**Reforming Our Affections: Emotions in Christian Life and Ministry**

*Tom Underhill, June 2025*

1. **Introduction  
     
   Luke 12:22-34 *“Do not worry”?***
   1. **The Significance of Emotions***“Sagacity”, Aidan Moesby*
   2. **The *Spiritual* Significance of Emotions**

Scripture puts emotion at the centre of human life rightly lived (and perfected)   
(Ps 27:4, Ps 16:11, Deut. 6:5)

“It is our affections he asketh for, and comparatively nothing else,” John Owen.  
  
But, complexities…

* 1. **Discipling Emotions**

Scripture speaks of right and wrong emotional responses for different circumstances   
(James 4:9, Phil. 4:4)

* 1. **Emotions, Soul Care and the need for Theological Psychology**

1. **Emotions according to evangelicals**
   1. **The “Fact-Faith-Feelings” train**

A 20th century evangelical move to put feelings in their place, as a reaction to:

* romanticist strategies to evade rationalist critique
* overemotionalism in some church movements   
  1. **Some common themes**
* Emotions are construals, or judgments
* The seat of emotion is the heart
* Emotions as heart beliefs, reveal our deepest commitments

See especially Matthew Elliott, *Faithful Feelings* (IVP, 2005)

***What’s your experience?***

1. **What *are* Emotions?**

What are we talking about physiologically, psychologically, theologically?

That determines our approach to emotions and our view of what would be the ideal state.

Key q: what is the role of the body?

**Two broad modern approaches to what emotions are:**

* ***Emotions are primarily physiological states***

*(matters of the body/brain/neuro-chemistry and so primarily involuntary and medical)*

* ***Emotions are primarily cognitive judgments***

*(matters of the mind/will and so primarily chosen and moral)*

**Emotions as physiological states**

* “Emotions are mental states brought on by neurophysiological changes” Wikipedia
* The involvement of the body in all emotions
* The impact of bodily conditions on emotions
* The instinctive/involuntary/pre-cognitive aspect to emotions
* The wealth of Scriptural language that identifies emotions with bodily regions or reactions (face downcast, eyes pouring, bowels boiling, weak knees, head sick, nose flaring – Ps 21:9!)
* Our matching personal experience

**Emotions as cognitive judgments**

* “Affections are vigorous exercises of the **will**” Jonathan Edwards i.e. emotions tell us what we most deeply believe/want/choose
* also, in a different way, the Stoics
* Mental acts can and do impact emotions
* The same external circumstances trigger different emot. reactions depending on mental states
* Scripture commands us to have/not have certain emotions, so they are a matter of choice
* Emotions have a moral dimension

***What will be the practical implications of taking each position?***

1. **Emotions: a theological lens**

We need ***theological anthropology*** (biblical understanding of what it means to be human).

**Human beings are embodied rational souls**

* Human existence is described in terms of a body-soul unity from beginning **Gen 2:7** (also Job 32:8) to end **1 Cor. 15.**
* The body is essential to our nature and identity: the way we exist (know, act) is bodily.
* **Soul** and **body** in Scripture can be identified as distinct (Matt. 10:28) but the separation of body/soul is not a natural or good state of affairs.
* **Like** all other living beings we have a principle of life (“animal” from Latin *anima* = soul/life), giving us powers of movement, sensation (Eccl. 3:21)
* **Unlike** other animals, we also have rational powers, leading to consciousness and moral responsibility (Gen 1:27, image of God)

Diagramming this out (with help from Thomas Aquinas):

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Type/tier of soul** | **Powers** | **Voluntariness** | **Requires corporeal organ** | **Possessed by** |
| **rational** | rational appetite (will) rational cognition (intellect) | voluntary | No | Humans |
| **sentient** | sense appetite sense cognition | partly voluntary | Yes | Humans & animals |
| **vegetative** | natural appetite | involuntary | Yes | Humans, animals & plants |

*Parallels in modern neuroscience:*

*Kahnemann: “System 1” vs “System 2”; Le Doux: “First order” / “Higher order”*

*Conscious / subconscious*

***So what are emotions / where are emotions on this map?***

1. **Breaking down Emotions**

* **Emotion is a broad term *covering desires at both levels***

Emotion is essentially a 19th century term, replacing (amongst others) **affections** and **passions**

***Caveat lector!*** there is no consistent technical distinction between these older terms throughout the Christian tradition

BUT Let us say that:

