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## **ENCOUNTERING GOD 2**

In my previous essay I emphasized the importance of encountering God. As I have pondered the subject, I have come to the conclusion that the church has to go to any lengths to make sure that everyone has a chance to encounter Him. Every activity must provide an opportunity to encounter Him. I believe, therefore, that I need to continue that discussion in this newsletter. What I want to emphasize here is how we can know we have encountered Him.

You will remember that I wrote that encountering God is an emotional experience. The emotion felt is love. This is followed by a long lasting and pervasive emotion of great Joy. Awe is felt when we contemplate Him who we have encountered. But what about negative emotions? Do they continue to occur? Do we live in a state of bliss after we have encountered Him? You know the answer is no. We still have negative emotions as often as we did before. The primary change is an increased ability to handle them more readily and diminish their impact on our lives. Why is this so? In the succeeding paragraphs I will try to help you see that we are emotional beings, and have to have coping skills to deal with our negative emotions, as well as ways to experience the positive ones. Our faith supplies them.

Ever since I became a Christian and began to encounter charismatics, I have heard much criticism of their worship, and their devotion to the Bible by pastors and lay persons in some evangelical and most liberal mainline churches. They object to their display of emotion. If they speak in tongues they are accused of doing so in ecstatic state, and of having lost control of their mind. They say the same things about the other manifestations of the Spirit's work such as resting in the Spirit, roaring and dancing in the Spirit. Even their facial expressions and bodily postures during the praise and worship time of a service are subject to criticism. These criticisms arise out of false assumptions.

Most critics assume that Spirit filled believers fake their emotional expression, or are unable to control their emotions. Indeed the liberal press has even accused them of being uneducated and culturally unsophisticated. But are these accusations true?

I have spent most of my life studying emotion. There is little written about emotion I have not read. I can tell you that this assertion is fact, not brag. I, therefore, asked myself, "What role does emotion play in the Christian faith?" To answer my question I searched the scriptures, read the early church fathers, and looked carefully at the history of Christianity. Because of my studies I have come to the conclusion that Christianity is an emotional faith, and the expression of emotion is a necessary part of worship.

Before we discuss the role of emotion in our religious life, it is well to briefly look at the role of emotion in our everyday life. God created us to be emotional. Without emotions we would die quickly. Emotion is the driving force in our life and it moves our every activity.

According to Sir Charles Sherrington, the father of modern neurophysiology, we all have an emotional tonus that drives us into activity. This tonus is diffuse and not vectored. We call it our spirit. Our emotional reflexes are superimposed on this tonus. They are vectored. There are twelve of these. Three of them give rise to pleasant feelings. Nine of them cause unpleasant feelings.

Emotions move us. They may move us toward or away from the stimulus, or they inhibit our movement. No matter what they do though, they cause us to have inner sensations that we call feelings while they move us.

There is much controversy about the classification of emotions. The lists in the various textbooks of psychiatry vary greatly in the number listed. Because of the great confusion about their classification I tried to see if there was any consensus that could be gained by simply counting the number of times they were listed by natural philosophers through the centuries. I have enumerated them in many places, but I will list them for you here. The pleasant emotions are LOVE, JOY AND AWE. The unpleasant emotions are SORROW, ANGER, FEAR, JEALOUSY, PAIN, DISGUST, CONFUSION, EMPTINESS, and SHAME. To be sure of this classification, I have studied the expression of emotions in newborn infants and children, and I have carefully watched the expression of emotion in normal people. My observations validate this list.

I need to point out to you that emotions have two dimensions. They are intensity and duration. It is these two dimensions that give us the various names for the same emotion. An example is anger. This emotion is described by such words as irritation, anger, very angry, rage, bitterness and hate. In these words we are describing the same emotion with different dimensions. Irritation is mild anger, anger is more intense and rage is extreme anger. Bitterness and hate are anger sustained over a long period. It may be of any intensity. Descriptions cached in slang words are commonly used as well.

Having given you some introductory information, we can now ask if the Bible speaks to emotion. The answer to our question is an unequivocal yes. It speaks loudly and often.

The most commonly mentioned emotion is love (551 times). Both Judaism and Christianity are religions of love. From the beginning of God's word he is described as a loving God, and He wants us to love Him as much as He loves us. The greatest commandment is to love God with all our being (mind)(Deut. 6:5), and the second greatest is to love our neighbor as ourself (Lev. 19:18). Jesus added a new commandment, i.e., to love one another as He has loved us

(John 15:12). Love for one another is to be the identifying mark of Christians (John 13:35). Paul makes love the centerpiece of his epistles exhorting Christians to manifest love in all they do (1 Cor. 13:1-3). Love is to be the central emotion of our relationship with God and all mankind.

The effect of Love on man's behavior is quite profound. First, it creates a pleasant feeling tone. Second, it makes us want to be in physical contact with its object. Third, it makes us want to do things that please its object. Fourth, it makes us want to be one with its object. These latter two effects make us want to live our lives for that person. Fifth, it makes us want to be in constant communication with its object. If we sum all these characteristics love makes us want to be one with its object.

Obviously we cannot be physically one with anyone. The boundaries of our body prevent this. We can, however, be one in spirit with humans we desire and are desired by. In the same way we can be one in spirit with God, for he first loves us and draws us to himself. It is love that achieves this oneness.

God is not like another human. He is pure Spirit. But like the human objects of our love He knows whether we love Him or not, for He knows what is on our heart. He feels our emotion--our desire to be one with Him. It is important then that we come into his presence and let him know what is on our heart. We come into his presence when we praise and worship Him.

