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# SELF-CARE

*A Theology of Personal Empowerment  
and Spiritual Healing*

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## 3

## The Subjective Self: A Theology of Emotion

*How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?" (Ps. 13:2) "I was silent and still; I held my peace to no avail; my distress grew worse, my heart became hot within me. While I mused, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue (Ps. 39:2-3).*

One looks in vain through the standard textbooks in systematic theology for a discussion of the emotional life of the self. In the literature on the nature of persons, under the heading of theological anthropology, there is virtually no mention of the subjective aspect of humans as image bearers of God. When one turns to the subject of faith, where the role of emotion might well be expected to contribute to an understanding of the experience of salvation, the focus is on the object of faith rather than the subjective response of the believer. Where faith is taken to be a subjective element of human response, it is treated as a "gift," produced by the inward working of the grace of God.

Theologians appear to have an innate disregard for the theological significance of emotion, except to treat it as a relic of the "old self" and to use it in doctrinal disputes with other theologians!

## WHY IS EMOTION NEGLECTED IN THEOLOGICAL LITERATURE?

The lack of a theology of emotion in theological literature may be explained by the view of Thomas Oden. Theology, says Oden, has no interest in feelings and emotional responses. The affective life of the self, with its emotions, is better left to the psychologists.

*Christian teaching is not primarily focused upon an analysis of human feelings. However important our emotional responses may be to us, they are not essentially or finally the subject matter of Christian theology, which is a logos, a series of reasonings not about one's private feelings but about nothing less than theos as known in the faith of the Christian community. . . . Understandably, our dialogue with this incomparable One powerfully affects our feelings. . . but Christian teaching is less focused on the aftereffects than on the One who elicits and grounds these effects (Calvin, Inst. 1:13; 3:20).'*

This dichotomy between faith as an intellectual grasp of logos, or the objective Word of God, and the affective elements of faith as experience of self and God, has led to a distortion in our understanding of God as well as to a repression of the subjective life of the self in the faith experience. From the first Christian theologians up to the present time, the doctrine of the impassability of God has been held with various degrees of emphasis as orthodox theology. That God should have passions and be affected by anything outside of His own being, was intolerable to the theologians who wanted to preserve the unchangeable and eternally serene character of God. Only recently have Christian theologians begun to question this doctrine and to argue that God indeed experiences pain and suffering as well as pleasure and joy.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, this dichotomy forced Christians to repress their feelings for the sake of conformity to the objective "rule of faith" where right thinking took precedence over contrary feelings. If the affective life of the self is to be studied at all, it was assigned to the growing discipline of psychology, with

the assumption that emotions needed to be understood only to be made conformable to the life of faith, but added nothing to the quality of that life itself. This breach between the disciplines of theology and psychology has its roots in the failure of theology to have a biblical view of God and to construct an integrative model of the human self.<sup>3</sup>

Self-recovery begins with a restoration of the full range of human emotion as an integral part of God's image, in which each person is created. Restoration of that image entails the recovery of the self as God intended it to be and as revealed in His own person.

Wolfhart Pannenberg, a contemporary German theologian, has made an important step in this direction. Contrary to the Stoic tradition in Greek philosophy with its disdain for the emotions, Christian theology must be fully cognizant of the affective life of faith.

*Christian thinkers could not accept the Stoic condemnation of the affects for the simple reason that Scripture repeatedly speaks of the sorrows and joys of the devout. Referring to Paul, Augustine explained that even the good could experience sadness. The Gospel reports that even the Lord himself became angry, felt joy, wept over Lazarus, "desired" to celebrate the Passover with his disciples, and was troubled in the face of his own death. The question therefore is not so much whether the devout mind can feel anger, but rather why it feels anger; not whether it grows sad, but at what it feels sadness; not whether, but why it is afraid. The impassiveness (apathia) which is part of the Stoic ideal of the sage may be good and desirable in itself (provided it does not degenerate into insensibility of spirit, stupor), but not in this present life which is ensnared in sin. . . . According to Augustine, on our journey to God the affects are the feet that either lead us closer to God or carry us farther from him; but without them we cannot travel the way at all.<sup>4</sup>*

A theology of emotion is first of all a theology of emotional health, not an analysis of emotional sickness. Because theology begins with the revelation of God, a theology of emotion must first make clear the nature of God as one in whose image and likeness we are formed.

## THE EMOTION OF GOD

Abraham Heschel, the Old Testament theologian, locates the source of divine feelings in the depths of God's pathos. Therefore, to comprehend God one must have a "depth-theology" which does not relegate the affective life to psychology.

