

Something must be
Known and Felt

*A missing note in
today's Christianity*

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Introduction: Why this book?

*True religion's more than notion;
Something must be known and felt.*

JOSEPH HART (1712–68)¹

This is a book about the place of feelings in the Christian life and about some aspects of spiritual experience. I have written it because, right now, such a book is needed.

The gospel continues to spread on every continent and we are filled with daily thanks for what the Lord is doing in countless lives everywhere. This said, modern Evangelicalism, especially in the West, is often very different from the religion of the Bible.

Today's Christianity is largely composed of doctrine (believing the right things), ethics (behaving in the right way) and methodology (doing church and evangelism in the best possible way). It is a three-legged stool, but it is not the same shape as the three-legged stool of God's Word. There we find that methodology is not of any great importance.

The three legs on which biblical religion stands are doctrine, ethics and *experience*—God’s revealed truth is believed, it is lived out, and it is *felt*. It impacts the soul. If we forget this we will eventually lose biblical religion altogether.

Some early personal history

I suppose I am a bit surprised to find myself writing about all this. I was brought up in a family where feelings were profound, but any expression of them was discouraged. I and my brothers knew that our parents loved us greatly, but we seldom, if ever, heard them telling us so. When my brother Stephen died at the age of forty-seven, I knew that my widowed mother was heartbroken, because she said, ‘Oh dear’. This, for her, was the cry of an agonised heart.

As a result of such an upbringing, I and my remaining brothers still find it hard to talk about what we feel. Some people have therefore concluded that we don’t have any feelings at all! Nothing could be further from the truth. ‘Still waters run deep’ is certainly true of us.

My conversion to Christ in my mid-teens was a time of soul-shaking emotion. For a year or more I was distressed by my sin and by the consciousness that I wasn’t saved. This was so upsetting to me, and the ungodly pressures from my closest friends were so strong, that I ended up with one strong desire—to get away from my Christian parents and all other gospel influences, so as to be like everyone else. I saw my chance of making the break when, one weekend in the autumn of 1957, I went to stay with my paternal grandmother in Colchester, Essex.

On the Sunday morning my grandmother did not make me go to church and I felt as free as a bird. But things changed in the afternoon. Somehow, in a way that I cannot fully explain, I felt hungry inside. I felt that I needed to be where the Bible was opened. But I was afraid of being converted, so I went to a church where it seemed unlikely that gospel truth would be pressed on me in any compelling manner. The minister of the church, whom I knew quite well, duly took the service and then, to my surprise, announced that he was not going to preach. A friend of his, with a life-transforming story to tell, would be preaching instead!

As the unknown man told his story and preached the gospel, I was overcome with a great sense of God, of sin, of judgment, of lostness and of total bewilderment. What a sense of relief I had when he told us about God's willingness to save us! I understood that salvation was somehow tied up with Christ's death on the cross, but could not have explained at the time how this could be so. I knew and felt that I must come to Christ, and there in the back pew of the gallery I cried out to Him to have mercy on me. I left the meeting trembling all over and hoping against hope that He had heard my prayer.

Back home in Chester I no longer had any hankering to distance myself from the things of God, but my experience in Colchester had been so traumatic that I was in a state of fear every time I heard a sermon. I was terrified that I might have to go through a similar experience again! Little by little, however, this fear left me, and I began to enjoy increasing comfort in the things of God. At this stage I left my parents'

church and joined a small church a mile away which was filled with happy and holy people, many of whom were as young as I was. There I was baptised, became a member, and began to live the Christian life in earnest.

In that church, which had no pastor, I learned to love the Lord, to love His Word, to love His Day, to love His people and to love working for Him. However, despite this surge of love, the emphasis in the church was that feelings were of no importance in the Christian life. In fact the church, with all its wonderful qualities, was an enigma. We sang choruses like, 'In my heart there rings a melody', 'I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart' and 'Sweeter as the days go by', and yet were told again and again that our feelings did not matter! I felt the melody, knew the joy, found the days sweeter, but found myself trotting out the accepted line that belief and behaviour were the only vitally important dimensions of the Christian life.

