

# *Take Your Feelings to Church*

Many years ago (more than I like to admit) my life was a shipwrecked mess. I was in my mid-twenties, my very young marriage had ended, addiction in many forms had fully taken hold and I was swimming in the fallout. I had been the proverbial "church kid" who married a girl from our youth group. Our families were well respected in the community. My life looked great. My life looked great, but it wasn't great.

I became an expert at outward compliance and played the role of hero child with skill and intentionality. It worked until it didn't. Marriage, financial stress, anxiety, and rage finally broke the facade and as my hero child mask was ripped off my face, I was ill equipped to navigate life well, and my young wife paid dearly. When the unrelenting pressure and sin finally took its final toll on her, she left, and had every reason to.

I walked into Pastor Mike's\* (not his real name) office facing, for the first time, the end of my ability to maintain the mask. I poured out my feelings, admitted my guilt; I lamented where my sin and trauma had taken me, how afraid I was about my future, and cried openly. I told Pastor Mike that I was in despair and saw no way out of the dark place I was in.

Pastor Mike was a fine and godly man; a great husband and father and a powerful preacher who lived out a bold faith and operated out of a kind heart. As I poured out my internal world in his office, he leaned up, forearms on his desk, lowered his voice and with tenderness said, "Phil, you're emotional which is understandable, but you can't trust your feelings. It's faith over fear, man. Your feelings will only lead you to more trouble."

I took Pastor Mike at his word and began to try to learn more about God; to try harder to be good; and to exercise willpower over the addictions that entrapped me. And I plunged deeper into a false role. I tried harder, learned more, and attempted to get tougher...and lived out a cycle of harnessing willpower, intellect and outward morality that initiated and maintained an endless cycle of abstinence and binging. Outward compliance worked for a while, but ultimately the internal world: feelings, memories, relational experiences and limited capacity to emotionally attach won the day.

"Feelings can't be trusted." "Faith over feelings." "Just stick with the truth and leave feelings behind" (where they belong). "Facts are friends." These and other phrases are common ways the church has framed the role of feelings in human life. Obviously not all churches hold to this position, but the facts are well rehearsed in churches across the industrialized Western world.

## TWO POLES

Human beings are feeling creatures. Therefore, churches form a practical theology of emotion by how they present the biblical view of the experience of emotion and their expression through preaching and teaching. The tendency of the church has been to cluster their beliefs and instruction around one of two poles. One pole is actually a modern version of stoicism in which feelings and the expression of feelings are to be logically framed and for a person to practice apathy when faced with the emotional impact of life. The other extreme is to express feelings in a largely unfiltered manner with little to no boundaries in place to modulate their expression.

It is well documented that Americans relish the idea of rugged individualism. Individualism finds its expression in phrases like, "I can do it myself," "I don't need any help," "I'll just gut my way through this," and other such phrases. Unfortunately, this mindset has seeped into way the church has taught the scriptures and catechized its members about the role of emotion in the Christian life. In many ways, practicing apathy and remaining unaffected emotionally by life has become synonymous with spiritual maturity.

While rugged individualism lived out in the stoic idea of reframing life around knowledge and facts is rampant in the church, what Warfield termed, "in its fullness every human pathos," or unfiltered emotional expression is a common phenomenon as well. Pastors and other Bible teachers use phrases such as "don't let emotion dictate your worship," or "it doesn't matter what you feel, just stick with the facts" as an apologetic towards stifling what is sometimes disruptive and boundaryless expression of feelings in inappropriate places or at inappropriate times. In some churches this type of emotional expression is encouraged. In fact, these faith practices, if one is not expressing feelings dramatically, he or she is viewed as spiritually immature, or in need of a "deeper experience" of God.

## EXPERIENCE AND EXPRESSION

Two opposite tendencies early showed themselves in the church. One, derived ultimately from the ethical ideal of the Stoa, which conceived moral perfection under the form of *apatheia*, naturally wished to attribute this ideal *apatheia* to Jesus, as the perfect man. The other, under the influence of the conviction that, in order to deliver men from their weaknesses, the Redeemer must assume and sanctify in his own person all human patha, as naturally was eager to attribute to him in its fullness every human pathos.

Warfield, B. B. *The Emotional Life of Our Lord* (Crossway Short Classics) (pp. 16-17). Crossway.

Both of these extremes represent a fundamental misunderstanding of the difference between emotional experience and emotional expression. Human beings are made as feeling creatures, and the regulation of emotion is the key component of healthy relationships. Curt Thompson states, "If attention is the ignition the of the mind, then emotion is the fuel in the tank the engine runs on." Therefore, it is imperative that the church develop a strong practical theology of feelings; a theology that helps people healthfully regulate their "relational fuel." The first step is to distinguish the difference between emotional experience and emotional expression.

