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What are affections?

ANOTHER COUNTRY

It was a Sunday. I (Josh) was waiting for the standard post-service handshake with the vicar. The one difference this time was that I had been abroad until recently, flying back to London the day before. I was jetlagged, sleepy and eager to connect again with my home church minister. He had always been a supporter of my involvement with student work at Cambridge, and I knew he would be excited to hear how the work was going in the far-flung corner of the world to which I had temporarily relocated.

The person before me performed the *shake-smile-thank you*.

Now, you have to realise that the culture where I had been was very different from South London. Only a few days before, I was immersed in a place where friends greeted each other on the street with a kiss. The accepted practice between male friends was something like this:



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- left hand behind friend's head...
- right hand firmly grasp friend's hand...
- pull head towards you...
- plant kiss on cheek.

This was not how it was done in South London.

The woman in front of me went off glowing after her brief word with the preacher. It was my turn. I looked at him. My left hand moved behind his head, my right hand grasped his right hand, and I tugged with the left hand to bring his head close to mine. The look on his face was one of sheer horror.

'What have they done to him!' was the thought that flashed across his eyes.

We never actually kissed (you will be glad to know). I averted mid-flight like a jumbo jet pulling up from the runway at Heathrow. Proper protocol was resumed.

'Thank you for the sermon,' I said.

Kissing friends as a sign of affection belonged to another country. It is not what we do.

DEFINING 'AFFECTIONS'

What are affections? They are not touching, hugging, kissing, or (even) feeling: *Affections are the movement of our thoughts, feelings and will towards a desired object, person or event. An affection is what inclines us to something (whereas an effect is what results from something). Affections are what move us towards action.*

When we talk about *preaching to the affections*, we do not mean preaching that is sentimental, or touchy-feely, or lacking intellectual rigour or content. That is not preaching to the affections; that is empty-headed preaching. Nor do we mean preaching that is lacking in close attention to the text of Scripture, or that skims over the surface of the passage in order to create an easy emotional high in the hearers.



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Affections are more than emotions (though they include them). Affections are defined by their result: they are what happens within someone when action is produced. We all know it is possible to feel something and do nothing about it. We also all know it is possible to think something and do nothing about it. But when our feelings and our thoughts are combined with a decisive will-to-action, then the internal event that generates this movement is called 'affections.'

Preaching to the affections is 'affectional preaching' (not *affectionate* preaching). Preaching to the affections means preaching that targets the heart. And the heart in the Bible is not merely our feelings, nor merely our thinking, but both intertwined; the heart is the centre of who we are.

Because affections are 'what move us towards action,' affections are:

- part of the brain's response to data
- necessary for rational functioning
- no more fallen or sinful naturally than reason
- orientated towards godly desires in the godly person
- not proof in themselves that someone is spiritual

Affections are part of the brain's response to data

When the Bible talks about the heart, it does not mean what most people today mean by the heart. The heart is not the seat of emotions/feelings/passions. It is the place where emotion and reason come together. The heart is the core of the person.

The primary agenda of the Bible is not to map a careful psychology of the inner life. The Bible is first and foremost a book about God and His Word to us. Nonetheless, while we use heart to mean emotions, the Bible uses heart to include emotions *and* thoughts *and* will.



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‘The fool says in his heart, “There is no God”’ (Ps. 14:1), where we might say ‘I was talking to myself’ or ‘I thought to myself,’ assuming that such self-talk took place in the brain. The Old Testament word for heart means heart, centre, middle, suggesting that it is referring to the core. Heart includes the personal, emotional, intellectual and volitional (see Exod. 9:12; Judg. 18:20; Deut. 7:17; 1 Sam. 2:35; 1 Sam. 16:7; 1 Kings 3:9). It includes the will, the intellect and feeling (see Mark 2:6, 8; Mark 3:5; Luke 24:32). Heart, combining emotions and thoughts, is the accepted definition today according to the *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* and the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.

We are talking about overlapping sets of feeling and thinking. There is an overlap between what the Bible calls heart and what the Bible calls gut. There is an overlap between what translators from the King James period onwards described as affections and heart, or what they called thinking or mind.

Jesus said, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’ (Luke 10:27). Jesus is not intending to give us a series of precise distinctions about the inner workings of people. Instead He is saying that the first commandment is to love God with absolutely *everything* you have – heart, soul, strength and mind, each of which integrates. These terms are less like distinct categories and more like a Venn diagram of overlapping sets.

Affections are necessary for rational functioning

Even though emotions are integrated with rational functioning, emotions can still disturb clear thinking. Emotions sometimes get in the way of being rational. That is why we do not expect a judge in a court case to be related to one of the parties, why we realise that



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we might not be thinking clearly if we have not eaten properly, and why it is typical advice to avoid making any major decisions after a serious bereavement. Physical, hormonal, circumstantial changes can alter emotions, and emotions can cloud reasonable and logical action.

