

The Failure of Emotional Religion

[Norman H. Street](#)

Norman Street was Pastor of Jarvis Street Baptist Church, Toronto, at the time this article was written. This article is one of a series of Annual Spring Lectures given by faculty members of Toronto Baptist Seminary at Berean Baptist Church, Flint, Michigan during May 1983.

True worship has to be first of all, not of the emotions, but of the mind. "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God with all thy mind." The whole work of grace begins there. "You have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered unto you." A message, which appeals to the mind, first. Are we saying that emotion has no part in true Christian experience? No, we are not denying the emotional side. Indeed, there is nothing that will move anyone more, in the realm of their emotions, than truth when it is first perceived and understood, and the glory of it is felt. And surely, there can be nothing more horrible than preaching, or singing or praying without any feeling or any emotion. Someone in serious emotional trouble might be diagnosed as schizophrenic or manic-depressive, but one of the signs of very serious mental disturbance is what is called flat affect, where there are no feelings at all. The person becomes an absolute blank, or else the emotional response is utterly inappropriate. They laugh when they should cry and they cry when they should laugh. Now, while there is no room for the inappropriate, there is most decidedly, a place for emotion in the Christian experience. Emotion that moves our hearts and fills us with song, or causes us to weep because the truth of God has gotten hold of us. Emotion divorced from truth is a delusion and a snare. So, while I am for emotion, I am against emotionalism. Now let us turn to the Word of God as found in Luke 9:57-62:

And it came to pass, that, as they went in the way, a certain man said unto him, Lord, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest. And Jesus said unto him, Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath no where to lay his head. And he said unto another, Follow me, But he said, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. Jesus said unto him, Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and preach the kingdom of God. And another also said, Lord, I will follow thee; but let me first go bid them farewell, which are at home at my house And Jesus said unto him, No man having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.

Now lest any of us misunderstand at this point, “Suffer me first to go and bury my father”, does not mean, “My father has died and the funeral is going to be in another day or two.” This was an eastern expression meaning my father is an old man and someone needs to care for him. Generally, this duty fell to the lot of the first-born son to stay by until the old man finished out his days. Then the son saw to the last rights for him. This duty perhaps requiring several years, was called “burying my father”. In that light, the answer of Jesus, “Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and preach the kingdom of God”, doesn’t seem so harsh or unfeeling.

Let us look again at the words of verse 61 “Lord I will follow thee; *but*”. We also read twice, “Me first”. We see the heart of the problem. They have gotten a vision of something more grand and glorious than they had ever known. They recognized in Jesus the most wondrous man they had ever heard or seen. Their heart and conscience had been touched by the magnetic person of our Lord. They were profoundly moved emotionally with a strong urge to leave everything and follow Jesus. Now, on second thought about this, they are not quite as ready as their words would indicate. In each case, there was something they wanted to do first. Jesus said, “No, you would follow me? Then follow me here and now.” There are several lessons that we are intended to learn and I would like to deal with five of these.

1. *Good intentions unfulfilled, are the life story of people whose religion lies mostly in feelings.*

We are all familiar with people who are always intending somehow to start reading the Bible everyday; always intending to be a good Christian; always intending to attend church more regularly; always intending to do more than they have ever done in helping with Sunday school or choir or ushering; always intending to give much more money to the Lord and to missions than they have. But, somehow it is ‘always intending’. Every now and then they hear a sermon on TV or perhaps in church which really shakes them up and they may go to their knees at home or come to the altar of prayer in church, and there they pray again, over all of these intentions. Somehow, they never do fulfill those intentions. Instead, it seems that they live their whole life on feelings.

Sometimes they have very good feelings but sometimes they are very bad. Sometimes they are in rapture over wonderful things that are happening, or over some inspired service, some moving sermon or some compelling radio broadcast. At other times, they are in a state of wretchedness and misery. They seem to constantly oscillate from one to the other through the years. They like Gospel music, and they have their favourite preachers, especially men who arouse in them a storm of feelings. They will say, “He makes me feel so good, he gets right to my heart.” That may be quite all right in some cases, but so often it seems that people never realize the difference. They confuse a genuine work of

saving grace in the soul with mere enjoyment of things religious. Because the name of Jesus is connected with it, everything seems to be all right. I am concerned that there are more people in evangelical circles than we care to think about, whose religion is more emotional than it is spiritual. They are awash in a sea of feelings when they should be grounded in the Word of God and gaining a true understanding of saving truth. There is great peril in this.