Emotional experience is fundamental to human relationships. We have feelings about things, situations, and people we care about. We feel lonely for one another when we are physically or emotionally absent from one another. We feel angry about injustice, abuse, and misuse of power. We feel hurt when we experience relational woundedness. We feel fear when we are threatened which lets us know we need to cry out to God and to others to be with us in our fear. We feel guilt when we have caused harm. When we are willing to experience her feelings in a healthy manner, we are then able to practice the "one anothers" that are peppered throughout scripture. God has graciously given us feelings so we have a way to communicate to him and to one another the nature of our relational experience, which is one of Paul's and other New Testament writers' main themes in the epistles.

Emotional expression is the means through which we communicate to God and to one another the nature of our experiences in relationship. If we do not express our feelings to God and others in a healthy way, those feelings develop into unhealthy conditions. For instance, if we do not deal with hurt, that hurt, which is designed to lead us to recognize our need for reconciliation will remain unaddressed and will harden into resentment. If we do not express healthy fear, we will lack discernment and become either reckless in our relationships are isolated from God and others through anxiety or even rage. If we do not express anger, then the anger turns inward and hardens into depression which isolates us from one another and from being able to experience intimate relationship with God.

To revisit a previous theme, imagine attempting to live out the "one anothers" in the church if we are operating in resentment, anxiety, rage, or depression vs expressing our hurt, fear, and anger to one another. These conditions are actually a result of reacting to feelings rather than responding to them. It is reactivity that many pastors and other leaders are battling rather than feelings themselves.

What well-intentioned pastors and teachers have inadvertently done is, in an attempt to help Christians experience and express emotions in a healthy way, have pushed people to one of the extremes or the other. On one extreme, feelings are bad and unbiblical and must be avoided at all costs, while on the other extreme true spiritual maturity is synonymous with boundaryless emotional expression that lacks discernment and can cause confusion and unnecessary emotional turmoil.

## "SHE LET ME CRY AND BE SLOPPY"

About 5 years after my visit with Pastor Mike, I walked into Jackie's\* (not her real name) office a defeated mess. She was a tiny woman with piercing dark eyes and a professional demeanor. I wanted to tell her my story of failure and humiliation, but I wanted to "do it right." In other words, I wanted to stick with the facts only, because "feelings were not facts." I began to pour out my story to her, being careful to not cry and to make sure she knew I was aware of my culpability in the matter and would keep a stiff upper lip and live out my practical theology of stoicism. As I was explaining the story and my cognitive apprehension of it, Jackie leaned over and said, "Phil, I am so sorry about all of this. This must be devastating on so many levels. It is clear that you are aware of your fault in this, but I am keenly aware of how sad I feel as I hear you. I'm sorry."

As you might imagine, my stoicism imploded under the force of care, and Jackie's expression of sadness. I wept freely and I wept long. Jackie did not make it her purpose to deliver me from the pain; she helped me struggle well through the pain.

Many years later in graduate school I received an assignment to write about a time we had a truly therapeutic experience. I immediately thought of Jackie and her shepherding me through that "valley of the shadow of death," and conclude the essay with these sentences: "She let me cry and be sloppy. She guided me with structure and competence, but mostly love and care."

## A HARD AND COMFORTING TRUTH

One of the last teachings of Jesus as recorded by John is found in John 16, particularly verse 33. In that verse Jesus states,

*...In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart. I have overcome the world."*

Not "maybe." Not "if you're not careful." You WILL have tribulation. The word means "to be pressured from outside." It is consistent to the meaning of the word to liken it to a blood pressure cuff squeezing your arm. The first couple of pumps are ok, but after several more, it feels like your arm is being squeezed to the point of bursting and it hurts. Thus, the idea of "tribulation; being squeezed." Jesus is saying, "in this world, you are going to hurt and there is no way around it. But take heart...pay attention to your heart and stay present. It is the same phrase used when Jesus turned to look at the bleeding woman who touched his garment from behind (Matt. 9:22), and in several other instances in the New Testament. "Stay. Have courage to remain present and address the hurt. I have defeated all evil in the cosmos but until I return to redeem it all, you're going to be squeezed." John 17 gives a hint as to how we are to do that; by pursuing relational unity in the body; by persevering with one another keeping our eyes on Jesus (Heb. 12:1-20)

One of the traps of trauma is the (enemy-inspired) reflex to not speak of the traumatic event(s). In fact, it is not uncommon to hear the phrase, "He/she never spoke of how horrible it was," and to assign virtue to the individual who endured the trauma for not speaking of it. Satan loves for humans to suffer trauma and revels even more when those who have suffered do not express their emotional experiences of what they have endured. As relational creatures, humans are made to attach and to experience safe relationships. Sadly, in many cases, the church has led the charge in pushing hurting people even further into trauma through messages that frame feelings as bad, or unbiblical.

## WHAT IF?

But what if the church began to equip its members to attach at a deeply relational level through the expression of their experiences? What if the church refused to cluster around the pole of practical stoicism or the pole of unstructured reactivity? What if people had the freedom to cry openly, to lament deeply, and even protest safely with structure and safety? And what if the church became a sanctuary where the Lord was worshipped and exalted in a room full of people who practice the "one anothers" in truth-telling, confessional, emotionally healthy ways? If that is to ever happen, we're going to need to preach, teach and practice healthy emotional experience and expression...and take our feelings to church.

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. (Gal. 6:2)