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A Christian Perspective on Human Emotions

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PSYD 503: Learning, Cognition, & Emotions

Since many of us provide psychological services to clients with a Christian background and commitment, it is helpful to consider a Christian theological perspective on emotions. Many Christians have strong beliefs about emotions which they believe are Christian because they have been taught by parents or churches, yet upon scrutiny often these beliefs are found to be inconsistent with biblical teaching. Few authors have looked seriously at a biblical or theological perspective on emotions and therefore there are not many resources for clients to draw upon. This article is intended to provide some information regarding a biblical perspective on human emotions for those who are providing psychological services to Christian clients. Hopefully, this information will help those providers respond to biblical and theological issues that clients often raise in the midst of emotional turmoil.

The Bible has much to say about the emotional experiences of people. It also provides advice regarding emotional responses that is designed to promote healthy functioning both intrapersonally and interpersonally. The Bible has little to say, however, about the actual nature and functioning of emotions. Thus this information has to be constructed from theology and implications of biblical passages, or from extra-biblical sources.

Emotional Functioning In The Created Order

Emotions existed in humans in the pre-fallen, created order. There is biblical evidence indicating that God has emotions, and since humans were created in His image (Gen. 1:26, 27; 9:6) it can be inferred that the first persons (Adam and Eve) had emotions. Adam's reaction to the creation of Eve (Gen 2:23), though not well portrayed in most English translations, was something like "Wow! This one is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh . . ." implying she is like me. My understanding is that the excitement and rejoicing of Adam's response is clear in the Hebrew version. Desire also was present in the pre-fallen condition. Eve saw the forbidden fruit, was delighted by it, and desired it (Gen 3:6).

The exact nature and purpose of human emotions in the pre-fallen state are unknown. It is believed that emotions assisted humans in fully appreciating God and allowed them to experience a more complete relationship with Him. It is also believed that emotions assisted pre-fallen humans in decision making (naming animals), and in successful dealings with others and the environment. Perhaps emotions provided humans with greater information about themselves

and others (cognitive input), provided intimate relationships (a sense of closeness and belonging), and provided a motivational system (desires motivate behavior).

We can assume that the nature of human emotions in the pre-fallen state was similar to what we know emotions to be today. Since we see that God expresses several emotions such as anger, compassion, sorrow, and joy (delight), we can assume that these were the types of emotions experienced by pre-fallen humans. In other words, we don't have completely different emotions as the result of the fall. The type of emotions then are similar to our emotions now, but may have varied in intensity, duration, and expression.

We can assume also that the purpose of human emotions in the pre-fallen state was similar to the purpose of the emotions we experience now. Currently, emotions serve us by giving us vital information that helps us react to and cope with our environment. It is believed that emotions served a similar function prior to the fall. Similarly, it is believed that emotions then and now can promote a more complete relationship with God. One of the purposes of emotions was to cause us to better comprehend, appreciate, and serve God.

It is believed also that there was harmony among thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in the pre-fallen state. That is, when humans acted, they acted consistently with thoughts and emotions. There was no such thing as feeling a certain feeling, but acting in an opposite manner. There was also no such thing as knowing something to be right, but not wanting to do it. There was consistency or harmony among thoughts, emotions, and actions. Ambivalence, conflict, disharmony, denial, and splitting were presumably absent.

Emotional Functioning Affected By Sin

The Fall of humankind and the resulting imputation of sin had a tremendous impact on the personal functioning. Through Adam we fell from being perfectly created beings who accurately reflected the image of God, to beings who are now bent or predisposed toward sin. We were created in God's image (Gen. 9:6, Psalm 8), and we retain that image (I Cor. 11:7, James 3:9). However, the image of God in humans is tainted and distorted (marred) by sin. Every part was tainted by the fall, but no part was completely destroyed. We no longer reflect God accurately; we only reflect Him in a limited and distorted manner.

Emotions were affected by the Fall and entry of sin into our world in the following ways:

1. Emotions are distorted, no longer reflecting the exact image of God. They may be experienced or expressed in inappropriate ways. They are both inaccurate and inappropriate at times. Emotions may be deceptive and lead us into actions that are inconsistent with the will of God. Since emotions are not always accurate or adaptive, they cannot always be trusted. We are influenced by both evil and upright impulses. We often have unpleasant emotions aroused by the presence of evil around us. Exposure to emotional pain and distress is inevitable due to the advent of spiritual, relational and physical death