Hywel Griffiths

This is the way it remained until, as a family, we moved to the village of Coshaston in West Wales, by which time I was a theological student. There, in the village's chapel, I had the life-changing privilege of sitting under the ministry of the Rev. Hywel Griffiths, who had come to preach for a week of special meetings. In a damp building without electricity, hidden away at the end of a short lane, the Lord dealt with me in a way that would direct the whole of my future thinking, behaviour and ministry.

Hywel Griffiths, minister of Litchard Mission Church, Bridgend, had been converted during his time as a coal miner,

and had been wonderfully helped by the Rev. R. B. Jones, who had given him a great deal of his time and attention. By the time he came to Coshaston Hywel was in his mid-sixties and had been in the ministry for about twenty-five years. He had first come to the village a year earlier, and my mother had urged me to come away from my theological studies for a few days so that I could hear him—which, regrettably, I was not able to do. She said that there was something about Hywel that could not be put into words. She told me that I would understand if I could hear him for myself. All she could tell me was that it was wonderful.

It was more than that, as I found out a year later. Hywel Griffiths preached lengthily, filled his sermons with word pictures, clearly felt in his soul the truths he was proclaiming, and poured out his love for everyone present. Accompanying all that was an indefinable influence. As Hywel spoke, heaven came to earth. Another Voice was heard. The invisible world was more real than the visible one. There was a touch of glory. Christ was more precious than anything or anyone in the universe. The Word came over with a self-authenticating force that was irresistible. Not to believe was not an option, because it was indescribably foolish. The only wise thing to do was to trust the Lord completely, and to love Him with all of my heart, soul, mind and strength.

You must not think that I was alone in receiving these impressions. After each sermon the congregation sat in stunned silence, overcome by the sheer power of the Word. Sometimes the silence was followed by spontaneous prayer, where one and another cried out to the Lord, wept their way

to the cross, or renewed their vows to love Him and to live for Him. And I, like many others, was changed for ever. We had experienced a small taste of what happens in revival. We all knew now that there was such a thing as preaching with ‘unction’,² and that there were panoramas of spiritual understanding and paths of spiritual experience of which we knew virtually nothing. Nothing had happened to diminish our belief in the importance of doctrine and ethics, but they, on their own, would never satisfy us again. We would now rather die than have a religion without a felt Christ.

From then until now

It is now over fifty years since those wonderful days in Cosheston. What Hywel taught us is still remembered and valued there, although he would hardly recognise the chapel (now called Cosheston Mission Church) today. The lane has been surfaced and there is a car park at the end. The building has been extended to include a schoolroom, study, kitchen and toilets. It has a damp course, electricity, heating and double glazing. Everything, it seems, has improved. But, in Evangelicalism as a whole, things have hardly improved at all. If it were possible, Cosheston would gladly welcome Hywel back, as would dozens of other churches. But, frankly, I don’t believe that the vast majority of Evangelicals in today’s world would be interested in a ministry like his. Their minds are elsewhere, and they are the poorer for it.

Nonetheless, felt Christianity with a supernatural touch has not entirely gone from the earth, and we must do what we can to help believers know about it, to seek it, and to not be satisfied with anything less.

This will not be easy. It is likely that people will believe that we consider ourselves to be members of a spiritual elite, when in fact all we are is humbly grateful for the way that the Lord has taken us. Others will write us off as touchy-feely fanatics. Yet others will accuse us of no longer having the Bible as our sole authority for all matters of faith and practice, and of having our feelings as a second authority. It doesn't matter what people may say. Biblical Christianity the world over is in danger of being permanently deformed, and we must do something about it, whatever it may cost us personally.

Believers need to know that 'without powerful, personal dealings between a man and his God, religion is a sham.'³ They need to know that feelings are part and parcel of a true Christian's experience, and how to tell the difference between holy emotions and unspiritual ones. They need to know something of how the Holy Spirit works in the soul. They need to know that it is possible to feel that you are a child of God and to have the experience of being guided by Him. They need to know about the felt presence of Christ and how to distinguish it from its counterfeits. They need to know about the prayer of faith—I think it is safe to conclude that countless believers today have never heard of such a thing. They need to know what it is to have a 'heart strangely warmed',⁴ and why the heart really is at the centre of all true religion.

