s expansion. He continued to organize people into many lay-led (small) “religious societies” throughout the Awakening. During each week, Edwards intentionally engaged people, one on one, in “private conference;” he seems to have listened more than he talked. He noticed that converts, and even excited visitors, conversed with friends and neighbors about what was happening, and he encouraged what we now call “the ministry of conversation” with seekers.

Edward’s preaching style changed. He began preaching in a much more vivid imaginative style which engaged people more emotionally than in traditional Puritan discourse; his most anthologized sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God,” was probably his most extreme experiment in imaginal preaching.

Edwards observed that Northampton’s congregation reflected heightened expectation.

Our public assemblies were then beautiful; the congregation was alive in God’s service, everyone earnestly intent on public worship, every hearer eager to drink in the words of the minister as they came from his mouth; the assembly in general were, from time to time, in tears while the Word was preached; some weeping with sorrow and distress, others with joy and love, others with pity and concern for the souls of their neighbors.⁸

Much of the rest of Edward’s Narrative reports the emotional experiences of the people-prior to conversion, and after.

Edwards perceived that in the period before conversion, people typically experience a period of spiritual and emotional struggle. They may be “seized with convictions” about their pride or unbelief, or disturbed in their conscience; they may feel shame, or fear, or “misery,” or a sense of conviction or unworthiness, or “distresses of thought,” or even depression. They may envy Christians, especially new Christians. Edwards perceived, “The awful apprehensions persons have had of their misery, have for the most part been increasing, the nearer they have approached to deliverance.”⁹ Often, they “never think of themselves so far off from as when they are nearest.”¹⁰ He saw that people who are awakened (but not yet converted) often begin responding in two ways: 1) They abandon some of their “sinful practices, . . . vices, and extravagancies,” and they 2) become actively involved with “the means of salvation—reading,

⁷ “Faithful Narrative,” 62.

⁸ “Faithful Narrative,” 63.

⁹ “Faithful Narrative,” 69, emphasis added.

¹⁰ “Faithful Narrative,” 71.

prayer, meditation, the ordinances of God's house, and private conference."¹¹ As they get closer to conversion, often "their affections are moved, and they are full of tears, in their confessions and prayers."¹²

Edwards discovered that Conversion (as Saving Grace discovered and experienced), involved profound changes in the people's emotional lives. While the emotional range varied from one personality to another, new Christians typically experienced a calmness of spirit; and a new love for God, people, and creation; and peace, compassion, empathy, and hope, and especially "joy in Christ." "Their hearts are often touched, and sometimes filled, with new sweetnesses and delights; there seems to be an inward burning of heart that they express, the like to which they never experienced before."¹³

In another significant insight, Edwards observed that—as seekers in distress often did not realize how close to the Kingdom they were, likewise "before their own conversions they had very imperfect ideas of what conversion was."¹⁴ (One person's conversion experience scripted the neighbor's expectation of what they would experience, but the latter's experience was often so different that they wondered whether they were yet Christians. When Edwards perceived "the fruits of the Spirit" in their life, he would assure them, verbally, that they now belonged to Christ.) So, what Edwards called "the surprising work of God" surprised the converts as much Edwards!

In the two-year Awakening in Northampton and the surrounding county, Edwards observed the movement reaching all "sorts" of people. Unlike Northampton's earlier "ingatherings," this one reached as many males as females, and it reached people across the age span. The local awakening reached "sober and vicious, high and low, rich and poor, wise and unwise; it reached the most considerable families and persons, to all appearances, as much as others."¹⁵ In time, Edwards observed that religious emotionalism could be counterproductive; when two men acted out on "strange enthusiastic delusions," this reduced other people's receptivity and "instances of conversion" became more "rare."¹⁶

Edwards concluded his Faithful Narrative with, overall, an optimistic appraisal of the Awakening. While a few apparent converts had relapsed, most of the people "thought to be converted among us . . . generally seem to be persons that have had an abiding change wrought on them."¹⁷ In later years, however, many of those people reverted back to the world and to their former way of life. Jonathan Edwards' observation of this undeniable fact, followed by additional field research and reflection, led to some of the most important strategic reflections in the history of Evangelical Christianity. He now asked

¹¹ "Faithful Narrative," 68.