If feelings become the measure of reality, we are in danger. Whether feelings of great joy because all seems to be well, or feelings of sorrow and distress because one has been convicted of some sin, if the intensity of our feelings and the frequency of our feelings becomes the proof of reality, there is indeed great danger, because it is very subjective. We must find the ground of salvation, not in our own subjective experience, but in the great facts of Gospel history — the fact that God became flesh and dwelt among us and that Jesus kept the law of God for the glory of God and for His people. Then, as a sinless sacrifice, He took our sin upon Himself and died an atoning death. These are facts of history: He died, was buried, rose again and ascended into heaven. We sing, “My faith has found a resting place”. Surely that resting place is not within ourselves and in the realm of our feelings and emotions. It is in all that Jesus Christ is, and all that He has done for us. Unless we rest our faith and confidence in that which is outside of ourselves, and unless we are trusting in Jesus Christ alone, then the peril is that our anchorage is in ourselves and our emotional experiences.

Those who are caught up in feelings are not interested in any deep thought, even about our basic, most primary need. What need is that? It is our need for a righteousness God will accept. This is so important that it is the theme of Paul’s great epistle to the Romans. But people whose religion is largely emotional have never heard serious, expository preaching through Romans, nor would they listen if it were attempted. So they never face the great questions, yet they suppose they have the answers! What is this righteousness? Where is it to be found? How can a sinner obtain it? The most wonderful thing that any sinner could discover is that he can never attain to this righteousness and that he can never weave for himself a garment that will be acceptable to God. He is helpless and hopeless in his sin unless he finds the hope that is in Christ. “And can it be that I should gain an interest in my Saviour’s blood?” That is the question. Is it possible, is it true that I have a share in salvation? Is there something in the death of Christ for me? Did he die for me who caused His pain, for me who Him to death pursued? If it is true that I am saved by the grace of God; if it is true that I am clothed in the righteousness of Christ, what amazing grace! That in turn does bring emotions, but the emotions are arising from truth believed and its saving, transforming power manifested in the life; not emotions — which produce restlessness because they are free-flowing with no reference to Gospel truth.

During the first fifteen years of my ministry I gave the altar call almost every time I preached. If my message had been a moving Gospel theme, there were certain persons I knew would come forward. If it was a searching sermon on the second

coming of Christ, or a sermon on heaven or on hell — it would shake them up. They would come forward, weeping and asking for prayer. They always did. I used to ask myself if these people were lost and needing to be saved. I don't know that I was ever sure. Were they backsliders needing to be restored? Who could say? Many of them never did find a resting place. They reminded me of those sad words of Paul when he said, "Ever learning and never able to come to a knowledge of the truth." That is a tragic statement. Perhaps my message would be a strong exhortation to Christians with a challenge to renounce the world and repent of unChrist-like ways. Perhaps it would be a call to prayer, or more faithfulness in giving to the Lord. In any case, I knew that as soon as the invitation was given there would be one or two men and certain women who would come forward whether anyone else did or not. They would come down the aisle under great emotion, weeping their way to the altar.

At first, I myself as the pastor, was moved to tears because I saw in all of this, encouraging evidence that the Lord was blessing the preaching of the Word. After a while it dawned on me that there was something wrong. These sincere people never did what they were always promising the Lord they would do. They talked about it, prayed about it, and wept over it, but with all the weeping and the prayers, there was never any noticeable or lasting change in their behaviour or way of life. After some years of this, I became disenchanted. I began to question the wisdom of the altar call or invitation system, to use Iain Murray's phrase. I continued to conclude the service in this way, though not with the same intensity. The sad thing is that some of these people to whom I refer thought of themselves as being very spiritual. Part of what they saw as proof of their spirituality was that every time the invitation was given, they came down the aisle. After all no one can ever get too right with God, nor can anyone ever get too close to the Lord. They felt that they were always hungering and thirsting after righteousness. They felt that they were always seeking more of God. They felt that this was a sign of greater spirituality. They would even pray about others, and mention by name those they felt should have come forward. They were caught up in pure emotion and it wasn't doing anything for them. Good intentions, but —

2. There is no substitute for obedience.

Tears, Yes. There would be something wrong with us if we never wept — if we never wept as we preached, if we never wept at the table of the Lord, if we never wept when confronted with our sin. There would be something wrong with us if we never wept over the sorrows of other believers. There would be something wrong with us if we never wept over those who do not know the Lord and are in wretchedness, living empty, futile lives. So, don't misunderstand me, I am not saying that we should renounce all emotion and pursue pure intellectualism.