* **Affections** = motions of the intellectual appetite (= the will)
* **Passions** = motions of the sensitive appetite

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Rational powers**  *(don’t require a bodily organ)* | **Sensitive powers**  *(require a bodily organ)* |
| **Knowing** | Intellect *(Intellectual cognition)* | Sensitive cognition |
| **Desiring** | Will  *(Intellectual appetite)* | Sensitive appetite |

**How do affections and passions differ?**

*Now it must be observed that the sensitive appetite differs from the intellective appetite, which is called the will, in the fact that the sensitive appetite is a power of a corporeal organ, whereas the will is not. Again, every act of a power that uses a corporeal organ, depends not only on a power of the soul, but also on the disposition of that corporeal organ: thus the act of vision depends on the power of sight, and on the condition of the eye, which condition is a help or a hindrance to that act. Consequently the act of the sensitive appetite depends not only on the appetitive power, but also on the disposition of the body.*

*…the condition or disposition of the body is not subject to the command of reason: and consequently in this respect, the movement of the sensitive appetite is hindered from being wholly subject to the command of reason.*

*Moreover it happens sometimes that the movement of the sensitive appetite is aroused suddenly in consequence of an apprehension of the imagination of sense. And then such movement occurs without the command of reason: although reason could have prevented it, had it foreseen. Hence the Philosopher says (Polit. i, 2) that the reason governs the irascible and concupiscible not by a despotic supremacy, which is that of a master over his slave; but by a politic and royal supremacy, whereby the free are governed, who are not wholly subject to command.*

Aquinas, ST.I-II.Q17.A7.C

**So, affections straightforwardly flow from reason, whereas**

*“The body contributes a certain thickness or viscosity to the passions of the soul.”* LaPine, 71.

**Does this find any support in Scripture?**

1. **Explanatory power**
2. **“Flesh”**

**How is this terminology and this map of theological psychology helpful?**

1. **God’s “Emotions”**

Prior to 1700, it was almost universally held that God was without passions.

39 Articles, Article 1: *“THERE is but one living and true God, everlasting,* ***without body, parts, or passions****…”*

Westminster Confession, Chapter 2 (drawing on Acts 14:15*): “There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible,* ***without body, parts, or passions****…”*

To say God has no passions does not imply that he doesn’t have what in humans would be emotions. Clearly from Scripture God gets angry, rejoices, is grieved, pities etc.

But we know God’s e.g. anger is very different from ours – we remove everything bodily from our experience of anger to understand his.

One (ahistorical!) approach: **God has affections but not passions** (that is, God’s “emotions” are wholly movements of his will – active, chosen – as is true of the divine life generally).

1. **Christ’s temptations**
2. **Is love an emotion?**
3. **Complexities of embodied existence**
4. **Positive role of the body and passions**
5. **Practical Outworking: Discipling Emotions**

* **There is a right order**: Rom 12:2 “be transformed by the renewing of your **mind**”
  + Commands to self-control (e.g. Titus 2:12) rather than being led by passions
  + Commanded emotion, rather than just acceptance
* But if the lower powers are bodily, they will not respond instantly to the command of the higher  
  + Emotions often involve instinctual reactions to stimuli which originate in the subconscious and are not under our direct conscious control.
  + There are shapes written into our neural pathways and nervous systems that guide these responses, not conscious thought.
  + Example: anxiety
* But the instincts and shapes of our subconscious are not outside our control: we can reshape them, with patient cultivation over time. (the elephant rider, Psalm 1)
* The bodily, sensitive dimension is a good and God-given part of our nature, which contributes to the fullness of human life and with which we can honour (love!) God.   
    
  *“so also does it belong to the perfection of moral good, that man should be moved unto good, not only in respect of his will, but also in respect of his sensitive appetite; according to Ps. 83:3* [84:2]: My heart and my flesh have rejoiced in the living God: *where by heart we are to understand the intellectual appetite, and by flesh the sensitive appetite.*”ST.I-II.Q24.A3.C
* The body of flesh both disposes us to sin (Rom 7:24) and can have a positive role in discipleship (Romans 6:19 *along with* Romans 12:2).
* A passion can be cultivated to make a good act “easier” and “better”
* Our final end involves bodily delight