*In order to conceive of God not as an onlooker but as a participant, to conceive of man not as an idea in the mind of God but as a concern, the category of divine pathos is an indispensable implication. To the biblical mind the conception of God as detached and unemotional is totally alien. . . . The essential meaning of pathos is . . . not to be seen in its psychological denotation, as standing for a state of the soul, but in its theological connotation, signifying God as involved in history. . . . It is of extreme importance that theology should endeavor to operate with categories indigenous to the insights of depth-theology instead of borrowing its categories from speculative philosophy or science. . . . To theology, the ultimate theme is that which man is unable to objectify, which he refuses to conceptualize.<sup>5</sup>*

In contrast to the Greek concept of the divine, the Hebrew's knowledge of God was experiential and relational. Contrary to the concepts of God held by their contemporaries, their God, Yahweh, was a God who expressed pleasure, responded to the feelings of His people, and demonstrated anger at their disobedience and unfaithfulness. They had no difficulty in ascribing to their God both wrath and love, because they understood that behind both was a passion, a pathos, to which they could appeal in their own distress. Heschel points to this aspect of God when he says:

*God does not reveal himself in an abstract absoluteness, but in a personal and intimate relation to the world. He does not simply command and expect obedience; He is also moved and affected by what happens in the world, and reacts accordingly. Events and human actions arouse in Him joy or sorrow, pleasure or wrath. He is not conceived as judging the world in detachment. He reacts in an intimate and subjective manner, and thus determines the value of events. Quite obviously in the*

*biblical view, man's deeds may move Him, affect Him, grieve Him or, on the other hand, gladden and please Him. . . . Pathos denotes, not an idea of goodness, but a living care; not an immutable example, but an outgoing challenge, a dynamic relation between God and man; not mere feeling or passive affection, but an act or attitude composed of various spiritual elements; no mere contemplative survey of the world, but a passionate summons.\**

Humans, created in the image of God, relate to each other and to God through pathos (emotion) which is the root of true knowledge and the source of intention and action. The worst condition of the soul was apathy, having no feeling or passion with regard to God and others. The prophets repeatedly attempted to stir up the emotion of the people so that they might respond to the outpouring of God's divine passion, whether expressed as anger or love. The recovery of the self did not result in the denial or abandonment of the emotions, but in the transformation of apathy into passion and of negative emotion into positive. God was viewed as effecting new and healthy emotions in the self.

*Far from insisting upon their effacement, the biblical writers frequently regard some emotions or passions as having been inspired, as reflections of a higher power. There is no disparagement of emotion, no celebration of apathy. Pathos, emotional involvement, passionate participation, is a part of religious existence. The utterances of the psalmist are charged with emotion; they are outpourings of emotion. Reading the prophets, we are stirred by their passion and enlivened imagination. Their primary aim is to move the soul, to engage the attention by bold and striking images, and therefore, it is to the imagination and the passions that the prophets speak, rather than aiming at the cold approbation of the mind.'*

Because love is attributed to God as the essence of divine motivation and action, it is also the core expression of the image of God in human beings. Love is not only an act of volition, says the Swiss neo-orthodox theologian Emil Brunner, but it is an expression of *feeling*. To the Western mind, with its European

bent toward the abstract, the contrast between feeling and intellect is an assumed dichotomy in the self. Feelings, and therefore, experience, are discounted as subjective and unreliable. In the biblical perspective, however, feelings are something located at the core of the self in its orientation toward God and the other.

*Feeling therefore has its rightful place in man's "experience" of his relation with God, because this "experience" is something which man has received, and not something which he has created. To be apprehended by the love of God, means to be smitten in the very centre of one's being, to suffer it, not as pain, but as the supreme joy, as happiness and peace; that is, the Self knows that it is "at home" in God, and that the "I" and the "Self" have become one.'*

With the fall into sin, the original unity of feeling with love and knowledge was severed, resulting in the psychological separation of feeling from the spirit. The severance of pleasure from relation to God means that the self is abandoned to the world of the senses.

*In his feeling he is completely passive; he has no power over his feeling, the disharmony of his existence comes out in his feeling, against his will, while in thought and will, to some extent at least, he is able to go beyond himself. His feeling as a whole is the total balance of his existence which is drawn up and presented to him without his will. . . . This unstilled longing for life, this negative balance of life, is therefore in the Bible everywhere the most important point of contact for the Gospel message: "If any man thirst let him come unto Me and drink" (John 7:37).'*

While feelings lie at the core of the self, it is the human spirit which directs these feelings toward God and others. Without the sharing of spirit, the self is left with only sensations and feelings. Pleasure becomes joy when life is shared with another and, particularly, when shared pleasure has a common spiritual bond, as the apostle wrote: "So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).

## SOME BIBLICAL CASE STUDIES OF EMOTION

When we understand that God is experienced as having strong emotions, we should not be surprised to discover that humans, created in the divine image and likeness, are addressed by God at the level of feelings and emotions.

For example, we might look at the incident recorded in Genesis 4, where Abel receives God's approval for his offering while Cain's was rejected. "So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. The Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it' " (Gen. 4:5-7). God goes directly to the heart of the matter in addressing Cain's anger. The emotion of anger is not a sin. Cain is given a chance to deal with it by reconsidering what he has done. Sin may overtake him (it "is lurking at the door"), but he can still recover if he deals with the emotion of anger by revealing his deeper feelings of rejection. The reason for his anger—after all, God did ask him for a reason—is clearly to be found in his feelings. The emotion of anger cannot be dealt with until the deeper feelings of rejection and possibly shame, are disclosed. God was probing for these feelings, not blaming him for his actions nor his attitude.