2. Rather than consistently supporting the person in decision making and righteous living, emotions may lead to confusion, chaos, and sin. Designed to be helpful to humans, emotions now also may be harmful. They may be experienced and expressed in ways that cause harm to self and others. Even good things, such as instruction and discipline, often are perceived as harmful to us.
3. Emotions have a tendency to be self-focused now, rather than God-focused. Rather than functioning with God as the focus of our activity, we function with ourselves as the focus of our activity. With the obvious imperfections that we have, we find it compelling to hide or cover these imperfections from ourselves and others; therefore, we become defensive. We repress our emotions so that we don't have to consciously face the pain of living. We use repression to hide painful feelings from both ourselves and others. This allows us to continue portraying a self-image (not God-image) that is untarnished. We also may externalize our emotions through projection of blame or displacement onto others. In so doing we again try to portray a self-image (not God-image) that is untarnished. The result of this 'hiding through repression' or 'externalization through blaming' is further confusion and interpersonal alienation.
4. Before the Fall persons experienced harmony in thoughts, emotions, and actions; now there is an inconsistency or split. Such disharmony not only affects us internally, but disrupts relationships with God and others as well. Thus, we may know something to be right, but not feel like doing it. Now we may know that God loves us, but not feel loved by Him.

Christ: Our Model Of Emotional Functioning

Christ is wholly God and wholly man. He is not partly each, but fully both (Phil. 2). Therefore, He bears the perfect image of God (II Cor. 4: 4, Heb.1: 3). It is in Christ that we see what we were meant to be. He is our model. He is what we were designed to be and what we shall one day become. This is not to say that we will become deity, but rather we will be like Him, including experiencing an integrity of emotion, experience, thought, and behavior which is not now possible.

As perfect man, Christ experienced and expressed perfect (accurate and adaptive) emotions. He experienced the same emotions that we experience: joy (John 15: 11; 17: 13), compassion (Mat. 9: 36; 15: 32), anger (Mark 11: 15-18), sadness or grief (John 11: 35, 38), and fear (Mat. 26: 36-42). He also expressed these emotions appropriately. Christ's emotions were not self-serving, but rather were a part of His total response to others or situations. They were not self-serving in the sense that He used these emotions in a defensive manner to protect Himself. Rather, His emotional responses served to give Him a full and complete response to a situation or person. His emotional responses were complete, and consistent with His thoughts and actions.

There were no fragmented, distorted, or un-symbolized emotional responses in Christ. He experienced His emotions in their full intensity. However, He probably did experience a mixture of emotions that were in conflict. An example of this is in Gethsemane (Mark 14: 32 ff and Heb.

12: 2) when He felt sorrow, fear, and joy (at the thought of the outcome). Christ did not engage in emotional denial, repression, or projection.

Christ expressed a full range of emotions, and there was a completeness to His emotional expression. In other words, His emotional expressions added to His total response to a situation or person, and that response was a complete (or finished) response. He did not go away from a situation still burning with anger or filled with sadness. Rather, there was a complete response from Him which enabled Him to move freely to the next relationship or situation unhindered by emotional baggage. He probably consciously suppressed emotions at times in the same manner that He suppressed other responses to people. When Christ suppressed emotions it was not in a self-serving, personally defensive manner. Suppression must have aided Him in responding appropriately at the time.

Christ is our model of emotional functioning not only in emotional expression, but also in the purity of His motives. He did not express emotions in a manipulative manner or with the intent of harming another person. Rather, His motives were pure, and therefore the manifestation of His emotions accomplished righteous purposes.

Effects Of Becoming A Christian On Emotional Functioning

In Christ we are new creatures (II Cor. 5: 17). Through this new creation we have new capacities and resources. These resources are present at least incipiently from the beginning, but develop with spiritual maturity. Empowered by the indwelling Holy Spirit, we are enabled to glorify and serve God (Rom. 6: 18). However, this remains difficult because the old self-focused habits, motives, and impulses continue to exist within us (Rom. 7: 25). In turn these old inclinations are aided and abetted by the world system and by the personal agents of evil, the devil and demons. We still have a tendency to live independently of God and believe that this is right and good.

The inherent conflict is obvious. We are capable of expressing emotions which can appear the same, but may come from motives designed to serve God or from motives designed to serve self through defensive maneuvers (Rom. 8: 5.). We have the capability as Christians to express emotions for various reasons (motives), which result in various outcomes.

Christians may experience a struggle with their emotions, especially the expression of them. The existence or expression of emotions may be the result of the old habits and patterns, new and Godly patterns, or combination of both. In addition, we may or may not be conscious of the sources of our emotions in relation to these patterns. What we do know is that as Christians we have the capability of glorifying God with our emotions. Non-Christians can express emotions correctly and accomplish good with them in some cases, but they cannot consciously glorify God with their emotions (Is. 64: 6).

