

*God,  
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In fact, Thomas Dixon, writing from a researcher’s point of view, states that perhaps the term is so difficult to define and understand that it should be cast from usage in psychology and science altogether.<sup>2</sup>

Even though clarifying exactly what is meant by “emotion” has proven difficult, human experience is significantly impacted by feelings, passion, dreams, hopes, visions, imagination, desire, longings, and hope. Throughout its pages, we see how emotions guide and impact relationships between marriage partners, business partners, parents, uncles, aunts, friends and a host of other relationships. As a result of their research on love and attachment, Lewis, Amini, and Lannon go as far as to say, “emotions are at the root of all that we do,” and “emotion is the messenger of love; it is the vehicle that carries every signal from one brimming heart to another. For human beings, feeling deeply is synonymous with being alive.”<sup>3</sup>

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The God who is love and eternally (before time) relational, introduces himself in the first verse of the first book of our bible. The Eternal One who has never not existed created the cosmos with declarations: Let there be light, and days, and nights, and vegetation, and water and the vast expanse, and animals, and on and on until the action slows noticeably. In Genesis 1:26 God said, "Let **us** (notice the plural) make man **in our image, after our likeness.**" And then, something remarkable happens. God has a conversation with the man and woman he created. (Gen. 1:28-30) The God of the Universe, who had just created the world itself, begins to speak with the two creatures that now bear his image and likeness. "Image and likeness, means an image which is like.

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Chapter 2 ends with a wedding. It ends with the married couple enjoying a bountiful, carefree existence with no shame whatsoever; abounding in love for each other and experiencing unbounded pleasure and fulfillment. Adam and Eve experienced relationship with God, each other, and their individual selves on an uninterrupted intimate level. They were completely exposed in every way; physically, emotionally, relationally with no shame or desire to cover themselves in any manner. HOWEVER, ("Now," ESV) "the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made." (Gen. 3:1)

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Genesis 1 and 2 depict a time when there were no feelings of shame, guilt, loneliness, fear, sadness, anger, hurt, or disgust. Rage, self-pity, depression, anxiety were non-existent. Revelation 21:4 tells us that the day is coming when Jesus will wipe every tear of pain away forever. In the meantime, we live in the pages between Gen. 2 and Rev. 21, and the language of that life is the language of emotion.

In those pages we read of and experience a God who feels intense emotion. God hates (Ps 5:6; Prov.6:16-19; 11:5; Is 1:14) he feels anger (Num 11:1; Ps 2:5; Jer. 4:8) and regret (Gen. 6:6).

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B.B. Warfield observes, (Jesus') "emotional movement was aroused in our Lord as well by the sight of individual distress (Mark 1:41; Matt. 20:34; Luke 7:13) as by the spectacle of man's universal misery (Mark 6:34; 8:2; Matt. 9:36; 14:14; 15:32). The appeal of two blind men that their eyes might be opened (Matt. 20:34), the appeal of a leper for cleansing (Mark 1:41)—though there may have been circumstances in his case that called out Jesus's reprobation (v. 43)—set our Lord's heart throbbing with pity, as did also the mere sight of a bereaved widow, wailing by the bier of her only son as they bore him forth to burial, though no appeal was made for relief (Luke 7:13)."<sup>12</sup>

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The triune God does have and does express feelings throughout the pages of scripture. He is not apathetic, nor is he an aloof observer. He is God Eternal; Creator and Sustainer who has given us His very image, and in his steadfast love has given us in his image and likeness the freedom and ability to express ourselves to him, to our inner recesses of self, and to others as we navigate the pages between Gen. 2 and Revelation 21 together, living out his call in Romans 12:15 to “rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep” through the language of emotion and mutual struggle and love, originating from God who Himself is love.

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<sup>12</sup> Warfield, B. B.. *The Emotional Life of Our Lord* (Crossway Short Classics) (p. 20). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

The triune God does have and does express feelings throughout the pages of scripture. He is not apathetic, nor is he an aloof observer. He is God Eternal; Creator and Sustainer who has given us His very image, and in his steadfast love has given us in his image and likeness the freedom and ability to express ourselves to him, to our inner recesses of self, and to others as we navigate the pages between Gen. 2 and Revelation 21 together, living out his call in Romans 12:15 to “rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep” through the language of emotion and mutual struggle and love, originating from God who Himself is love.