**Summary points and take-aways**

1. Emotions are complex, intertwined states of mind and body: they are both moral, and not straightforwardly voluntary.
2. Emotions are part of discipleship: we can & should cultivate healthy and God-directed emotions.
3. “Emotion” is a broad term which can be helpfully broken down into **passions** and **affections**.
4. Our passions are inescapably bodily and not under our direct instant control.
5. This impacts our *expectation* of change and our *strategies* for change
   1. Discipling emotions is a long-term project, requiring patience and perseverance
   2. As bodily realities, there are bodily factors in how we change emotions.
      1. *So there is space for medical remedies*
      2. *So we should recognise the power of habit*
6. These realities are God’s good design of humans as embodied souls, but severely impacted by the Fall and sin.
7. Emotions are not always accurate reflections of our heart beliefs, so we need compassion on ourselves and others.
8. It is good and right to feel emotion and this completes virtue (the just person takes joy in justice).

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| **Back to Luke 12:22-34**   * How does Jesus couch and surround his command not to worry?  (More “DO NOT WORRY!” or more “You don’t have to worry anymore!”?) * How does he address the hearers in v32? * What is the practical strategy for combating worry in v33-34? How might this involve a positive contribution from the body and a long-term view? |

1. As we cultivate right emotions, we steady ourselves in paths of righteousness.

*Worked example: how would this grounding help you counsel someone dealing with anger, depression, anxiety?*

1. ***Apatheia***

“One of the great governing themes of early Christian spirituality   
is the concept represented by the word *apatheia*.” Rowan Williams

“[the Reformed] evidence an antipathy for Stoic ἀπάθεια” David Sytsma

So *apatheia* – where did you come from, where did you go?  
  
Or (a more interesting question): what does the framing of discipleship of the emotions as a quest for *apatheia* have to contribute to Reformed piety, which frames it as a quest for holy affections?

**Historical survey**

An existing debate:

**Stoics :** the soul is unitary and rational, passions are mistaken judgments

Hence passions to be eliminated (*apatheia*)

Although two important qualifications: *propatheia* and *eupatheia*

**Peripatetics :** the soul is tiered and not all powers are straightforwardly rational

Hence passions to be moderated (*metriopatheia*)

Christian writers

Clement

Origen

Gregory of Nyssa

Maximus

**The end of the *apatheia* tradition in the West: Augustine**

The difference between schools words not substance

But desire to emulate Scriptural framing

**Evaluation**

* 1. The church fathers were not simply in thrall to extra-biblical philosophy, though their mode of expression was affected by their context: the biblical theme of God’s transcendence and immutability was more prominent in framing discipleship as a quest for *apatheia*.
  2. The Reformed framing of **holy affections** has advantages: language of Scripture, combined with Aquinas’ anthropology of the emotions as a bodily, natural, good, pre-fall and divinely-intended part of human nature, justifies the shift away from the language of *apatheia*.

**Emotions in the four-fold state of man:**

**State of nature**: Humans are designed as embodied souls, so emotions are present in the state of nature and wholly good. The whole orientation of man being aright, the body contained no bad dispositions. So emotions did not disturb, but operated wholly to confirm the motion of the intellectual powers.

**State of sin**: Once the orientation of the whole man is upended by sin, emotions are disordered and are significant causes of sin. The body disposed in a bad direction, the emotions often override the intellect.

**State of grace**: Re-oriented by the gracious work of the Spirit, progress in the Christian life involves discipling our emotions to virtue. Habituating our bodily dispositions is a key element in the life of faith, godly emotions assisting and perfecting godly acts of will.

**State of glory**: Obtaining the object of our deepest desire, God himself, our desiring motions will be transformed into the “ever-moving repose” of complete but ever-deepening satisfaction in him. Remaining bodily, we retain perfected emotions with which to enjoy God in the perfect harmony of a spiritual body.

* 1. However, Reformed piety can learn from the older *apatheia* tradition in three ways:  
     + Highlighting the difference between human and divine emotion
     + Highlighting the difference between the life of the redeemed now and in glory
     + Demonstrating the value of a contemplative element in discipleship: progress in sanctification as a movement from disturbance/turmoil towards peace/rest

**Further Reading**

Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica* (I-II.Q22-48)

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(& my attempt to summarise! [tomunderhill.co.uk/the-logic-of-the-body/](https://www.tomunderhill.co.uk/the-logic-of-the-body/))

Sytsma, David S. *The Logic of the Heart: Analyzing the Affections in Early Reformed Orthodoxy.* In *Church and School in Early Modern Protestantism*, edited by Jordan Ballor, David S. Sytsma, and Jason Zuidema, 471–488, 2013.