

Emotionalism

Introduction. In Matthew 27:42, the men who were mocking Jesus were sensationalists. To them, Jesus would be the Messiah only if He would do something stupendous. When Jesus did not comply, the spectacle of the cross was meaningless. Can you imagine being right before the greatest drama ever enacted, yet not seeing it because you were looking for the sensational?

People everywhere are trying to find God in the spectacular and dramatic. The test of worship is not, "Is it true?", but, "Does it sweep me off my feet?" The proof of preaching is not, "Is it from the book?", but, "Does it leave me tearful or excited"?

"Emotionalism" is the tendency to display emotion freely or to place too much value on emotion. All of us would agree that it is easy to be swayed by the emotions, so emotionalism as a determiner of truth needs to be examined.

I. **Examples Of Emotionalism**

A. In the religious world.

1. A lot of people relate their conversion "experiences" as "a rush like I never got on drugs." Some would say they "wouldn't trade this feeling for a whole stack of Bibles." The reality of conversion is perceived through the lens of feelings, and a man with an experience is never at the mercy of a man with a Bible argument.
2. Some churches have a time where people can give testimonies or "witness" to the fact of their salvation.
 - a) One result is that people hearing such testimonials are influenced to look for sensational and emotional "experiences" in their own life.
 - b) Steve Wallace, a gospel preacher who used to work with a church in Alabama, had a TV program called "Bible Answer." A lady sent him the following letter: "I am a Christian and am happy with my relationship with God. But here lately I've been praying to him to take full control of my life and let his will be done. I'm very sick and won't live a long life if I don't get a liver transplant. I feel very confident that God will look after me. I have hundreds of people all over praying for me. I pray everyday, not for myself, but for my family and others. The thing is, I thought when he took me in I would have this awesome feeling of his love pouring over me, or something like that. I hope you can understand what I mean. I don't have this feeling I expected. I trust in him so I believe he is here with me. Should I have this overpowering feeling or not? There is a lot I don't know

about the Bible's teaching. Can you help me to understand. God bless you."

- c) John MacArthur, in his book, *"Why Believe The Bible,"* said, "Without the Holy Spirit (i.e., miracle in your life) the Bible is just another book" (p. 17). In essence, this is a "better felt than told" feeling.

B. In churches of Christ.

1. Having a powerful worship experience has become the goal of many churches, which are organized to accentuate the emotional elements and politely relegate the exposition of scripture to a minority status. As one man put it, "I go for worship, but I don't always stay for preaching."
2. Instances of spontaneous observance of Lord's Supper, turning lights down, an appeal for evening services composed of spontaneous "prayer and singing," and sermons prepared to stir emotions are all occurring in congregations.
 - a) People "like" this novel approach and they "feel" that it is more exciting.
 - b) The elements of worship are then evaluated on the basis of how they make us feel.
 - c) The emphasis of true worship is pleasing God, not ourselves (Matthew 15:8-9).
3. Emotions that motivate to obedience.
 - a) "Baptism bandwagon."
 - (1) This is effective in advertising: "Don't be the last kid on your block." If one young person obeys the gospel, others are encouraged to "join your friends."
 - (2) In Acts 2:41, the 3,000 who were baptized on the day of Pentecost did so because they "gladly received his word."
 - b) "Your poor departed [loved one] would want you to be baptized."
 - (1) While pleading with one to obey the Lord, one may invoke the statement to Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:5.
 - (2) However, we cannot allow emotions to replace the cross of Christ as the basis of an appeal to obey (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:24).
4. Emotions that "prove".
 - a) In evaluating Mark 16:16, Baptists may ask what will happen if someone dies on their way to be baptized.
 - b) Proponents of institutionalism would advocate that orphans will starve if we do not benevolently help all men with the Lord's money.

- c) Christians have said that if we strictly adhere to Matthew 19:9, then our churches will be empty because of divorce and remarriage.
- 5. Emotions that comfort.
 - a) With the emotions some preachers provoke, there is a danger that Christians come to equate faith to the "warm fuzzies."
 - b) This essentially means that as long as someone feels okay, then everything is okay, regardless of truth.