## God, Humankind, and Emotion

“Emotion.” For some, even saying or hearing the word activates...emotion. But what is it? Or perhaps the question is, “What are *they*?” Is “emotion” a singular entity or a collection of things? A phenomenon so seemingly common as emotion seems so difficult to understand. In my work as a therapist/pastor/elder I have asked and been asked the question, “What is emotion?” and its various offshoots, such as “What is so important about them?” “Why does it matter what emotion I feel?”<sup>1</sup> hundreds, if not thousands of times. The answer to the question matters relationally, spiritually, and naturally, emotionally. However, the essence of the word itself remains difficult to capture.

In fact, Thomas Dixon, writing from a researcher’s point of view, states that perhaps the term is so difficult to define and understand that it should be cast from usage in psychology and science altogether.<sup>2</sup>

Even though clarifying exactly what is meant by “emotion” has proven difficult, human experience is significantly impacted by feelings, passion, dreams, hopes, visions, imagination, desire, longings, and hope. Throughout its pages, we see how emotions guide and impact relationships between marriage partners, business partners, parents, uncles, aunts, friends and a host of other relationships. As a result of their research on love and attachment, Lewis, Amini, and Lannon go as far as to say, “emotions are at the root of all that we do,” and “emotion is the messenger of love; it is the vehicle that carries every signal from one brimming heart to another. For human beings, feeling deeply is synonymous with being alive.”<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the history of the church, many teachers and leaders have been hesitant to explore the place of emotion in the pages of scripture and in the lives of Christ followers. Many Christians have been reared in faith practices

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this essay the words “emotions” and “feelings” will be used interchangeably

<sup>2</sup> ...despite the continuing proliferation of books, journals, conferences, and theories on the subject of “emotion,” there is still no consensus on the meaning of this term. Some even believe that it should be thrown out of psychology altogether. Among the scientists surveyed by Izard, there was moderate support for the view that the term “emotion” is “ambiguous and has no status in science,” and that it should therefore be abandoned. Thomas Dixon 2012, *Emotion: History of a Keyword in Crisis*, National Library of Medicine, <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3573683/>>

<sup>3</sup> (Emotions) are the opalescent pigments that gild our lives with vibrancy and meaning. And emotions do more than color our sensory world; they are at the root of everything we do, the unquenchable origin of every act more complicated than a reflex...In all cases, emotions are humanity’s motivator and its omnipresent guide. Lewis, Thomas; Amini, Fari; Lannon, Richard (2000) *A General Theory of Love*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group Kindle Edition

that recite slogans such as “you can’t be led by emotions,” “don’t trust feelings,” “facts not feelings” and other ways of conveying these messages. It is not uncommon for people to sit in my office and tell stories of being shamed, rebuked, and even mocked for their tears or protest. All too often the message has been, “Stop feeling \_\_\_\_\_ and rely on God.” This is an unfortunate misstep in spiritual formation and discipleship.

Calvin, in response to this mistaken “theology of emotion” sought to clarify the importance of feeling and expressing feelings as a natural part of being human. “Many falsely suppose that feelings, which God has implanted in us as natural, proceed only from a defect. Accordingly, the perfecting of believers does not depend on their casting off all feelings, but on their yielding to them and controlling them, only for proper reason.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite science and psychology’s difficulty in defining or clarifying the meaning of “emotion,” I offer this simple definition to guide the rest of this essay:

Emotion (feelings): “the subjective experience and expression of relational interaction with God, self, and others.” The definition includes “relational” as an essential element. From the moment of birth, it is evident that humans are made for relationship and will (literally) cry out for it.

In a fascinating study at San Francisco State University, researchers discovered that even blind babies will react with a smile while interacting pleasurably with their mothers. Specifically, “Such a smile comes from a developing creature unable to speak, walk, or even sit up, but he already knows how to express happiness through a configuration of muscular contractions he has never seen on anyone’s face. His knowledge has to be innate. A blind baby’s smile must reflect the brain’s inherited emotional architecture. “Spontaneously produced facial expressions of emotion of both congenitally and non-congenitally blind individuals are the same as for sighted individuals in the same emotionally evocative situations.”<sup>5</sup> The study states,

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<sup>4</sup> For that is false whereof they dream that those affections proceed only of corruption, which we have naturally from God. Wherefore, the perfection of the faithful consisteth not in this, that they put off all affections; but that they be moved therewith only for just causes, and that they may moderate the same. Calvin, John. Calvin’s Commentary on Acts Vol. 2, Christian Classics Ethereal Library <https://calvin.edu/centers-institutes/meeter-center/files/john-calvins-works-in-english/Commentary%20037%20-%20Acts%20of%20the%20Apostles%20Vol.%202.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> “Spontaneous Facial Expressions of Emotion of Congenitally and Noncongenitally Blind Individuals,” David Matsumoto, PhD, San Francisco University and Bob Willingham, PhD, Center for Psychological Studies, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol. 96, No.1.