¹² "Faithful Narrative," 71.

¹³ "Faithful Narrative," 86.

¹⁴ "Faithful Narrative," 76.

¹⁵ "Faithful Narrative," 64.

¹⁶ "Faithful Narrative," 85.

¹⁷ "Faithful Narrative," 85-86.

how you distinguish between valid Christian experience and its unstable counterfeit. In his Narrative he had identified those converts who then appeared to be enduring Christians with traits like “new views of God,” and a sense of “the great things of the gospel,” and with “hearts” that had been “touched.”¹⁸ When he later observed that a number of those converts had lapsed, his research and reflection produced an astonishing range of deeper insights, which were published in 1746 in his Treatise Concerning Religious Affections.

Part one of Religious Affections is a measured defense of the role of emotions within Christian experience. Edwards reflects a knowledge of human emotions that is remarkably congruent with today’s lore. Our “passions” or “affections” are not automatic responses, nor do they happen to us; they are “the more vigorous and sensible exercises of the inclination and will of the soul” or the “heart.”¹⁹ Furthermore, the heart’s affections are “the spring of men’s actions.”²⁰ Human nature, generally and in all matters, is “very inactive” unless “influenced by some affection, either love or hatred, desire, hope, fear or some other. These affections we see to be the springs that set men agoing, in all the affairs of life, and engage them in all their pursuits.”²¹

Edwards had observed, and freely admitted, that emotional religious experiences can be excessive, and a religious experience is no guarantee that the person will be a Christian for life. He reflected that recent colonial Christian history had shifted between extremes. In one period, we “look upon all high religious affections” as evidence of “true grace,” and we accepted all “religious talk” as a sign of the Spirit. More recently, “instead of esteeming and admiring all religious affections, without distinction, it is . . . more prevalent to reject and to discard all without distinction.”²²

Nevertheless, he contended, “true religion, in great part, consists in the affections.”²³ Christianity without passion is powerless and lifeless. Indeed, emotional religious experience is essential in both the conversion and in the later renewal of souls.

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; . . . A fervent, vigorous engagedness of the heart . . . is the fruit of a real circumcision of the heart, or true regeneration, and that has the promises of life.²⁴ . . . Nor was there ever a saint awakened out of a cold lifeless frame, or recovered from a declining state in religion, and brought back from a lamentable departure from God, without having his heart affected.²⁵

¹⁸ “Faithful Narrative,” 86

¹⁹ Jonathan Edwards, “A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections”, in John R. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema. Eds., A Jonathan Edwards Reader (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995) 141.

²⁰ “Religious Affections,” 144.

²¹ “Religious Affections,” 145.

²² “Religious Affections,” 147.

²³ “Religious Affections,” 143.

²⁴ “Religious Affections,” 143.

²⁵ “Religious Affections,” 146.

So Edwards' purpose in the Treatise Concerning Religious Affections is to “distinguish between affections.”²⁶

Part two of Religious Affections, after two and half centuries, still serves as a challenge to the assumptions that prevail in most churches today. He identifies a dozen “signs” that are widely assumed to be signs of grace, conversion, and the Spirit, but they are not necessarily so. Essentially, Edwards discovered that:

- If people have had great emotional religious experiences, and different kinds of religious experiences, they may be Christians who will endure, but they may not be.
- If people have learned, and can quote, many texts of Scripture, they may or may not be Christians that the Christian movement can count on years from now.
- If people are “fluent, fervent and abundant in talking of the things of religion,”²⁷ they may be the kind of Christians God wants, but not necessarily.
- If people give “moving testimonies,” they may or may not be the real thing.
- If people now attend church, and they perform other religious duties— with “zeal,” they may or may not be New Testament Christians.

Edwards says more, but this is enough to follow his still-revolutionary insight. He learned from his involvement in the Awakening that such signs as emotional religious experiences, learning Scripture, talking the faith and so on are essential to authentic enduring conversion, but you cannot tell by those traits who will likely be Christians for the long haul, and who will not.

In part three of Religious Affections, Jonathan Edwards unpacks what he now understands to be among the “distinguishing signs of truly gracious and holy affections.” Edwards gives us another dozen (more valid) signs (offering them more for self-examination than for appraising others). He suggested that the following three are the most normative.