II. **Results Of Emotionalism**

- A. Truth is trampled.
 - 1. Truth essential (John 8:32; 17:17). Whenever emotion is primary, truth is secondary.
 - 2. Try discussing salvation with an emotionalist. Where does discussion begin? In many cases it begins with "witness," not truth.
- B. Converts soon whither away.
 - 1. A person often does not like the product bought on impulse (Luke 8:12-13). Therefore, when the emotion is gone, the religion is gone.
 - 2. After the excitement of conversion wears off, the realities of living righteously can disappoint and disillusion.
- C. Converts are converted to emotions.
 - 1. Emotionalism can lead to a certain type of captivity. Some preachers are very gifted in appealing to emotions.
 - a) If such preachers can "convert" people to emotionalism, whether they know it or not, they can become emotional "dependents" (cf. Matthew 15:14).
 - b) Once someone is divorced from the standard of truth, emotionalists are left wide open to every charlatan that comes along, or to every trick that "warms the heart" (Ephesians 4:14).
 - 2. God created the church to function with the intimacy of a body. Yet, this fellowship is not rooted in emotional desires, but in common faith (Ephesians 4:4-6; 2 Peter 1:1).
- D. Fear of problems and persecution.
 - 1. Those into sports or exercise will tell you that, when it comes to muscle tone and strength, either you use it or you lose it.
 - a) Likewise, a failure to live an active life of faith makes faith weak, perhaps to the point of non-existence (James 2:26).
 - b) A Christian's relationship with God will not be a protection from the unpleasantness of the world (2 Timothy 3:12; Revelation 2:10).

2. One of the reasons many Christians have no stomach for fighting error is because they have had a steady diet of preaching which provokes emotional responses.
 - a) When called upon to serve God, or confront problems in the church the emotionalist will be upset because it will not "feel" good.
 - b) How would some Christians today react if the Lord sent them a message like Galatians 1:6 or Revelation 2:14-16?

III. ***Facts Against Emotionalism***

A. Emotions can cloud.

1. Our emotional reaction to a message -- happy or sad -- has nothing to do with whether or not the message is true or false (Proverbs 14:12; Jeremiah 10:23; Isaiah 55:8-9).
2. Contrary to popular culture, the Bible prioritizes the mind over the emotions, because when the emotions are pulling the cart, we will go off track (cf. Romans 10:1-2).
3. Our mind is to be the censor of our emotions. Our emotions will always lead us to ruin unless they are submitted to and controlled by the mind devoted to God's word.

B. God is sometimes not sensational.

1. In 2 Kings 5:11-12, Naaman was not asked to do something spectacular. In Matthew 27:42, Jesus did not come down from the cross in a dazzling way.
2. A preacher may speak God's word in a monotone voice, yet God is most certainly working through the word.

C. The word is essential.

1. A relationship with God is all about His word (Luke 8:11; Romans 1:16; Hebrews 4:12). While emotions are sometimes produced by the word, this is not always the case (cf. Acts 17:32; 26:28).
2. All who responded to the gospel are those who heard the word preached or had read the word. Nowhere in the scriptures do we find anyone knowing they were converted through an experience or feeling.
3. The irony is, by focusing on emotions we think we have a more genuine connection with God, when in reality we are simply bowing more deeply to our own desires.

D. Appropriate emotions come after the facts.

1. In Luke 10:20, the disciples were to rejoice because they knew they were saved, not because they knew they were saved as a result of rejoicing.
2. People who heard the gospel in first century times responded to it and then rejoiced (Acts 8:39; 16:34).

E. Spirituality is measured by works and fruits.

1. Part of the "fruit of the Spirit" are properly used emotions (Galatians 5:22-23).
2. Our place in eternity is based on the judgment of our works, not feelings (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Conclusion. Emotions make me think about fire. In the right setting they warm you. When they are out of control they burn you. Sadly, people are missing Christ because they are expecting religion to be dramatic (Luke 16:27-31). Salvation is not sensational; faith is not all emotion; emotions do not equal spirituality. Remember, you could sit right in the shadow of the cross and yet miss its meaning.

On the other hand, we do not want to be spiritual tadpoles. A tadpole is a creature with a huge head and not much else. Likewise, our heads bulge with biblical knowledge and we have little place for our emotions. We exist in the frigid waters of accuracy without carrying the torch of love. Nothing sets the heart on fire like fresh understandings of truth. It is when the mind is enlightened that the heart begins to burn. But, as we learn to express our emotions remember they only work properly when they are submitted to a deep love for God's truth. The heart shines, not to our pleasure and approval, but to God's glory!