What I am saying is, that tears are no proof of repentance. They are not even proof of sorrow for sin. The proof is obedience. Doing what the Word of God says

is the proof. I have heard men and women praying and pleading with God, arms upraised, crying out to God with tears flowing down their face, as they promised the Lord that they would live for Him. However, promises are no substitute for action. It is doing God's will that counts. The Word says, "He that doeth the will of God abideth forever." None of us does the will of God as we should, and all of us are conscious of falling short in failure and sin. We recognize that God's will is not fulfilled just because we avoid certain sins, and likewise that there are many things we are to do that we so often fail to do. God has revealed His will to us, "To him that knoweth to do good and doeth it not, to him it is sin." We are conscious of that. It is doing God's will that counts. If all we do is make promises, it is like offering God a post-dated cheque. In some circumstances, a post-dated cheque is all right, but remember, it is worthless until it is cashed.

When God speaks to our hearts in some passage of Scripture or through the truth of a hymn, then we must do what He says. Nothing must interfere with our obedience, at the very peril of our soul. Every Christian senses this, but often Satan beguiles us. Our hearts are prone to wander and we feel it. Pilate's wife sent a message to him concerning the Lord Jesus, "Have thou nothing to do with that just man for I have suffered manly things this day in a dream because of Him." Pilate should have listened to what she was saying, for it was a word from the Lord to his soul, but he did not obey. Whatever feelings he had about the Lord Jesus, whatever trembling in his soul, whatever convictions he had as to the real innocence of Jesus (he did say this man hath done nothing amiss) were submerged because he was concerned about his political future. He rode roughshod over his conscience and choked down all misgivings and feelings of guilt, to secure his future at any cost. It was all to no avail as history tells us. Thoughts and feelings and good intentions have to be translated into resolute, decisive action. It is no good to say, "Lord I will follow Thee *but* . . ." We must say, "Lord I will follow Thee today with no ifs or buts. By your grace I am marching out. Today, tomorrow and always." Are we following Jesus or are we just floating around on a sea of emotion?

3. Warm feelings about Jesus Christ may deceive us concerning our faith.

Here are these three would-be-disciples. They were strongly drawn to Jesus Christ. Quite evidently they have warm feelings concerning Christ. They are emotionally moved. They would have numbered themselves among those who believed on the Lord. They certainly were not among His enemies. They were not among the doubters. What became of them? They were left with nothing to say and what will become of us, when we feel drawn to Christ, believing the Gospel to be true, not openly rejecting Christ, but rather feeling comfortable among Christians and often attending the House of the Lord, with no doubts about the person of Jesus Christ and His claims to deity, His sinless life and atoning death, and yet we do not actually commit ourselves to follow Jesus. I ask, what will become of us? Will we be unsaved believers? More often than we suppose,

there are people in our audience who believe everything that every Christian ever believed, but they are not saved. They fall short of saving faith though they are “believers”. This is shown by their indecision. They speak ‘Lord’ in one breath, and “Suffer *me first*” with the other. Well then, who is Lord?

4. Indecision is really disguised refusal.

If you analyse it, refusal at the bottom, is really unbelief. We have now come to something truly serious. These men did not know their own hearts. Neither do we. This is why we must cast ourselves upon the sovereign mercy of God. This is why we find the apostle Paul so often writing, “Be not deceived”. Why did these would-be-disciples delay? Because they did not know their own hearts. They did not truly believe that it is best to do God’s will and follow Jesus Christ *now!* They were not like the people we read of in Hebrews 11: “By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed, and went out. Noah being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved of fear” — did something about it. He did not just wallow in his emotions but “prepared an ark to the saving of his house, by the which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith.” “By faith Abel offered unto God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain.” These men acted on their faith. They followed through, but the men who came to Jesus saying that they would follow Him, did not. They were just words, spoken in the emotion of the moment. It could not be said of these three men, “You have obeyed from the heart, that form of doctrine which was delivered unto you.” It could not be said, “You became followers of us and of the Lord.”