1. People who, in their religious experiences, have experienced (and accepted) God's Saving Grace have experienced “a change of nature”²⁸ that is perceivable by the Church and by people who remain Lost. Christian experience, Edwards reminds us, is supposed to be “transforming.” Grace changes people with respect to their “natural temperament;” while their temperament may not be completely “rooted out,” there is evidence of a “great alteration.” Grace changes people with respect to “whatever is sinful” in them; while they may still experience temptation, their former sins “no longer have dominion” over them. “Therefore if there be no great and remarkable abiding change in persons that think they have

²⁶ “Religious Affections,” 149.

²⁷ “Religious Affections,” 152

²⁸ Jonathan Edwards, The Religious Affections (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1984 reprint) 266.

experienced a work of conversion, vain are all their imaginations and pretenses, however they have been affected.”²⁹

2. Edwards declared, “Christian practice” is “the chief of al the signs of grace;”³⁰ Valid Christians follow Jesus, and live by his ethic. What people do and how they live is the surest sign of the state of their heart. Essentially, this means that they live in compassionate good will toward people (and other creatures); that they live by “the will of God,” and no longer for their own selfish agenda; that, consistent with their gifts from the Spirit, they are involved in ministry in the church, and beyond it; and that their lives will “bear fruit.”³¹ In other words, the point in becoming a Christian is NOT simply to go to Heaven and experience Christ’s other benefits (like a “religious consumer”), but to become agents of God’s new creation, and to experience the transcendent Purpose and Power that come as a by-product of living as Kingdom People.

3. Edwards stressed that people who are, in fact, changed and obeying God’s will do not become and live this way by their own power or effort alone. They need more Grace and Holy Spirit within them than they first experienced when they became new disciples, and this additional Grace comes to those who deeply accept Jesus Christ as Lord (and not as Savior only), and are radically open to His Spirit. The source of the life that we want to live is supernatural. IF we will let God get as close to us as He wants to, we will see the world more like God does, and we will live by God’s power a life we could not live by a lifetime of New Years resolutions.³²

Protestant Christianity’s Second “Pioneer” in Emotionally Relevant Ministry: John Wesley

Within a decade from the beginning of the Awakening that Edwards catalyzed (and studied) in America’s colonies, John Wesley’s Methodist movement was launched on the other side of the Atlantic. Wesley’s understanding of the role of religious affections in second birth and in the Christian life was remarkably similar to Edwards’. One reason, undoubtedly, was because Wesley knew Edwards’ Treatise on Religious Affections and even published an abridgement of it in England; in that edition Wesley concurred with Edwards, “A great part of true religion lies in the affections.” Even more, however, Wesley drew from his 1738 experience when his own “heart became strangely warmed,” and from his study of Scripture, and from observing crowds in decades of field preaching across the British Isles, and from conversation and correspondence with many converts and local Methodist leaders.

Wesley concluded, in contrast to the cold and rational “formalism” that characterized the Church of England and most of European Christianity, that Christianity is essentially an experiential faith, “a religion

²⁹ “The Religious Affections”, 267; See 266-271 for Edwards’ complete discussion of this point.

³⁰ “Religious Affections,” 165.

³¹ See “Religious Affections,” 164-171.

³² For Edwards’ thorough reflection on spiritual power, see “Religious Affections,” 153-164.

of the heart.”³³ Gregory Clapper explains Wesley’s use of the term: “Wesley spoke of the ‘heart’ in the same metaphorical way that we do, to signify that part of the human which is most central, most important, the seat of values, the home of the deep and abiding emotions.”³⁴ (One’s “heart” can likewise refer to one orientation, what one lives for.) Wesley, Clapper tells us, never contended that a religiously inspired heart is “infallible,” or that it has anything like an “unmediated access to the truths of the universe.”³⁵ Nevertheless, Christian experience is indispensable in the genesis of faith and in the life of faith, and religious affections are intrinsic to Christian experience. Wesley rejected the model of human nature, from the Enlightenment and much of establishment Christianity, that reason and emotion are positioned at opposite ends of a spectrum; indeed, Clapper explains that, for Wesley, “the heart has to be right before the mind can function correctly.” In experiencing joy, peace, and the love of God, God prepares us for understanding His truth; and religious affection plays a continual role in a Christian’s reasoning.³⁶