Through a relationship with Christ we have the capability of experiencing and expressing emotions as Christ did. Thus, the following are possible:

1. We can experience emotions accurately and adaptively.

2. Emotions can aid us in decision making.
3. Emotions can be consistent with our thoughts and actions.
4. Emotions can be complete and not fragmented.
5. Emotions can be expressed fully, and not denied, repressed or externalized.
6. Emotions can also be expressed with pure motives, and not be manipulative or destructive to others.

We have these capabilities incipiently as Christians, but we are hindered in this endeavor because of the old (sin) nature and the encouragement of the fallen world and the personal forces of evil (Satan and demons) which compromises our ability to function in a holy manner. Spiritual immaturity may also limit our capability for Christ-like emotional expression at any given point in our Christian development. In the coming kingdom these potentialities will be fully realized as we are transformed into our new bodies and capacities (1 Cor 15: 50-54).

Living Christianly With Our Emotions

Christian living requires that we experience and express our emotions in a way that glorifies God. Our model for this is Christ Himself. It is realized that this is a process that begins at the time of conversion and does not end until we are present with God. We are in the process of being transformed (Rom. 12: 2), and this transformation takes time. What is possible for us as Christians (listed above) is not immediate at the time of conversion. We "work out our salvation" (Phil. 2: 12).

The first Adam was created perfect (sinless), but was not fully mature. The second Adam (Jesus) was born sinless and immature also. His humanity went through a maturing process (Luke 2: 52) without sin. Thus, Christ was complete and perfect both in sinlessness and maturity. We can assume that His emotions went through a normal developmental process, yet without sin. The implication of this is that our emotional experience and expression can be wrong or inappropriate without being sinful. Wrong or inappropriate emotional expressions may be the result of developmental immaturity, personal sin, or non-personal sin (as in inappropriate emotions which result from trauma, genetic, or physiological factors).

This view of emotional growth indicates that emotional expression changes, develops, and matures over time. Emotional expression develops naturally if cultivated. This happens in Christians and non-Christians, and is seen as part of normal human development. However, there is a further development of emotions available to Christians. Emotions can mature in the Christian who yields to the work of the Spirit. Thus, the maturational process will lead to Christ-likeness (complete maturity) in emotional experience and expression. The fruit of the Holy Spirit is righteousness, peace, and joy (Ro 14:17).

Mature emotions are informative, supportive, spontaneous, and expressed appropriately. They should be expressed openly without sinning. An example of this is found in Eph. 4:26-27, where we are told "Be angry and sin not," but rather build up others. In other words, don't express your anger aggressively. Don't use your anger to destroy, hurt, or harm. At the same time we are told to "not let the sun go down while you are still angry." In other words, don't hold your anger inside or express it passively. This passage seems to be saying that we should express anger openly and constructively (assertively). In this manner we "do not give the devil a foothold."

One aspect of this transformation is that we may need to learn to "contain" our emotions as Object Relations psychology proposes. Containing emotions involves both restraining reactive and sinful responses to them, and retaining them so that they will motivate and energize us to act in Godly ways to resolve problems and conflicts and restore healthy relationships.

Emotional Experiences Of Biblical Characters

Many biblical characters had significant emotional experiences that shaped their relationship with God and others. This is just a partial list:

- Sarah Anger (Gen 16:1-5)
 Joy (Gen 18:1-15; 21:1-7)
- Moses: Anger (Ex. 2:11 - 12, Num. 20:11-12)
 Depression (Num.11:10 -15).
- Deborah Joy/rejoicing(Ju 4-5)
- Ruth Grief (Ruth 1:12:14)
- Naomi Bitterness (Ruth 1:19-21)
- Elijah: Depression (I Kings 19)
- David: Depression (Psalm 55:4 - 8)
 Joy/celebration (2 Sam 6:14-15)
- Job: Depression, Grief, Sorrow (Job 3 and 6)
- Jonah: Depression (Jonah 4:3, 8b; "why anger" (Jonah 4:4, 9)
- Mary Joy (Lu 1:26-55)
 ?? (Lu 2:15-20)
- John: joy (Jn 3:27-29)
- Jesus: Anger (Mark 11:15 -18);
 Sorrow and fear (Mat. 26:36 - 42)
 Grief (Mt 23:37-39; Luke 22:40 - 46; Jn 11:33-35)
 Peace (Jn14:1-6, 27)

- Paul: Joy (Lu 15:7-10;
Fear (II Cor. 7:5 -7)

Happy, blessed, fortunate (Acts 26:2)

Hope (2 Cor 3:11-12; 1 Tim 3:14; Phil 1:19-20)

Joy (2 Cor 2:3; Phil 2:2)
- Peter: Fear (Mat. 14:26 -32)

Morality And Emotional Functioning

A case is presented here for the *amorality* of emotions. That is, primary emotions are not inherently either right or wrong; sinful or righteous. Primary emotions just are; they just exist. Obviously, emotions are shaped and influenced by our experiences and actions. Emotions themselves, at least at the primary level, are amoral. Our responses to or expression of these emotions may be either moral or immoral. For example, feeling angry is amoral, but responding to our anger with aggressiveness or passivity may be immoral.