Feelings may deceive us into supposing that our faith is solid when all the time at the centre of it all is self rather than Christ, and that is a delusion. Sometimes when severe disappointments come in life, some shattering grief, some awful reversal of circumstances, some crippling illness, some financial disaster, it is then that the failure of emotional religion is seen all too clearly. In the midst of crisis, those whose religion has been mostly in their feelings throw up their hands and say, “God has failed me. I have gone to church all these years and I have tithed my money and now the Lord has let me down.” So, they leave the church and you can’t do a thing with them, or get through to them. They have shifted from one kind of feeling to another, but they are still in the realm of feelings. They have yet to be gripped, possessed and transformed by Gospel truth. Their mind, soul and whole being needs to be ministered by the Spirit of God. Jesus is here standing with these men who say that they will follow him, but they walk away. That is still happening. People are saying, “I tried to live the Christian life”, or “I was a Christian once” but now they turn their back on the Lord and walk away. They now have feelings of indignation against God. They are angry with God. They are not able to accept what has happened in their lives. They blame God for it. It is a sad and tragic thing, because you and I will never be able to fathom the windings of our own minds. The depth of depravity and deception in our own hearts is beyond us; let alone what is in the mind and heart of another. We

cannot judge others. It is ours to warn and to plead, but we are not in a position to x-ray the soul.

If we have only sentimental feelings we are going to be in trouble. These men instead of being decisive were indecisive. That is what I have been speaking of all of this time: Indecisiveness. Jesus demanded that men be for him or against him. It must be one or the other, "He that is not with me is against me." Indecision is a tragedy because it can become a fatal habit. We may seem to be obeying His call while actually we are caught in a conflict of interest. Jesus said, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness." He spoke plainly to these men, especially the one, "Let the dead bury the dead, go thou and preach the kingdom of God." In other words, "Do what you believe you are being called to do." If we have not said a final, decisive yes to Christ, then we have refused Him. The last thing that anyone wants to believe is what the Bible says about us all: "We are at enmity against God." We don't want to see ourselves as enemies of God. We wouldn't curse in the name of the Lord. We are not against Jesus Christ, but we can't have it both ways.

5. Christ's time is always now.

It is not tomorrow it is now. Are there things that the Lord has been speaking to us about? Is it true that every time we find ourselves in the Lord's house, every time we are with Christians, every time we are brought into contact with the Gospel there are certain things which always rise before us? Unmistakeably, it is God dealing with the soul. How merciful and patient the Lord is. Many of us are going to be in heaven because the Word of the Lord came to us tire second time or maybe even the two-hundredth time. How merciful and gracious the Lord is. But we will not be left in this state indefinitely. In this **story** the moment of opportunity came and they replied, "I will follow thee withersoever thou goest". Jesus told one what it might cost. "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests," and the would-be disciple was gone. We don't read of him again. It may be that the Spirit of the Lord has been dealing with you about an open confession of your faith in Christ. Perhaps there are people in the office, the shop, or at home, who have no idea of you convictions. You have never said a word. But you must come to the place where you do confess Christ, as your Lord and Saviour. It may be that having professed faith in the Lord, we have postponed baptism. The Lord deals with us about these things. Every now and then, we may have a great emotional experience, but we don't follow through and do what the Lord would have us do. It may be that we are withholding tithes and offerings. It may be that for a long time we have owed an apology to someone. This message has many applications.

I don't want to leave it just in the realm of those who have nothing more than emotions and who are not truly saved. It is also possible that in our Christian lives we reach a plateau or are stranded on some sandbar and we are just not

going anywhere until the tide comes in, lifts us and moves us again. But when the tide comes in, unless we launch out in obedience, we will be left stranded as before! Our Lord said, "While you have the light walk in the light lest darkness comes upon you." That also has application to the Christian. There have been times when I have walked in darkness. There have been times when I wasn't prepared to do that which I knew to be God's will. It is only by the mercy of God that we find ourselves in the light again. We have that wonderful passage in John about confessing our sins. It is all linked with walking in the light of truth, as He is in the light, and having fellowship one with another. Let us put things where they belong.

True salvation and true religion has to do with God's truth and the great facts concerning the dying, risen and living Saviour. We must consider our need of Him, our relationship to Him, our abiding in Him, and our following Him. There certainly will be emotion but there will be much more than that. There will be certainty. There will be a reasoned faith. We will indeed be able to give a reason for the hope that is within us with meekness and fear.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [Reformed Perspectives Magazine Forum](#).

Subscribe to Reformed Perspectives Magazine

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [Reformed Perspectives Magazine](#), please select this [link](#).