

SUBJECTIVITY VS. REVELATION

By

Curtis Dickinson

In modern advertising the way a product is packaged and presented is more important than a factual description of the product itself. Television ads are put together to create a certain emotion, not necessarily for the purpose of telling the truth. And it works. People respond with their emotions and buy things they cannot afford and for which they have no real need.

We have become a people who have reduced rationality to the minimum, to be guided and ruled by our feelings. It follows that the children of such a culture should consider it unrealistic and a violation of their rights to be told to practice abstinence in order to avoid pregnancy or disease. In this permissive society no one is expected to suffer the pain of subduing his own feelings for the sake of chastity.

Does the modern church constitute a force for rational thinking, or does it encourage people to follow their feelings?

The Wall Street Journal (March 2, 1992) tells about the American Bible Society producing a translation of Scripture on videotape “aimed at a young, ‘post-literate’ generation.”¹ more and more we rely on films and other visual aids rather than on reading and studying the Bible itself.

Visual aids can be a great help in getting the message across. As the Chinese proverb says, “One picture is worth a thousand words.” But while the Bible is given by God, pictures are made by men and may often leave impressions which are not consistent with the truth, especially when viewed by the “post-literate” generation.

One reason visual aids are so popular was expressed by William Hinson, pastor of the First United Methodist Church in Houston, when he said, “People don’t want to read anymore, they want you to show them.”²

Instead of studying that which is revealed in the Bible, they watch a film that has been skillfully crafted to stir the emotions. Without any depth of understanding, they have been persuaded to feel a certain way about the subject.

The key word here is “feel.” We hear it all the time. A congressman says, “I feel this bill is worthy of support.” Rational judgment is beside the point. His “feelings” may be produced by the promises or threats of a powerful lobby or wealthy constituent. Someone says, “I just felt it was the right thing to do,” learning later that it was illegal or very bad judgment. We hear evangelists say, “I f-e-e-l that the Lord is going to speak to us this evening.” He then proceeds to make promises and statements contrary to the Lord’s word.

Through the use of music, drama and spellbinding rhetoric, emotions can be produced which people take to be God’s stamp of approval. Their feelings are mistaken for convictions, and no amount of reasoning can persuade them to consider truths which are contrary to those feelings.

In many “full gospel” groups the major business is to stir the emotions that all may feel that something deeply spiritual is taking place. But our relationship with God is

not created by subjective feelings. It is based upon our rational response to His revealed word.

Evangelist Bill Pile points out the strongest churches in the inner city (such as Los Angeles) are “charismatic,” whose approach is subjective and emotional. He tells how gang members may respond to the preacher’s call and passionately kneel at the altar. But “outside the church they reassemble in their groups, light up, get in their stolen vehicles, plot revenge...This is religious subjectivity,” He writes. “Being emotionally based, it lacks any ties with reality.”³

Feelings are not to be the criteria in interpreting Bible teaching on difficult questions. A well-known professor in a Bible college once told me that the truth about the judgment of the lost is such an “emotionally laden subject” that it was hardly possible to present it in open discussion.

We feel comfortable with traditional ideas and easily become emotionally attached to them. But some churches’ traditions have their origin in political expediency, not in Biblical scholarship. Comfortable feelings with traditional interpretations help to divide believers and keep us from learning more of what God has revealed.

From the beginning God depended upon words to convey His purpose and will for man. Words are the means of forming the mind-to-mind relationship between the Creator and His people.

The commandments do not speak to our feelings but to our wills. Assurance of our relationship with God does not rely upon our emotions but upon His revelation through words. Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would guide into all truth,⁴ not create an emotional state that would make us feel safe. The feelings of joy and jubilation are the result of the Spirit’s guiding us into the truth of salvation and hope.⁵

God spoke to Adam to tell him what to do and what not to do.⁶ His downfall was in disregarding God’s words. This principle has never changed. Jesus could have mastered the art of manipulating people by playing on their emotions, but instead He made them face the hard facts of His teaching. “The words that I spoke unto you, the same will judge you in the last day.”⁷ How one feels about it, how much one’s emotions may rise up in his heart to give a feeling of awe and well-being, it is still the truth as revealed by Jesus that forms the basis of judgment. Jesus asked, “Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not the things I say?”⁸ One may feel that everything is all right between him and God and things not be right at all. “Not every one that says unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he that does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”⁹

According to the record of the apostle’s work, they depended entirely upon communication by words. Without the help of any visual tools, without even a printed sheet, the message of the gospel was readily understood and taken to heart, to the extent that believers committed their lives fully to serving Christa in spite of great opposition. Their effort was not to produce a response based on emotion but to convey the prepositional truth of God, especially as demonstrated in Christ’s death and resurrection.

The great change that is to take place in a believer does not begin in the emotions. It is a transformation that begins with a renewing of the mind,¹⁰ rather than by being emotionally stirred by external sights and sounds.

This is not to deny deep emotion in our response to and fellowship with God and with other Christians. Genuine feelings of joy and well-being are to be expected and

encouraged. When one realizes that he is totally unfit for God and is deserving of nothing but His wrath in judgment,¹¹ there is no use in trying to make him feel good about himself by exciting music, entertaining activities, or emotion-stirring drama. The solution to his feelings of misery and guilt is provided by God in the gospel, and once it is believed and fully received there is true cause for feelings of joy.¹² Where there were bitterness and guilt, there now is the relief of forgiveness;¹³ where there was sorrow over sin, there is now the joy of being clean;¹⁴ where there was the dread of judgment, there now is the glad hope of immortality;¹⁵ and where there was painful alienation from God, there now is sweet fellowship with Him and His people.¹⁶

But none of these blessings are produced by the emotions or feelings. Rather the good feelings and joyous emotions are the result of faith — faith in objective truth revealed through the written or spoken word of God.¹⁷

At the core of temptation is our emotion, which pulls us toward the wrong course and tells us that “it can’t be wrong because it feels so right.”¹⁸ This is why the fruit of the Spirit includes self-control.¹⁹ Taking the right course may often mean sacrificing our feelings and denying self to follow Christ.²⁰

We are to walk by faith and not by our feelings.²¹ Faith is to believe that what God has revealed is true and that to follow it is right and best. Feelings are unreliable. We know God is present, not because we can feel Him, as some say, but because He promised to be with us — no matter how we feel.²² Even when our feelings are at low tide, we can be at peace and find strength in God’s presence because we are trusting in His word. Fellowship with God is based on faith in His word, not faith in our feelings.

REFERENCES

1. Beth Pratt editorial, *Lubbock Avalanche Journal*, 3/22/1992
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Heartbeat*, April, 1992
4. John 16:13
5. Luke 2:10
6. Genesis 2:15–17
7. John 12:48
8. Luke 6:46
9. Matthew 7:21
10. Romans 12:2
11. Romans 3:23, 6:23
12. Acts 8:35–39
13. Romans 8:1
14. Romans 6:6, 11
15. Romans 2:7, I Corinthians 15:53–54
16. Ephesians 2:5–6, 19
17. Romans 10:17
18. James 1:14–15
19. Galatians 5:22–23, II Timothy 1:7
20. Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34
Luke 9:23
21. II Corinthians 5:7
22. John 14:23

.....
Copyright © Curtis Dickinson. Formatted and Posted by Ken Fortier Ministries.
Permission is hereby granted by Mrs. Regina Dickinson to reproduce and distribute
Curtis’ articles to as many as possible. This statement is to remain attached to this article
for permission to be valid. Vol. XXXII, Number 5.
.....