Perhaps we can also see here a distinction between the feelings of rejection which Cain experienced ("his countenance fell"), and the emotion of anger. Anger is more than a feeling, it is an emotion which carries some attribution, usually against someone else, but also against oneself. The immediate shock of having the offering rejected is felt at the core of his being. Anger is the emotional response based on this feeling which causes his disposition and behavior to change. As it turns out, this emotion of anger was not dealt with by Cain and, fueled by other emotions of jealousy and revenge, he soon found opportunity to kill his brother, Abel (4:8).

A second example of the role of emotion can be found in the case of Elijah. Following Elijah's successful contest with the

prophets of Baal, he received word that Jezebel, the notorious and powerful wife of King Ahab, was seeking to kill him. "Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba . . . [and] he left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors' " (1 Kings 19:3-4).

The threat from Jezebel produced an immediate feeling of fear, leading to an emotional state of panic, depression, unworthiness, and finally a death wish. Awakened from a deep sleep by an angel, he found food and drink. This happened a second time, and on the basis of that nourishment, he went forty days and nights to Mount Horeb, where he took refuge in a cave. It was then that the Lord appeared to him. "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (19:9) His response was to complain that, despite his zeal for God's cause, everyone else has failed and he alone is left. It was then that he experienced a wind so fierce that it split mountains and rocks, followed by an earthquake, and finally a fire. Then there was silence, within which came the sound of a voice, that of God, who asked him again what he was doing there. When Elijah once more began to complain and to express his despair, God interrupted and gave him a commission and task to perform, undergirded by a promise. As he began his journey back, he encountered Elisha, who became his servant, and eventually his successor (cf. 19:5-20).

What is notable in this account is the role of Elijah's feelings and emotions in the context of his service to God. Despite having experienced the triumph of the contest with the prophets of Baal, Elijah was plunged into an emotional abyss by the threats of Jezebel. His feelings of fear and panic led him into an emotional state of self-pity, bitterness at the failure of others, and even to a desire to die. These are the classic signs of depression. At the same time, he is given physical nourishment by an angel of God and receives a word from God that begins with a question rather than with blame. "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Twice this question is asked (9:9, 13), permitting Elijah to express his emotions, after which there is a strange and eerie

silence, in which he finds self-recovery through God's empowerment and a new mission to perform.

Jonah is another example of one who experiences a similar process of self-recovery. Jonah, who had earlier fled from the mission God had sent him on, is rescued from the stomach of the whale and finally goes to Nineveh to preach God's judgment upon the city. When the people of the city repented, Jonah became angry. "He prayed to the Lord and said, 'O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me for it is better for me to die than to live.' " And the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" (Jonah 4:2-5)

The pattern is clear. With feelings of rejection, humiliation, and shame, came the emotional state of self-pity, anger, and a death wish. Jonah went outside of the city and sat in a sulking manner, demanding by this petulant act, that God go ahead and destroy the city, thus exonerating Jonah in His own eyes! As a therapeutic intervention, God caused a bush to grow up to provide him shade from the heat, causing Jonah to have feelings of happiness (4:6). But then God suddenly destroyed the bush, with the result that Jonah was once again plunged into his depressive state. "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" asked God. "Yes, angry enough to die," replied Jonah! (4:9) God then used the bush as a device to access the deeper feelings of Jonah, behind his anger. "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow. . . . And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city?" (4:10-11)

Once more we discover the importance of emotion in the recovery of Jonah's self-identity and in his restoration to functional life. The anger of Jonah was the point of entry for God's intervention. Yet, the anger was not addressed as something for which Jonah was to be blamed. Rather, behind the emotion of anger was the deeper feeling of care for himself. When that care was projected upon the bush, God used that as a basis for the

inner healing which Jonah experienced, leading (we hope!) to a reframing of that anger and a reentry on Jonah's part to the joy of God over Nineveh's repentance.

Finally, we turn to Jesus Himself, who was never shy about revealing His strong feelings and depth of emotion. Near the end of His life, one incident stands out. As John tells it, Jesus was suddenly overcome emotionally by the impending threat of death, and cried out: "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name" (John 12:27). The Greek word for soul is *psyche*, from which we derive our word psychology. It is not mental confusion that Jesus is experiencing, but a deep psychological upheaval. The author of Hebrews points to the same emotional state when he says: "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission" (Heb. 5:7).

We shall never know nor be able to comprehend the depth of feelings which raged through the soul of Jesus during those last days. What is clear is that He expressed Himself to God through these feelings and thereby seemed to have touched the inner core of that divine pathos of which the ancient Hebrews knew well. Not only that, but the core identity of Jesus was not merely "logos" as a principle of eternal reason, but that of "son." It was the intimate relation of a son to a father that Jesus reached for in His times of greatest stress. It was from Jesus that the disciples first heard that all too intimate and familiar word, "Abba" (father), and could only guess at the depth of feelings that were aroused by that expression (Mark 14:36).

