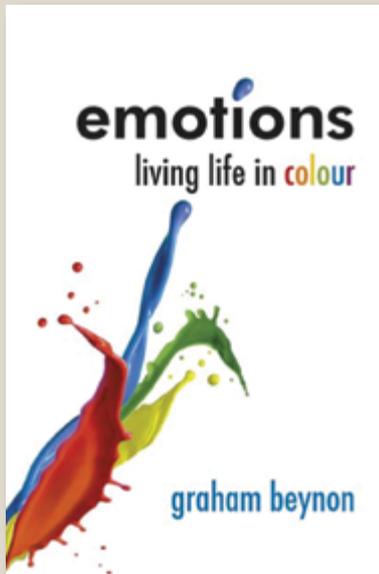


Faith and feelings

Feelings play an exalted role in modern culture...

and also in many churches. We talked to Graham Beynon, whose book *Emotions* explores the place of feelings in the Christian life and the church community



How did you come to write *Emotions*? Can you tell us something of the story of how the book came to birth?

Graham: One of the apprentices at our church asked if we could do some study on the topic of joy. So I set them the task of a word study on joy and rejoicing. I was really surprised and taken with some of the findings which came from that.

For example, Jesus tells us not to rejoice in our abilities but in our salvation (Luke 10:20). And Paul says he worked for the 'progress and joy in the faith' of the Philippians (Philippians 1:25). These verses mean that we can choose what we rejoice in and that growth in joy, while not automatic, is possible.

That led to my giving a topical sermon on joy in the Christian life.

From there I started reflecting on other aspects of emotions and reading more. Eventually I ran a seminar course on emotions at our church and began speaking on it elsewhere.

Out of the three – thinking, feeling and acting – which would you say most characterises you personally? Have you had any sort of journey from one to the other – for example, from facts to feelings?

I guess my background is the 'thinking' type. I don't think I did down feelings or actions, but I naturally leant towards thinking (I first studied engineering!). I hope there has been a gradual balancing of that through my experience of life, especially in church ministry. You can't be in ministry very long before you wrestle with problems

people have in their thinking, feeling and living. And as you talk about those problems, whichever aspect someone presents with, the others are involved.

Doing the teaching on emotion and then writing the book has brought greater reflection and clarity, though. I think I'm more emotionally aware than I was, and more concerned for godly emotions.

'How I feel' is given pride of place in life and the media today. In fact, you memorably say our culture 'leads people to think with their feelings, decide with their feelings and live by their feelings'. Do you think emotions are one of the important gods of our time?

Very much so. Back in the 1980s, people were concerned about being successful. Today they are more concerned about being happy. In speaking about decisions, people might say, 'I had a good feeling about it', or 'It felt right'. People vary in what feelings they are looking for, but satisfaction, contentment and happiness are high on the agenda. You can see that very easily by looking for how these emotions are appealed to in advertising.

What effect does the idolised place of feelings today have on Christians as they live in the world but are not of it?

The danger is that we are 'of it' without noticing. Some areas of Christian living are well known and clear – such as issues over sex or alcohol. We might struggle not to conform to the world, but at least we know that's what happening.

But with an area such as emotion, we might conform to the world without even realising it. We can buy into the world's idols and then make our relationship with God the means of meeting them: I want to feel content and happy and that's what God should give me. Ideally, of course, what it should mean is that our emotional life is another area where we are distinct and different and 'shine like stars'.

Is there a 'should' about emotions? It sounds almost odd in your book to hear you tell your readers that they should or should not feel certain things.

It is strange – and that's been an interesting point to teach. But after a little reflection I've found people tend to see the point and agree.

Suppose we said that we cannot control our feelings and we are not responsible for them; suppose there was no 'should' about feelings. Then we would have to say that any area of feeling is not really sin. We'd end up saying we cannot sin with our feelings. But we all know what it is to feel envy,

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or inappropriate anger, or excessive sorrow over unimportant things. We know these things are wrong.

Then we start reading verses such as Luke 10:20 where Jesus tells his disciples not to rejoice in one thing but to rejoice in something else instead. That must mean there are shoulds and should-nots involved, and we can take some control, or influence our emotions.

Once we get into the dynamics of emotions and where they come from, we see how they flow from our wrong values and loves. That too helps people see why an emotion is wrong, even if we feel it fairly instinctively.

Feeling, thinking and acting – what happens when these get out of balance in the ministry of a Christian leader?

All sorts of things! We can evaluate our ministry wrongly because we focus on one of those aspects as the most

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important measure. We can focus our ministry wrongly because we try to cultivate just one of those aspects in other people as the most significant marker of growth. We can perform our ministry wrongly because we are concerned with what we think or feel or do, rather than being concerned about all three at once in a connected way.

Once upon a time, churches were places where it was difficult to be emotionally honest. How can leaders best help people to be both honest about their difficult feelings, and to grow in 'godly feelings'?

There are several strands needed. Honesty needs to be encouraged by example, teaching and opportunity. That is, we need to talk about the importance of our emotions, be honest about our own emotional life, and give appropriate opportunity for sharing of emotion.

But we're not after emotional honesty for its own sake; it is so that we can grow in godliness. So we must also teach about the importance and possibility of growth in godly

emotion. As with all areas of growth in church life, we need to keep gracious acceptance (which encourages honesty) alongside a positive agenda for growth, which means we don't stay where we are.

As a preacher, how do you avoid the temptation of using emotion to persuade a congregation? Or do you think emotion plays an essential part in preaching?

Emotion does play an essential part in teaching whether we like it or not. We communicate something about what we are saying by the way we say it. All knowledge has an emotional component to it, or emotional consequence that flow from it. Robert Murray McCheyne once heard that a friend had preached on the ungodly being cast into hell. He asked the friend, 'Were you able to preach it *tenderly*?' The manner of speaking was crucial.

We should want to exhibit the appropriate emotion to our content, in keeping with our own character and personality. Just as we want our listeners to be very clear on what we

have said, we should also want them to be clear on how we felt about what we said. We also want our listeners to feel appropriately and our expression of emotion is part of how we do that.

However, we want them to feel because of the truth we are speaking, not because we've told a sad story, or a funny story, or are good at rhetoric.

Do you believe God is a God who feels?

I do, but we have to be very careful in how we understand and describe divine emotion. The Westminster Confession famously said that God was without 'passions'. However, in the 17th century that word referred to 'lower' level emotions that were more passive, such as fear. It is noteworthy that the confession did not say that God was without 'affections', which were higher level emotions such as sympathy or love. What is being guarded here is that God cannot be an emotional victim of his creation. He cannot be made to feel something against his will.

But I do think scripture presents us with a God who feels sympathy for his people, anger against evil, compassion for the lost, and so on. So I do think God has an 'emotional life' which has similarities to ours, but we need to be very careful in how we describe it.

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