These are the subjects that this book will touch on, and it will do so in as biblical a manner as possible. But I do not want anyone to think that I am writing of things beyond my experience. I am well aware of my many failings in my walk with

the Lord and of my constant need to be cleansed in the blood of Christ. Yet I know what it is to have holy feelings—feelings which are so deep that I have literally been dumbfounded in prayer, or so affected by God’s truth that it has been impossible to speak to anyone after preaching a sermon. I know what it is to have the Holy Spirit stir my soul. I both know and feel myself to be in God’s family. I have felt the presence of the risen Christ. I know what it is to be guided by God. In prayer, and after it, I have often known the outcome of an event yet to take place. Waiting on the Lord has been the joy of my life. And there is a fire in my heart even now as I write these words.

I have no doubt that there are many who could write more competently on all of these subjects but, at the moment, there are very few who are doing it. So, child that I am, I am offering to the Lord my five loaves and two fish and am asking Him to bless them. My hope is that they will be multiplied, distributed widely, and used by the Master to feed men and women who have hungry souls. Lord, hear my prayer!

STUART OLYOTT
Connah’s Quay, North Wales,
September 2014

1. Emotions in the Bible

*I preached what I felt, what I smartingly did feel
... I preached what I saw and felt.*

JOHN BUNYAN⁵

The Bible has to a lot to say about our emotions and its teaching needs to be clear to us, especially as there is so much confusion about this subject. As I have already told you, in my early Christian life I was left with the impression that our feelings didn't matter. There are still lots of well-meaning people today who teach the same thing. Other Christian circles, however, seem to be saying that our feelings matter more than anything else. In addition to these contradictory voices, we have more and more people coming into our churches who have emotional problems. And which one of us will dare to say that we have no such problems ourselves?

I want this book to be reasonably short—otherwise no one will read it! This means that we cannot study this question in the depth that it deserves. Even so, this chapter will still be one of the longest in the book. This is because we need to

build everything on a solid scriptural foundation, which is something we can't do in a hurry. Nor can we do it without sometimes sounding a bit technical.

As we study this subject in the light of God's Word, it seems to me that there are six main points for us to grasp. These six points make up the six sections of this chapter.⁶

1. Our nature as men and women: we are body and soul

We must start by enquiring about our human make-up. We humans, what are we? We are, first of all, body. When God created our ancestor Adam, it is said that 'The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground' (Genesis 2:7). The human body, in and of itself, is good—having a body is not a reason to be ashamed! It is not the seat of sin, because human bodies existed before sin came into the world. Nor was the body originally mortal; it only became so as a result of the Fall. It is important for me to recognise that my body is as much *me* as any other part of me. What is laid in the grave at death is not without value. It is not just a thing. It is the *person* as respects the body, 'for dust *you* are, and to dust *you* shall return' (Genesis 3:19).

Not only so, but we are also spirit (or soul). There is an aspect of our life and existence which is to be distinguished from the body—something that has qualities which prevent it from undergoing the disintegration and destruction that happen to the body after death. The Scriptures call this *spirit* or *soul*.

This is why we read of our Lord saying such things as, 'Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul'

(Matthew 10:28) and, ‘The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak’ (Matthew 26:41). This is why the Scriptures record our Lord’s death on the cross by saying that ‘bowing his head, he gave up his spirit’ (John 19:30). In the same way, when Stephen’s dying body was being stoned, he prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit’ (Acts 7:59).

There are, then, two aspects to our being; we are spirit (or soul), as well as body. There are two entities in our constitution. One, our body, is derived from the earth—it is material (made up of matter), corporeal (made up of organs which depend on each other), phenomenal (perceived by the senses, rather than the mind) and divisible (you can chop it up into pieces). The other, our spirit, is derived from a distinct action of God. It is immaterial (there is no matter in its make-up), ordinarily not phenomenal (you can’t normally detect it with the senses), indivisible (it can’t be chopped into pieces) and indestructible (it can never be destroyed).

These two, body and spirit, form one organic unit, namely *me*! As I was once told as a boy, each one of us is ‘a psychosomatic unity’! I have never forgotten what I was told, but at that time I couldn’t understand what was being said. It means, quite simply, that I am body and I am soul, but that there is only one *me*. But body and soul are interdependent—the state of my body affects the state of my soul; and the state of my soul affects the state of my body. Body and soul co-act and interact in a way which is impossible for us to finally analyse; the union between them is intimate and intricate.