"Be angry but do not sin," counseled the Apostle Paul (Eph. 4:26). "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. . . . Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:4-7).

Feelings are not only permitted, they are essential to our



personal and spiritual well-being! The core of the self is only approached through the emotions, be they negative or positive. Behind these emotions lie the feelings which expose the self to pain as well as to healing. Self-recovery begins with acknowledgment of those feelings which our emotions make visible.

## FEELINGS TOUCH THE CORE OF THE SELF

When called names as children, we learned to respond with the taunt, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me!" Wrong! We *felt* the blow of unkind words at the very core of our being and even now carry above or below consciousness, the anger, shame, and humiliation caused by words intended to hurt us.

Feelings are more than sensations produced by external stimuli. Feelings are more than emotions which flood the terrain of the inner self. Feelings *are* the self as a living and experiencing being. Where the self exists feelings are present, even if unrecognized or unexpressed.

Feelings may be the most critical indicators of well-being that we possess. The feelings that we acquire as infants and children form the matrix of the self for our adult years. Feelings need care and nurture as much, if not more, than the physical parts of the self. When our feelings are sick, there is no health in us. Without feelings, we have no contact with the world and no relationship with others.

Feelings are an essential and accurate expression of the self, says Archibald Hart, professor of psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary. While our emotions may be distorted by making incorrect interpretations of what we experience, feelings are connected directly to the self and serve as a guide to restoring the unity and health of the self.<sup>10</sup>

The earliest responses of the infant to the attention of another do not always require touch. Through all of its senses, the infant experiences itself under the stimulation of smells, sounds, and visual images as well as touch. The core of the self in the infant actively responds to the self of another and is experienced as feelings. Infants can actually *feel* the presence of another with-

out being touched. These feelings are not merely sensations which the self has, as though there is an unfeeling self hidden behind the responsive self. The feelings *are* the self, and the capacity to respond to the presence of another is the capacity to feel. This response means growth for the self when the presence is love and care.

When feelings as the response capacity of the self are nurtured and encouraged, touch can also produce the feeling of happiness and pleasure. This is the infantile "narcissism" I referred to in the first chapter. It is the intrinsic longing of the self for fulfillment which underlies the pleasure-seeking instinct. By reinforcing this sense of pleasure, infants begin to develop a sense of the self and a capacity to interpret the sense experience phenomena of life as either pleasant or unpleasant, a lifelong process.

Who knows what the feelings of pain and pleasure are like for the child too young to remember and tell us? The infant cries when hungry, hurt, and apparently when fearful. At least we associate the tears with the circumstances that seem to cause them. In his book *Persons in Relation*, John Macmurray said that there are body sensations for pain, but not for pleasure.<sup>11</sup> Feelings of pleasure, he suggested, are not the result of sensation alone, but originate in the capacity of the self to interpret sensation as feelings of pleasure. The same touch that produces a feeling of pleasure, if continued, will soon become uncomfortable and begin to feel painful.

## EMOTION INCLUDES FEELINGS WITH COGNITIVE CONTENT

We are now ready to clarify the subtle but important distinction between sensation, feeling, and emotion. Sensations are largely physiological responses to external stimuli with little, if any, cognitive content. My muscles may tighten or my "skin crawl." When I become aware of a sensation it is experienced as a feeling. The subjective element is now involved. This emergence of self-consciousness with regard to a feeling does involve some level of cognition to the degree that it registers with the self as "my feeling." I may feel irritated, apprehensive, or become more

attentive to the thing which caused the sensation.

With the entrance of cognition, the feeling tends to become an emotion. I become more aware of the context and experience a response to the sensation, such as anger, fear, or judgment. Emotion involves a higher level of cognition than does feeling, though the two tend to blur, so that we often use the words, feelings, and emotions interchangeably. Warren Shibbes associates cognition primarily with emotion and not with feeling.

*Feelings may be a part of what we mean by emotion. They may precede, coexist with or follow cognition. By feeling is largely meant sensation or bodily state. Cognition can usually affect or alter feeling only slightly. Feeling may depend on interest and attention. One may attend to the back of his neck or how his foot feels."*

From this it is clear that we can only articulate a feeling by expressing it as a thought. When we are unable to bring a feeling into a cognitive form, we are thus unable to communicate it. We are then dependent upon someone else to intuit what the feeling is, but even then, if it is to be actually verified, it must be recognized as having the form of a concept. "We ask for reasons, for emotions, but not for feelings," says Shibbes. "Because emotions involve cognitions they can be shared, whereas, feelings cannot be shared. . . . Feelings do not have objects as emotions do."<sup>13</sup>

Suppose someone swings a piece of lumber and strikes me on the back of the head. If I do not see the action, my first response is a sensation of extreme pain. Subjectively, I immediately acknowledge this as a feeling of distress, even though the sensation is almost entirely physiological. As I turn around to discover another person in the room with the board in his hand, I experience anger. Anger is a strong emotion which is directed toward an object. If I assume that this injury was inflicted upon me intentionally, my anger becomes outrage and I add moral indignation to the feeling of pain. As an emotion, anger carries an attribution made by the cognitive function of the mind. The attribution is a judgment made that the injury was inflicted upon me by this person and my anger is directed toward him, not

toward the point of the pain.