"(the baby's) knowledge has to be innate." As we will address later in this essay, "innate" simply means, "what God breathed into humans at creation."

Theologians have observed that the triune God, one God in three persons, exhibited triune love and relationship within the trinity itself. While studying the book of Genesis in seminary, Dr. Harry Hunt remarked, "From the very beginning of recorded time, God, in his perfect love, reached out of the love the trinity was (and is) and created all things...the crowning achievement being the creation of the human beings he designed for relationship with each other, themselves, and him."<sup>6</sup> The trinity, in love and desire for relationship was present in creation, before time began (eternally existent) and is put on display throughout the pages of scripture as intensely relational and in an unbreakable union of love.<sup>7</sup>

God is intensely relational and loving. He exists within himself in perfect love, or to put it more succinctly, in the words of scripture itself, "God is love." (1 John 4:8b) For a more comprehensive treatment of this text, I recommend my friend and colleague Nathan Wagnon's excellent essay, *Love the Center*. (*not sure how to cite this*)

Nathan writes, (quoting Anthony J. Kelly in *God is Love: The Heart of the Christian Faith*) "If God has always been a loving Father begetting the Son, and if the Son has always loved the Father in joyful obedience, and if the Spirit has always proceeded from the unity of the Father and Son, energizing and binding together, then we must affirm this flawless, others-focused, self-giving unity is the essence of God. "God is love" is the sine qua non of all true theology."

The God who is love and eternally (before time) relational, introduces himself in the first verse of the first book of our bible. The Eternal One who has never not existed created the cosmos with declarations: Let there be light, and days, and nights, and vegetation, and water and the vast expanse, and animals, and on and on until the action slows noticeably. In Genesis 1:26 God said, "Let **us** (notice the plural) make man **in our image, after our likeness.**" And then, something remarkable happens. God has a conversation with the man and woman he created. (Gen. 1:28-30) The God of the Universe, who had just created the world itself, begins to speak with the two creatures that now bear his image and likeness. "Image and likeness, means an image which is like.

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<sup>6</sup> Lecture notes from "Genesis" Dr. Harry Hunt, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Ft Worth, TX 1992

<sup>7</sup> As the Father loves the Son, the son loves the Father. The Father loves the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit loves the Father. The Son loves the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit loves the Son. This reciprocal love of the three persons exists in the unbreakable union of the undivided Trinity. Insofar as we are enabled to be "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4), "from one degree of glory to another" by the Spirit of the Lord (2 Cor. 3:18), we are brought, in a creaturely way, into this communion of the love of God. Robert Leman, *God is Love*, Ligonier, May 1, 2004 <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/god-love-letham>

The simple declaration of the Scripture is that man at his creation was like God."<sup>8</sup> "Like God"...made for relationship.

In a stunning act of grace, God creates humans and puts His identity in them. The realization that God's love would (and did) extend to humanity to that extent strikes at something far deeper than a recognition of a fact. It lands upon humanity in feelings, passion, awe, inside all humanity, the place of intimacy, attachment, relationship, and emotion.

The second chapter of Genesis begins with the word, "thus" (ESV) which alerts the reader to think "so, as a result," or even "therefore." God finished his work and established the Sabbath (Gen. 2:1-3). Beginning in verse 4 the author (as if he wants to re-visit an event he still can't comprehend) begins to unfold the enormity of the creation in 10 stages that constitute the entirety of the rest of Genesis.<sup>9</sup>

The author reaches back into the creation narrative again, before anything existed except the triune God himself. Gen. 2:1-6 reads like a passage set to orchestral strings that form a backdrop of the Great Artist creating plants and bushes and all manner of vegetation, and looking back to Genesis 1, animal life as well. It is easy to imagine the music building into the more robust sound of brass, woodwinds, into a crescendo as verse 7 announces "then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature."