But there is also evidence that *without* emotion our rational capacity would be diminished. People who spend their days and nights dreaming up ways to create artificial intelligence wonder whether our ability to create computers that *think* will be limited by our ability to create computers that *feel*. Even some of the most rationalistic philosophers have agreed. Immanuel Kant, hardly a sentimental man, said that 'nothing great is ever done without passion.' The case of Phineas Gage appears to confirm the interrelation of emotion and reason. In 1848, the construction foreman Gage had a large iron bar driven through his head. Amazingly, he did not lose consciousness, even making a full recovery apart from loss of vision in his left eye. Gage, though, no longer showed appropriate respect for ethical convention. He made decisions that violated his own personal interest. A more recent 'Gage,' Elliot, had a tumour the size of an orange removed from his brain. Elliot also recovered, including mentally, but he became unable to make decisions. Elliot noted that his feelings had changed. While he appeared able to examine logical options, he was not able to come to a conclusion. He lacked the emotional kick to bring him to the point of decision.

The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio examined these and other matters in his book *Descartes' Error*, concluding that emotion, far from interfering with rational function, was essential to it.¹ Similarly, bestselling books like

1. Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error* (London, U.K.: Penguin Books, 2005).





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Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink* and Sheena Iyengar's *The Art of Choosing* suggest that in certain circumstances – when we have developed expertise – our decisions may be best informed by our affectional responses, rather than in spite of them. For instance, a skilled and trained football player can 'over-think' when he is faced with a shot at a goal, whereas if he follows his well-honed instincts, he may be more likely to score.

The cause of this is the hard wiring of our brains. While no doubt much still needs to be discovered, and some ideas that are now current will be rejected, developments in brain mapping suggest that emotions have a 'low road' and a 'high road.' There is the immediate emotional response (high road), but then that response can become entrenched in our brain as a short cut (or low road). The ability of our brain to form such short cuts can make it very difficult to break addictive behaviours. But it can also mean that learned responses to events over time build a path of affectional wisdom. Perhaps there is a biochemical reality to the old phrase, 'Sow a thought, reap a deed; sow a deed, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a destiny.'

Reason and emotion are both fallen

Biblically, both reason *and* emotion are fallen.

Consider 2 Corinthians 4:4, 'In their case the god of this world has blinded the *minds* of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.' Or Romans 1:21-25, 'For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their *thinking*, and their foolish *hearts* were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools... Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their *hearts* to impurity... they exchanged the truth about God for a lie...' (emphasis added). Or 1 Corinthians 1:21, 'For





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since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.' Or 1 Corinthians 8:1-3, '...knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.' In his commentary on 2 Corinthians, Paul Barnett even says that 'The Achilles' heel of man is his mind, since he is so prone to intellectual pride, especially in matters to do with religion.'²

On the other hand, while reason and emotion are both fallen, it is clear that the Bible expects Christians to exercise self-control. Part of discipline is keeping unwarranted emotions or passions in check. Galatians 5:24, 'those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.' Passages like that, and hundreds of others, like Philippians 2:12-16 ('...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life...'), show that the Christian is called to exercise self-control over what would otherwise be intemperate desires.

If one person will mistakenly consider that his thoughts are sufficient to contain God ('The fool says in his heart, "There is no God"' Ps. 14:1), another will mistakenly do what feels good *because* it feels good (by contrast, 'I discipline my body and keep it under

2. Paul Barnett, *The Message of 2 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 82.



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control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified' 1 Cor. 9:27).

There *is* a battle. Both reason and feeling must be proactively, energetically, passionately, logically, wrestled into line with God's Word: 'For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take *every thought* captive to obey Christ' (2 Cor. 10:3-5, emphasis added).

Some become frustrated when they hear a person say, 'Keep your emotions in line; don't trust your feelings.' 'Should we always trust our reason instead?' they ask. Others are wary of feelings spiralling out of control. You only have to dip into the descriptions of intemperate revivalism like the magnificent (if strange) *Fits, Trances, and Visions* by Ann Taves, to realise that sometimes telling people not to trust their feelings is the right pastoral thing to do!³ *As long as* we also tell people not to always trust their thinking either. Because as alarming as the weird and wonderful world of *Fits, trances and visions* may be, no less alarming – for any Bible-believing Christian – is what developed from the secular rationalism of the Enlightenment to various streams of liberalism today. Some bow before the idol of experience, others bow before the idol of intellect. Both need to repent and worship the God who reveals Himself in His Word, to our hearts, minds, souls and strength – *all* of which are to love Him.

3. Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).





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Affections are orientated towards godly desires in the godly person

Godly affections are the vibrant experience of the godly.