At this point, the person who struck me offers deep apologies and convinces me that it was an accident. He did not know that I was standing behind him. On being persuaded that the blow was not intentional on his part, and with the moral judgment resolved by his taking responsibility for it and offering to do what is necessary to restore me to health, I alter the original attribution which led to the emotion of anger, and allow the anger to dissipate. I am still left with the feeling of pain, however, and will make some new attribution with regard to the feeling of pain resulting in a different emotion. Now, my emotion may be one of self-pity due to the fact that I have no one to blame but myself for not being more aware of my surroundings! Or, I may adopt a stoical attitude and attribute the accident to one of those things which cannot be prevented. "Accidents happen," I assure the person who struck me, "and I will be okay when the swelling goes down."

In this way, we see that emotions may be caused by an attribution which has no basis in fact. I felt anger as long as I assumed that I was intentionally hit. The emotion of anger can be changed with a new attribution which corresponds more nearly to the reality of the situation. Feelings, however, are deeper levels of the self than emotion and are not so susceptible to "reframing" because they are not primarily the result of a cognitive attribution. This is why feelings are a more accurate indication of the state of the self than emotions. At the same time, feelings must be interpreted to be integrated into the subjective state of the self, even though there will always be some aspect of feeling which defies such transfer to thought. Pannenberg puts it nicely when he says:

*. . . every understanding, including every understanding of the self, must move beyond feeling into the medium of thought. . . . The fact remains, however, that in its reaching out to the totality of life, feeling anticipates the distinction and correlation effected by the intellect, even though because of its vagueness feeling depends on thinking for definition. Thought, on the other hand, can never exhaustively transfer to its own sphere what is present in feeling."*

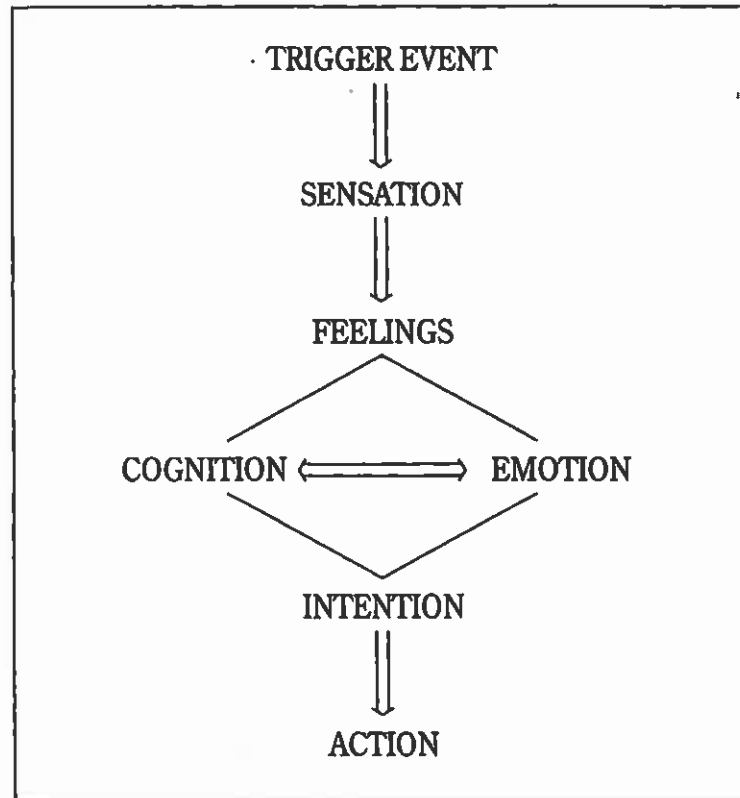


Figure 3.1

The sequence of sensation, feeling, and emotion can be illustrated by a diagram in which the feelings produced by a sensation are captured as an emotion by the act of cognition. This then leads to an intention and finally an action. If the action taken results from an intention which is grounded in an emotion formed by an incorrect or unrealistic cognition, there is liability for serious error leading to great wrong. In the case of Cain, for example, as described above, his anger seemed to be directed against his brother Abel, as though Abel had intentionally cheated him out of God's approval. Following through with an intention based upon this erroneous emotion, he took the desperate act of killing his brother. If he could have expressed his real feelings to God, the emotion of anger could have been trans-

formed into one of sorrow for displeasing God, and then gratitude for being given a second chance. Far from being a deterministic factor of the human personality, emotions are capable of transformation and change. We should never feel that we are the victims of our emotions. Emotion represents the creative possibility of growth and change in the recovery of self.