Though clearly a metaphor (more technically an anthropomorphism) since God is spirit and has no actual face, the image of God Eternal bending down to press his "face" against Adam's face and breathing into him his very breath; actually, his very likeness and image, speaks to our relational self as being of value and dignity. The language is deliberate and illustrative and allows us to experience the expansiveness of God's relational care and attachment to us:

"Formed" (Heb. *yasar*) means to shape or mold and implies that God deliberately did this with tender loving care. ***It describes the work of an artist.***<sup>10</sup> (emphasis mine)

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<sup>8</sup> Hodge, Charles. *Systematic Theology*. 3 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887.

<sup>9</sup> Study notes on Gen. 2:4-50:26 in ESV Gospel Transformation Bible, Crossway. Wheaton, IL 2013

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Constable, Dr. Constable's Expository Notes, Plano Bible Chapel, Genesis. <https://planobiblechapel.org/constable-notes/>

The "breath of life" (Heb. *nesama*) was "God's breath that gave Adam life, spiritual understanding" and quoting Leupold,<sup>11</sup>

"Not this breath itself but the manner of its impartation indicates man's dignity."

The rapid expansion through the centuries of the field of counseling, psychotherapy, psychiatry, and pastoral care as well as gallons of coffee brewed over the years to fuel night-long talks between families, friends, and partners is a testament to how far humanity has drifted from the truth of what God bestowed on humanity in Gen. 2:7. As a pastor and practitioner for over 30 years and as a human, I can attest to the necessity of having a healthy relationship with "self," that humans bear the *imago dei*, God's image and likeness. However, both as a practitioner and human I can attest to how difficult it is to maintain that healthy relationship...As Gen. 2 follows Gen. 1 with "thus," it is not unreasonable to place a "however" at the beginning of Gen. 3 to bridge the reader from Chapter 2.

Chapter 2 ends with a wedding. It ends with the married couple enjoying a bountiful, carefree existence with no shame whatsoever; abounding in love for each other and experiencing unbounded pleasure and fulfillment. Adam and Eve experienced relationship with God, each other, and their individual selves on an uninterrupted intimate level. They were completely exposed in every way; physically, emotionally, relationally with no shame or desire to cover themselves in any manner. HOWEVER, ("Now," ESV) "the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made." (Gen. 3:1)

Sin entered the relationship and the ensuing fall ("the fall" as theologians have labeled it) echoes to this day and will continue to echo until the Lord returns to restore order. What had been relational, spiritual, emotional, marital, and physical intimacy in perfect form was destroyed. The one thing that could tear apart this perfect union of love happened.

In one of the most remarkable interchanges in the scriptures, God, unwilling to abandon his creation, calls to them (Gen. 3:9). The language indicates that God initiated a call out, a cry of pursuit of their hearts despite and due to their sin. His question, "Where are you?" strikes at the heart of the question children ask their parents, what husbands and wives ask each other when the car ride is silent, or conflict is in the air. The question of relationship: "*Where are you?*" When this question is asked in this context, the one asking is not wondering at which GPS coordinate the other is located. The question stems from feelings

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<sup>11</sup> Leupold, Herbert Carl. *Exposition of Genesis*. 2 vols. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1942.

and is expressed emotionally and is a cry out for a heart response. The language of pursuit and answer being asked for is emotional and relational.

This conversation between God and the couple serves as a microcosm of life since the Fall. Humans struggling to remain connected to self, the *imago dei*; to others in order to answer the God-fueled movement toward relationship; and to God, the one who breathed into our collective earthly father His image and likeness.

Genesis 1 and 2 depict a time when there were no feelings of shame, guilt, loneliness, fear, sadness, anger, hurt, or disgust. Rage, self-pity, depression, anxiety were non-existent. Revelation 21:4 tells us that the day is coming when Jesus will wipe every tear of pain away forever. In the meantime, we live in the pages between Gen. 2 and Rev. 21, and the language of that life is the language of emotion.

In those pages we read of and experience a God who feels intense emotion. God hates (Ps 5:6; Prov.6:16-19; 11:5; Is 1:14) he feels anger (Num 11:1; Ps 2:5; Jer. 4:8) and regret (Gen. 6:6).

Perhaps the consummate expression of love that gets to the heart of God expressed relationally and with dogged pursuit of our hearts is found in one of the most cherished and familiar verses in all of scripture, John 3:16. God did indeed love the world so much that he did indeed give his only begotten son in loving pursuit of relationship.

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