Consider the Psalms. Even a cursory reading tells us that God cares how we feel. Remember not every emotion listed in the Psalms is *approved* by God. But the full range (from joy to anger, from depression to peace, from hate to love) is recorded. Emotions are important enough for God to have them included in holy writ. Of course, the Psalms are far *more* than a therapy session where the psalmist lets it all hang out. They are a model of how to coordinate the full range of human emotions to the revelation of God.

For instance, Psalm 42, 'As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God', is usually referenced as a sweet call to desire God. But it is also desperate: 'My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, "Where is your God?"... Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?' So the psalm is not describing a person on a religious *high*; this is someone on a religious *low* longing to renew their sense of connection with God. Being passionate, or affectional, does not mean, then, that if we feel slightly less excited, we must be slightly less holy. 'Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God,' battling those emotions into line with the truth of God (Ps. 42:1-3, 5).

Another example is Psalm 126. There the tone is uniformly upbeat – or so at first it appears. 'Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.' Such laughter and joy is directed towards mission: 'then they said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them."' They were not just





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having a good time with God; they were celebrating *because* nations all around the world were hearing what great things God had done. And even in that celebration there is a note of realism: 'Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy' (Ps. 126:2, 5).

A New Testament illustration is Paul. As an ancient Middle-Eastern Jew, some of his expressions of emotion are determined by that background and culture (perhaps including the 'holy kiss' in Romans, 1&2 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians). Still, Paul's affection is not only a product of his culture, it is a product of the gospel. '... [W]e could have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us' (1 Thess. 2:6-8).

Sometimes in his letters to the Corinthians, Paul is like a parent who is being driven crazy by his adolescent children with their partying and general mayhem. He is not cold and calculating; he is passionate, and a little unhinged in a good way, like a mum or dad get a little unhinged when a child comes home two hours later than they said and the parents are having nightmares about whether the child has died or not.

Apparently, Paul was emotional enough to cry a fair bit: 'For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you' (2 Cor. 2:4). He also blubbed when he was in Ephesus, '...serving the Lord with all humility and with tears' (Acts 20:19), which he wants them to recall when he has gone. 'Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears' (Acts 20:31). And when he finally





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left Ephesus, all the elders let the waterworks flow, and kissed him too, 'And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him' (Acts 20:37).

That is not the usual way you say goodbye to your vicar.

Some of this is cultural and particular to Paul's own personality. It is as important not to *fake* passion (*affectation*) as it is to have passion. Ask yourself: what do I do when I am passionate about something *outside* of church life? That may be how I would expect to act when I am passionate about the things of God. If I do not cry when my much loved child leaves home for college, I am unlikely to cry when a missionary leaves for the mission field. But in one way or another, we are to say with Paul, 'I rejoiced in the Lord greatly' (Phil. 4:10), 'sorrowful, yet always rejoicing' (2 Cor. 6:10), 'I am overflowing with joy' (2 Cor. 7:4). Or as Peter put it, 'You believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory' (1 Pet. 1:8). Or Jesus, 'In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit' (Luke 10:21).

Affections are not proof in themselves that someone is spiritual
If it is possible to undervalue affections in the Christian life, it is also possible to overvalue them. The sign of being a Christian, and of making progress as a Christian, is not whether you feel passionately, or express your emotions in ways that appear to others to be passionate. *Salvation* – becoming a Christian – is evidenced by *sanctification* – gradually growing as a Christian. The truth of the gospel is shown by the power of the gospel in changed lives. 'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control' (Gal. 5:22-23). The fruit of the Spirit is *not* weeping, or shouting, or (conversely) being prim and proper. The fruit of the Spirit is *moral change*.



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What causes this spiritual change is the power of the gospel, the pure Word of God, the seed that goes down into our hearts, and over time gradually produces the fruit of increasing Christlikeness.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus explains, 'As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away' (Matt. 13:20-21). It is possible to have joy, even passionate joy, but for that passion to be short-lived. Simon of Samaria was baptised, 'amazed' at what the apostles were doing, and yet he was not 'right before God' (Acts 8:13, 21). Isaiah chapter 1 shows that religious excitement by itself is not what counts to God; God is looking for godliness of character, 'justice,' doing what is right, that flows from genuine worship of Him.

I remember one person who appeared to be soundly converted, became passionate for the work of the gospel for a season, and now, as far as I know, is nowhere spiritually. Passion may be important, it may be an inevitable part of being human, it may be necessary for good rational function, it may be the fuel for much godly endeavour, but it is not the sign of godliness itself. That is the fruit of the Spirit, perseverance, following Jesus to the end.

Affections then – rightly understood – are part of what it means to be human and are to be increasingly orientated towards godly desires in the Christian. How, though, does preaching relate to affections? To answer that question, we need to make sure we clearly understand what the Bible has to say about proclamation.