Why do we love? God has created in us a radical neediness to receive and give love. We cannot live without it. From birth on we have to love and be loved or our lives will be empty and meaningless. God created a special need in our lives for the love of a person of the opposite sex, for children and for **Himself**.

Joy, the emotion that comes after we begin to love God, is mentioned in the Bible 218 times. Most of these references have to do with the joy that comes in knowing Him. It is no wonder that gladness (23 times) arises out of the joy we feel. We are reminded that we should rejoice 133 times. The most notable of the instructions to rejoice in the Lord is found in Philippians 4:4. "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"

What are the external and internal evidences of joy? When we experience joy we want to sing and shout, to frolic about or indulge in other physical expressions of our joy. When we are joyous we smile and laugh. We have a freedom from worry and strain for both love and joy occlude them.

The other pleasant emotion in our classification is awe. It is mentioned as such only 16 times. Habbakuk summed it all up so well (3:2) "LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy." Almost all other references

to awe also have to do with responses to Gods mighty works, whether they are in creation or in the miracles he performs.

What does awe do to us? It fills us with wonder. It inhibits our activities and focuses our attention on the things we are seeing and have seen. Awe is the aesthetic emotion. We experience it in response to beauty and rhythmicity. It occurs in response to nature's beauty and grandeur, to great music, or to man's creations that are beyond our imagination.

If the Bible makes it so clear that we have an emotional God who created us to be emotional beings, why is there so much criticism of the display of emotion by large numbers of Christians? We do not criticize the display of emotions that occur at athletic events, classical and pop music concerts, or political rallies. Why then should we criticize emotion in our relationship with God?

I am convinced that the sourpuss religion we practice can be traced back at least to John Calvinism. I am sure that it goes back further than that, perhaps even to Augustine, but since we are more influenced by our own traditions we can start with Calvin. Joy is found only once in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In contrast the works of John Wesley contain several accounts of emotion being expressed during the worship of God. He did not stifle this expression. His critics however referred to his faith as enthusiastic. He stoutly defended his followers in their expression of emotion. In his "Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion" he makes it plain that the Holy Spirit stirs up Godly (e)motion, and inflames their hearts with love. Even in Wesley's day the emotionality of his followers was considered a kind of religious madness. The same criticism is leveled at Spirit filled followers today. Almost all the manifestations of the Spirit that are found in Spirit filled churches today are found in the Bible, and have recurred periodically throughout the history of the church.

Modern books on worship, other than those written by charismatic authors, rarely mention emotion. They do not even mention that the purpose of worship is to bring the worshipper to an encounter with God.

How does the Bible deal with negative emotions? The answer to this question is that it attempts to provide mechanisms to eliminate or inhibit them. I will mention only two negative emotions.

The scriptures condemn the inappropriate expression of anger. The purpose of anger is to help us protect ourselves, our families and our belongings from the assaults and depredations of others. It serves to help us survive in a mean and hostile world. In this sense it is a necessary emotion. Inappropriate anger alienates men and/or women from one another. It is the greatest cause of disharmony in all societies. Real and imagined anger (and hate) causes such horrors as war, terrorism, genocide and murder. It alienates us from our families

and neighbors. It causes splits in churches, lawsuits, and assaults on the person of others. Anger is the most disruptive emotion we possess.

Because it is so destructive, it is not surprising that anger is mentioned 262 times in the Bible. Jesus made a special point of condemning its expression in the Sermon on the Mount. Paul devoted almost all of the fourth chapter of Ephesians to its expression, control and elimination.

The greatest weapon we Christians possess in our battle against anger is the forgiveness that we were deputized to use by our Lord (John 20:23). Forgiveness cleanses the soul of anger. The ability to forgive those who have offended or wronged us should be our most treasured possession. **To my knowledge no other faith possesses the intervention of divine forgiveness.**

Fear like anger has both beneficial and deleterious effects on our lives. It is beneficial when we fear the Lord. Fearing Him rightly means to have respect for his power, his justice, and his ability to chastise us when we have transgressed. Fear is, however, deleterious when we allow it to control our behavior in everyday life. Fear is the precursor to worry. Most of our worries have to do with real or imagined harm that may come to us in the course of our everyday living. Jesus told us not to be afraid and worry about temporal things (Matt. 6:25-33). He assured us that we have a protector who loves us and watches over us and will take care of our every need.

The other negative emotions are adequately treated in the Word of God. Shame is mentioned 126 times, jealousy 62, pain 46, and sorrow 36. Confusion and emptiness receive little attention as emotions with confusion mentioned 16 times and emptiness not at all. The concept of emptiness is recognized, but not named as such.

What then does this say to us. Is Christianity an emotionless faith? No indeed! **It should be filled with emotion.** The fact that the emotions elicited by our praise and worship-love, joy and awe-occlude negative emotions and strengthen our coping mechanism to deal with them is good reason to allow, yes, even to encourage their expression. When we encounter God, we experience Him emotionally. **We feel his love. We rejoice in the fact that we have a personal relationship with Him, and are no longer slaves to sin. We stand in Awe of his majesty, power and loving kindness.** What more can we ask for? Why should we inhibit our expression of the love we have for him? Why not show our joy? Why should we not show our awe of Him? If we do not put anything into the relationship with God, we will get nothing out of it. No intimate relationship can survive if there is no expression of love, especially our relationship with God.