### EMOTION IS CREATIVE

Emotions are flexible and fluid. We can move from an emotional high to a low as quickly as the sun moves behind a cloud or a thought passes through our minds. Even where emotions have become habitual ways of perceiving the self, it is emotion that is most susceptible to change. Warren Shibles agrees and suggests that the key to such change is to understand the relation of cognition to emotion.

*The view that emotions cannot be changed, or can be changed only slightly, is false. It is now known that emotions, to a large extent, involve thought. Therefore, we can change our emotions by changing our thought. We can even learn how to change from being an angry person to hardly ever being angry. We can change our entire personalities in this way. We can eliminate negative emotions (jealousy, anger, envy, etc.) and develop positive emotions such as warmth, love, being happy, enjoying humor, etc.<sup>15</sup>*

Emotions are functional and stimulating. Emotion is not a "state of being" outside of our control. Emotional patterns were formed through cognitively conditioned experience and are subject to modification through "re-cognition." So-called "crimes of passion" are thought to be explained by uncontrollable emotions. But this view of emotion places it outside of the control of the self, and "passion" thus acquires a kind of fatalistic character. Shibles will have none of that.

*The view that "passion" is self-justificatory is unacceptable. It will not do to say one did an irresponsible act "out of passion." Emotion was once called passion. "Passion" derives from the Latin passio meaning:*

*"suffering, affection, being affected." Pathos derives from the Greek word meaning, "suffering, passion, misfortune." Affection derives from the Latin affectus meaning "to do something to," and from affectionem "a permanent state of feeling." This commits the fallacy of thinking that emotion is passive like a feeling."*

Feelings, of course, being related to sensations, are less amenable to change through cognition. We are not expected to change our feelings by altering our cognitive patterns, but we are able to direct those feelings through the emotions, which are susceptible to cognition.

"Re-cognition" might take the form of shifting from left brain to right brain mode of awareness. Many of our emotional patterns were first formed through awareness prior to the development of language skills. Right brain functions tend to process sensory data through imaging and visualizing. These forms of cognitive awareness stimulate emotions as much or more than logical and verbal cues. In this case, we acquire emotional patterns long before we create cognitive "maps" of our experience through left brain activity.

"Re-cognition" as a way of changing emotional patterns does not only mean forming new mental concepts (left brain), but experiencing new awareness of self and one's environment (others) through creative imaging and visualization techniques (right brain). Prior to much of the left/right brain research, William James suggested forms of consciousness which lie outside of the normal thought process.

*Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness, as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest [sic] of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation."*

If cognition is considered to be a function of the entire brain function, then imaging functions may be as useful in working

with the emotions as conceptual functions. This would be particularly the case where the formation of the emotion took place through a visual rather than conceptual process. The self's experience through visualization and imagination opens up the emotional life to a creative cognitive function which works along with the conceptual function. This was a very important part of the function of memory and imagination for the Hebrew people, as John Pedersen makes clear.

*New and large experiences make one forget the lesser; they are displaced from the soul and exercise no influence. When the new heavens and the new earth are created, then the Israelites shall no more remember the former, and it shall not rise in their heart (Isa. 65:17; Jer. 3:16). It means that the new order of things shall fill their soul, so that the old no more stirs any emotion in it."*

The intentions of the heart, which express the same thing as we mean by the term "will," are connected to the concepts of the mind through the emotions. This is why attempts to change behavior by appealing directly to the mind through concepts usually fails. The creative dimension of the self is not isolated in mental activity, but is a process of cognition which includes emotion as well as intellect. Imagination, for example, as the power of visualizing something new, receives its stimulation through the emotions. John Macmurray reminds us that reason is essentially an affair of emotion.

*It is not that our feelings have a secondary and subordinate capacity for being rational or irrational. It is that reason is primarily an affair of emotion, and that the rationality of thought is the derivative and secondary one. For if reason is the capacity to act in terms of the nature of the object, it is emotion which stands directly behind activity determining its substance and direction, while thought is related to action indirectly and through emotion, determining only its form, and that only partially."*

Reason receives its direction through emotion, and emotion receives its stimulation through feelings, for the self is its feel-

ings. And feelings are generated by the stimulation of contact with the self's environment and context. The stimulation of other selves, therefore, affects one's emotions in a different way from any other encounter. It is through social interaction that the emotions of the self come to rest beyond the feelings that produce them.

Psychologist Mary Vander Goot suggests that emotions are intended to signal some action with regard to persons and objects.

*The signaling function that emotions serve is tied in with actions. It is as though our emotions turn us toward certain actions and away from others. Those emotions that we experience as being undesirable tend to turn us away from their objects. For example, we try to move away from those things that we fear. In contrast, those emotions that we experience as being desirable tend to draw us toward their objects. For example, we try to be with persons whom we like."*

## EMOTION IS SOCIALLY CONDITIONED

The human self as created in the image of God is essentially social in nature and makeup.<sup>21</sup> It follows, then, that the self's encounter with other selves has an effect in shaping the emotions that is quite unique and unparalleled by any other encounter in human experience.