John Wesley observed that Christian conversion involved a radical change in the lives of Methodism’s converts, and these changes often involved almost a move from one emotional world to another. “I have seen (as far as a thing of this kind can be seen) very many persons changed in a moment from the spirit of fear, horror, despair, to the spirit of love, joy, and peace, and from a sinful desire, till then reigning over them, to a pure desire of doing the will of God.”³⁷ While Wesley confessed that his understanding of human emotionality was only partial, and the origins of our feelings are mysterious, he was clear that our actions are rooted in, and energized by, our emotions. (So, for instance, hatred of one’s neighbor may lead to murder, or lust to adultery, or love of neighbor to the neighbor’s service.) Wesley was clear that the stronger religious affections like joy are episodic experiences in a Christian’s life; we do not live in a perpetual religious “high”. Wesley was fairly clear that the emotions we experience are somewhat voluntary; we, in part, make ourselves experience fear, peace, or some other emotion.³⁸

Wesley both experienced and observed that appropriate religious affections accompany our experience of justification and second birth; indeed, they are involved in our assurance that we now belong to Christ. Conversion ushers us into a new emotional world that overlaps some with the old: Christians are now set free from some negative emotions; they now experience some religious affections that pre-Christian people do not; they also experience some of the same emotions as before. Wesley reminds us that the Church’s three “theological virtues”—faith, hope, and love—each have an affective

³³ Like his views on many topics, Wesley did not confine his views on religious affections to (say) a single essay; he scattered his reflections amidst voluminous writings. I am indebted in much of this section to the one source (to my knowledge) that has organized Wesley’s insights: Gregory S. Clapper, John Wesley on Religious Affections: His Views on Experience and Emotion and Their Role in the Christian Life and Theology (Metuchen, NJ and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1989)

³⁴ Clapper, 33.

³⁵ Clapper, 47.

³⁶ Clapper, 49, 102, 81.

³⁷ Quoted in Clapper, 130.

³⁸ Clapper, 36, 61, 54-55.

dimension. He often observed how Christians experience gratitude, joy, peace, happiness, and the fear (as in “awe”) of God.

Gregory Clapper suggests that, to healthy Christianity’s need for orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxy (right action), Wesley has added “orthokardia”—the need for a right heart. “Without such a ‘right heart,’ there is no Christianity on Wesley’s terms.”³⁹ John Wesley believed that the “heart right with God” is even more important than theology, and can (and should) transcend theological differences. That is why he could say, “If your heart is as my heart, give me your hand.”

Emotional Relevance in Ministry Today

Most church leaders, today, function as though the emotional part of human nature does not need to be taken seriously (or they take it seriously in counseling, only). Such leaders observe that emotions sometimes “get in the way” in congregational life, or become “dysfunctional” in persons and families, but these are aberrations and what people really need is sound doctrine and religious advice. The discoveries of Edwards and Wesley, that “true religion, in great part, consists in the affections,” and that people need to be liberated from the power of emotions like fear and “misery,” and to experience emotions like peace and joy, have been substantially lost in their Christian traditions.

There are exceptions. Some pastors who are schooled in the advanced art of pastoral counseling have developed other ways to be emotionally relevant in the church’s life. Some churches that launch recovery ministries for people with addictions learn to help addictive people with the fear, resentment, guilt, shame, low self-esteem, and the extreme mood swings that typically afflict addicts, and from that ministry experience they learn to engage other people’s emotional needs as well.

In contrast to the “mainline churches” whose paradigm of human nature is still rooted in the Enlightenment, most of the Christian movements today have found pathways to people’s emotional worlds. The Inuit Christian movement began, in many arctic communities, with addictive people, and they have learned to engage their people’s feelings in conversations, small groups, prayer meetings, and even in cathartic experiences in public worship. Tim Keller, who has led Redeemer Presbyterian Church’s growth in Manhattan, is deeply rooted in Jonathan Edwards’ Treatise Concerning Religious Affections which, he reports, has provided an “indispensable foundation” for also tapping into more current literature on human emotion.