Secondary emotions pose different issues. Secondary emotions involve conscious volitional actions and process which we are able to control. Such processes as “psyching up” or its counterpart, “psyching down” involve our engaging in deliberate actions and thoughts which are intended to alter our emotional states and subsequent behavior. Athletes do this before games, students before tests, and so on. We can also engage in these processes before confronting a spouse, friend, teacher, or pastor. We can nurse grudges, stir up anger, cultivate bitterness, or dwell and what is virtuous (Phil 4:6-9).

The primary basis for this argument is that we can only be held accountable for that which we can control. The experience of primary emotion is often immediate and spontaneous, and something over which we have no direct control. On the other hand, the expression of emotion is not always immediate and can be controlled. Since our experience of emotion is beyond direct control, it is amoral. Our expression of emotion, however, is open to moral judgment. Further, our cultivation of secondary emotions also has moral implications.

This argument is based also on three biblical foundations:

1. Christ experienced emotions, yet did not sin. How could He really know us unless He experienced the emotions that we feel? We are usually tempted on an emotional level (James 1: 14). Jesus was tempted in all ways like us (Heb. 4: 15). Therefore, Christ must have experienced the emotions that we feel, since he was tempted on an emotional level. Although He experienced the full range of emotions, His expression of these emotions was always righteous. The experience of emotions must be amoral since Christ experienced a full range of emotions.
2. The Bible seems to encourage us to experience and express emotions. The fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5: 22 - 26) certainly has an emotional aspect, and we are encouraged to

manifest these qualities. We are told also to express emotions in an attempt to identify with and aid others (Rom. 12: 15).

3. II Cor. 7: 5 -11 is a key biblical passage on the emotion of sorrow. In this passage the emotion of sorrow is not inherently right or wrong; rather, Paul addresses the result or response to feeling sorrowful. In this case the sorrow led to growth, not devastation. "No regret" followed for this sorrow (vs. 10). In this case the experience of sorrow led to a righteous expression of this emotion.
4. If emotions at the primary level are truly respondent or involuntary in nature, then they are not under our control. Thus it would be unjust to be held responsible for them. However, voluntary actions which we take can produce emotions. The voluntary actions are under our control, and hence can be evil or righteous. For example, if staying up late makes me prone to anger, then choosing repeatedly to forego sleep is a morally culpable action which in turn makes me at least partly responsible for my involuntary anger.

It is our volitional actions (intentions, motivations) that carries moral weight. Once we experience an emotion, we then choose a response to this emotion. At this choice point morality enters the picture. After we become aware of how we feel, we make a moral choice of how we are going to respond. The problem is that this choice point is often instantaneous and often occurs without reflection. Thus, we often act or respond without conscious deliberation. When this happens we are left to judge our emotional expressions on the basis of the results or consequences of them, and on the motives which we can recognize regarding them.

When we have time to deliberate on our emotions we should become introspective and prayerful. It is at these times that we can examine our motivations, intentions, and the probable consequences of our emotional expressions. This reflection, guided by the Holy Spirit, can enable us to respond righteously.

Bassett and Hill (1998) proposed a model of emotional behavior which includes physiological, chemical, and bodily functions; cognitions, behaviors, and emotions. They strongly emphasized an assessment of emotion along the dimension of aware-volitional, vs unaware-nonvolitional. Their view is that only aware-volitional emotional behaviors or responses to emotions can be sinful. Rebecca Brownell (1999, personal communication), proposed the following for positive emotions:

constructive + aware/volitional = good fruit

constructive + unaware/nonvolitional = imago dei

And the following for negative emotions:

destructive + aware/volitional = secondary and instrumental emotions (G&S)

destructive + unaware/nonvolitional = maladaptive emotional responses (G&S)

I wonder if secondary emotions, in part, may seem to fit the second option here because they become so automatic. Perhaps this is an example of the ways in which we are able to be self-deceptive as suggested in Jer. 17:9-10.

What do you think?