*In human beings, who are in a special way social beings, the self-transcendence of the affective life is largely oriented to the social environment. The positive affects, in which individuals open themselves to their world, are ecstatically inserted into interhuman relations."*

The self has its own emotions, to be sure. But these emotions were conditioned from the beginning by the stimulation of feelings in the self by contact with other selves. As I have suggested above, the cognitive power of the brain includes non-conceptual as well as conceptual functions. Long before concepts are shared, there is clearly a sharing of self with self at the emotional level.

Hans Urs von Balthasar expresses this thought beautifully when he says:

*No man reaches the core and ground of his own being, becoming free to himself and to all beings, unless love shines on him. . . . God, who inclined toward his new-born creature with infinite personal love, in order to inspire him with it and to awaken the response to it in him, does in the divine supernatural order something similar to a mother. Out of the strength of her own heart she awakens love in her child in true creative activity. . . . The essential thing is, that the child, awakened thus to love, and already endowed by another's power of love, awakens also to himself and to his true freedom, which is in fact the freedom of loving transcendence of his narrow individuality."*

This first experience of love is obviously experienced as a depth of feeling before it comes to expression as an intention. If the self should be impoverished of these feelings, its emotional life will be narrow and rigid. The "narrow individuality" of which von Balthasar speaks describes all too well the isolation of the self which has failed to integrate feelings with intentions. The emotions remain trapped within a pattern of self-attribution so that attempts to form effective and lasting relationships, despite the best of intentions undergirded with sacred vows, continually fail. Pannenberg explains why this is so.

*The orientation of human beings to a fullness of life that transcends them and manifests itself especially in the community of their fellow human beings finds expression in the positive affects and passions, especially in feelings of sympathy but also in joy and hope. These draw individuals out of their isolation and therefore may not be simply condemned as expressions of human egocentricity. On the other hand, it is characteristic of such affects, moods, and passions as are negatively related to the environment and other people (fear, anxiety, arrogance, sadness, envy, and hate) that they isolate individuals within themselves. The positive affects and passions, on the contrary, must be understood as expressions of an "anticipatory expectation" in which the human being is aware of the "positive or negative termination into which the value of his being necessarily flows."*

## EMOTIONAL WISDOM LEADS TO EMOTIONAL HEALTH

### 1. Listening to what our emotions tell us

The first question asked of Cain by God was, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen?" (Gen. 4:6) God prodded Cain to listen to his emotions, to hear what his anger was saying about the inner disposition of his soul. As long as Cain allowed his anger to be directed toward an object outside of himself, he was not listening to what his anger was telling him about himself.

"Why am I angry?" he might have responded. "I am angry because I feel devastated and miserable at the core of my very being. You have no idea what it feels like to have something you have carefully prepared rejected by the one to whom it is offered!"

"Tell me about it," God might have replied. And if Cain continues to express those deep feelings of rejection, hurt, and shame, he will find a reason for his anger and discover the place to begin the process of healing.

"Emotions signal something about the state of our well-being," says Mary Vander Goot. "Those which we experience as being desirable are those which signal that we are in a state that contributes to our good. Those which we experience as unpleasant are those which signal the need for a corrective. The signaling effect of emotion applies not only to our own well-being but also to the well-being of others."<sup>3</sup>

There is a wisdom hidden in our emotions, if we will but listen. Some of the messages which our emotions can reveal to us take us back to feelings which have long since been repressed or denied. We need to recover those feelings and reattach them to the living and growing self, making use of the emotional creativity at our disposal.

Self-recovery begins by seeking emotional health through emotional wisdom. Listening to what our emotions are telling us about our feelings is the beginning of wisdom.

### 2. Taking responsibility for emotional habits

"Be angry but do not sin," counseled the Apostle Paul, "do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Eph. 4:26). Anger can

become an emotional habit. Because it permits the self to project negative feelings on another, it serves well to protect us from deeper feelings of shame, hurt, and rejection. Taking responsibility for anger does not mean denying this emotion, nor repressing the feeling which gave rise to it. Rather, it means doing something about the anger instead of letting it do something to you—and to others.

Paul, apparently, felt that such emotions, which often led to hurtful intentions and actions, were susceptible to the management of the self, if not transformation into more positive emotions. "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you" (Eph. 4:31-32).

I don't think that the Apostle Paul meant that we should "ventilate" our emotions as a form of releasing them. Rather, the emotions which controlled such attitudes and behavior were to be "put away." Unfortunately, Paul does not tell us how this is to be done! But it surely involves a letting go of the negative emotions by the creative process of forming new and more positive ones. The practice of "venting" one's emotions so as to gain freedom from them is judged by writer Warren Shibles not to be helpful.