In a recent conversation with Fuller’s Archibald Hart, we “brainstormed” some of the basic ways that churches can, and sometimes do, become emotionally relevant. Church leaders might begin by paying closer attention to the emotional life of the people. For instance, about one in seven or eight people experiences depression; addiction (to multiple substances and processes) is very widespread; and many

³⁹ Clapper, 155.

people are “stuck” in “learned hopelessness.” Effective churches will learn to name, identify with, and connect with people’s emotional needs; often, churches need to help people get over the denial in their emotional lives. Making human emotions a prominent, and continuing, topic in the church’s life works wonders over time.

Emotionally relevant ministries will provide people with help, support, insight, and options, and especially with perspective. People need insight on how much stress impacts their lives, and perspective on how “living outside of God’s design” magnifies the stress. They need to know that the Gospel is good news for their struggle, and that the Holy Spirit paces the floor with them. Effective churches will take a very redundant approach to emotional engagement—through many lay-led addiction recovery groups, divorce recovery groups, and other support groups, and through ministries of intercession, as well as through the liturgical ministry of the church—from the sermon, to the music, to the ministry of testimony, to the featured scriptures and the pastoral prayer. Testimonies help people discover they are not alone in struggling with (say) a phobia. The pastoral prayer will be honest and specific, and thereby model how people can pray about their emotional pain. “Most people haven’t a clue,” Hart reflected.

When I asked Hart “What churches are practicing what you preach?,” he mentioned one—Saddleback Community Church in Orange County, California. Rick Warren—Saddleback’s founding pastor, planted the church (in 1979) with a founding vision to be “a place where the hurting, depressed, frustrated, and confused can find help.” Warren studied with Hart in Saddleback’s early years, and has steered Saddleback in emotionally relevant directions ever since. In Saddleback’s early years, Warren’s preaching often targeted people who felt they were “falling apart,” or that their life was “out of control.” His series on the Seven Deadly Sins was emotionally focused. (The sermon on Greed, for instance, asked, “Why do I always feel like I have to have more? No matter how much I get, I have to have more! Why do I have that feeling?”) In recent years, Warren has often featured sermons, or sermon series’, focused explicitly on topics like pressure, depression, anger, self-esteem, and burnout. (Saddleback’s services also feature a testimony, often reporting the person’s emotional deliverance by Grace. Much of Saddleback’s worship music, from the singing ensemble’s performance on stage to the congregation’s singing, heads straight for the heart—engaging emotional issues, celebrating a gospel of deliverance, radiating hope, accompanied and sung with unrestrained passion.) Rick Warren’s book, The Purpose Driven Life, has sold over 25 million copies, in part, because it addresses some of people’s emotional struggles so clearly.

In 1991, Saddleback’s John Baker built upon the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous to pioneer a “Celebrate Recovery” ministry for people with addictions. In time, they perceived that many people who do not have substance addictions nevertheless struggle with obsessions or other problems in which the same emotional issues are at the core, and the same Steps bring them restoration and recovery. Celebrate Recovery is now designed to help anyone “overcome their hurts, habits, and hang-ups.” The Friday evening ministry (with a meal, a large group worship with a lecture or testimony, then small group

meetings for people with “similar hurts, hang-ups, and habits,” and ending with the “Solid Rock Café” social time) has served over 7500 people at Saddleback’s campus. When Saddleback started the ministry, 70% of attendees were from the church, 30% from the community; today, 70% are from the community. The church has expanded Celebrate Recovery’s reach to junior high and senior high students. Hundreds of other churches, and a number of prisons, have adapted Celebrate Recovery to their context.

More broadly, Saddleback ministers with whole persons (including their emotions) through more than 1400 lay-led small groups. Partly because some of our emotional needs (such as for Purpose or Significance) are only met as a by-product of being in ministry with others, Saddleback features a seminar for “turning an audience into an army.” People discover their Spiritual Gifts, Heart, Abilities, Personality type, and significant Experiences, and thereby discover how God has “SHAPEd” them for some ministry. Thousands of Saddleback’s people are involved in some ministry based on their “SHAPE.” Saddleback now sponsors more than 300 community ministries, engaging such target groups as prisoners, c.e.o.’s, addicts, single parents, homeless people, and people with HIV/AIDS. Saddleback believes that all people can inhabit a new emotional world of the Spirit, and know hope, inner strength, peace, and joy, and a life of purpose and passion and adventure.