*We are told we must release our emotions or tell what we really feel inside us. The picture of "release" and of emotions as things "inside us," is damaging and unhelpful. It creates the view that we are irrational and that there are evil forces within us at work which we can do little about except to let these "forces" be released now and again as water is released from a dam. . . . To "release" emotions is not to effect a cure, but in fact is to create a harmful pattern of behavior. One may find himself constantly "releasing" his emotions, thereby often becoming angry and violent. The therapist who encourages the patient, "Look at your emotions," "Tell what you really feel," or "Be honest about your emotions," is misleading the patient. . . . Instead, it would be more sound to ask the patient not about his emotions but what he thinks, what he has said to himself and to others, what his beliefs are about himself and others, what images recur, and what he has done."*

As I read Shibles, I sense that he does not appreciate the role of feelings in the formation of the emotions and the importance of accessing those feelings to release the emotion from its habitual pattern. Emotions, such as anger, jealousy, and fear, may rest on incorrect cognitive attribution. To this extent Shibles is correct in suggesting that a cognitive approach be taken in order to re-frame the cognitive attribution behind the emotion. Vander Goot offers a similar approach when she points to the fact that emotions may be either true or false.

*There is a sense in which emotions may be true or false. Just as the truth of a statement depends, in part, on how well it corresponds to an event, so the truth of an emotion depends on how appropriate it is to an event. . . . Emotions may be spoken of as true or false because emotions are a form of knowledge. . . . They are triggered by the way we have perceived or know past events in our lives, and then they become part of our store of feelings that signal to us what needs to be done."*

When we have listened to what our emotions tell us, we have moved out of the "blind rage of feelings" into an understanding of why we feel and act this way. We then can begin to take responsibility for emotional habits by tracing them down to their roots. "Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit" (Matt. 12:33).

### 3. Locating our emotional center

In chapter 2 I said that, while our passions move us, it is spirit that gives the self direction and hope.<sup>24</sup> The human self has a spiritual core that is created in the image and likeness of God, who is Spirit and life. While feelings are the core of emotions, spirit is the core and center of self. As we noted earlier, genuine feeling, according to Brunner, is not possible without spirit.<sup>25</sup>

The emotional center of the self is neither located in the determinative events of the past nor in the capricious events of the present. The self has its source in Spirit and therefore has a destiny which is also its center. This is a center which cannot be molested nor violated.

*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matt. 6:19-21).*

Note that we are to lay up "for ourselves" treasures in heaven; the desire for self-fulfillment is not itself an unworthy emotion. The self needs a center which reaches back into its origins within personal history and, at the same time, orients the contemporary self to a guiding star of future hope which shines its brightness into the darkest of days. As Vander Goot reminds us, "people are longing for . . . an ideal that could be the lodestar of their lives."<sup>30</sup>

How could we discover and claim that center for ourselves without being stimulated by the emotion which it summons forth within us? Our emotion is the touchstone of that star, and as Augustine said so many years ago, "The affects are the feet that either lead us closer to God or carry us further from Him; but without them we cannot travel the way at all."

What our feelings cannot tell us and our emotions cannot teach us, is what the Bible calls wisdom. In the biblical view of the self, wisdom comes from the heart and from the heart issues the intentions and actions which receive God's blessings. In the next chapter we will explore further the nature of the self as "heart-felt response" to the Word of God and the practical realities of life.

## SUMMARY

- The absence of a theology of emotion in textbook theology reflects an abstract concept of God. The Bible reveals to us a God who expresses strong feelings and who cares deeply about the objects of his love: pathos is at the very core of the being of God.
- God confronts persons at the level of emotions and uses emotion to motivate response and to bring healing and hope: emotion is at the core of faith and love.

- Emotion differs from feeling in that emotion has the added factor of some attribution at the thought level: when we think about our feelings, we stir up emotions.

- Because emotions arise through perceptions based on feelings, emotions can be changed with new perceptions: this makes emotions susceptible to change.

- We begin to take responsibility for our emotions when we listen to what they tell us and allow them to be guided by the spiritual interchange with God and others: emotional health has its source in emotional wisdom.

### PRAXIS

*As the pastor met with Norm and his wife, he found them composed and outwardly cordial to each other. After a few minutes of casual conversation, the pastor asked, "Have you talked about the incident when Norm was arrested for indecent exposure?" "That's between him and God," Ella quickly responded. "He said that he confessed his sin to God and that he had been forgiven. So I have forgiven him too." The pastor waited for a few moments before speaking. He noted that Norm and Ella were sitting close together on the couch holding hands, but they did not look at each other. Then he asked quietly, "How do you feel about Norm now?" Letting go of his hand, Ella began to weep. "I feel humiliated and angry at what he put our family through. But I know that I'm not supposed to feel that way. I have told him that I forgive him, but he doesn't believe me."*

- Why did the pastor ask Ella about her feelings rather than attempt to reinforce the spiritual value of forgiveness?

- From what was discussed in this chapter about feelings and emotions, how do you account for the anger which Ella feels toward Norm?

- As long as Ella feels humiliated, how can she deal with her anger?

- What emotion do you suppose lies behind Norm's inability to believe that Ella has forgiven him?

- What next step should the pastor take in giving pastoral counsel to Norm and Ella?