

## EMOTIONAL RELEVANCE IN OUTREACH MINISTRY

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### **Abstract**

In Western history, the Enlightenment sold the idea that humans are essentially rational creatures who need to graduate from their primal emotions. Leaders like Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley knew better, commending Christianity as a faith of “the heart” and leading a Great Awakening. Nineteenth century evangelical leaders, however, drank too much of the Enlightenment Kool-Aid and took an excessively left-brained approach to pre-Christian people. The religious tracts of the time expose this turn. This article invites church leaders to rediscover a more biblical (and Reformation) understanding of human nature and to pioneer in “emotionally relevant ministry” once again.

The European Enlightenment (aka “the Age of Reason” that gave us “Modernity”) proposed, among other ideas, to redefine human nature: human beings were now the “rational” creatures. Humanity’s capacity for rational thinking separates people from the beasts of the fields, forests, and jungles. A human being is a “thinking animal.” Descartes said, “I think, therefore I am.”

The Enlightenment’s leaders acknowledged that rational humans also experience emotions, but they decided that emotion is a relic from humanity’s evolutionary past. Humans are graduating from the emotional hangover. Philosophy and science are leading the way, and education will enlighten humanity’s advancement into the life of reason.

The Romantic Movement arose to challenge the Enlightenment tsunami in Western history. The Romantics believed that truth could be known through nature, imagination, and emotions. William Wordsworth, for instance, believed that insight could emerge from “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” which the poet then recalls and writes “in tranquility.”

Enough of science and of art,  
Close up those barren leaves,  
Come forth, and bring with you  
A heart that watches and receives.<sup>1</sup>

Church leaders in Europe and in the American colonies essentially responded to the Enlightenment (and somewhat to Romanticism) in one of three ways.

First, many leaders in the European state churches swallowed the Enlightenment’s paradigm in toto. Deism emerged. Its doctrine of God was informed more by reason than revelation. Reason could rationally conclude the existence of a Creator, though this God was less involved with creation—and with a serious personality deficit, compared to the God of Abraham! Christian Deists generally affirmed Christianity’s ethic and the duties of a personal moral life, but miracles did not fit within Deism’s paradigm.

Second, many Roman Catholic leaders served cultural regions less impacted by the Enlightenment, or they ignored it. They launched a Counter Reformation. They maintained devotional practices, mystery, and the Mass. A new era of mission expanded their ranks, their religious orders proliferated by the hundreds, and Folk Catholicism flourished in many lands.

Third, many Protestant Evangelical leaders responded to the challenge of The Age of Reason in a contrasting way. Two giants, Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley, reintroduced Christianity as a faith of “the heart.”

In the 1730s, Edwards was pastor of the church in Northampton, Massachusetts, when a religious awakening broke out in Northampton and surrounding hamlets. In a six-month period, three hundred people became new Christians; in one period of five or six weeks, thirty people per week became Christians. Edwards observed and studied what was happening. He interviewed converts and the people who knew them best, and he wrote case studies, gaining some serious insight.<sup>2</sup> In 1737, he wrote his *Faith-*

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<sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth, “The Tables Turned,” in *English Literature: A Period Anthology*, eds., Albert C. Baugh and George Wm. McClelland (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc.), 791.

<sup>2</sup> I have covered Edwards’ experience and written at greater length about emotionally relevant ministry in *The Apostolic Congregation: Church Growth Reconceived for a New Generation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), chapter three. Read especially what Edwards did as a pastoral strategist—like organizing people into lay-led small group life and sending people out in witness—to extend the Awakening.

ful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God, which became the primer for a wider awakening in Colonial America, in the British Isles, and into Western Europe.

Edwards learned that virtually all of the conversions were preceded by a period of emotional struggle; people were convicted about their pride, or they experienced shame, fear, unworthiness, or depression. As people neared conversion, they typically became more involved with Scripture, prayer, sacrament, and spiritual conversation. New emotions moved them, often accompanied by tears. Following conversion, people typically experienced profound changes in their emotional life; they experienced gratitude, peace, compassion, empathy, joy, or “an inward burning of the heart.”<sup>3</sup>

Compared to earlier revivals in New England, this one reached all sorts of people—“sober and vicious, high and low, rich and poor, wise and unwise,” as many males as females, and all ages.<sup>4</sup> Edwards perceived a difference in his Sunday congregation: “Our public assemblies were then beautiful; the congregation was alive . . . from time to time in tears while the Word was preached: some weeping with sorrow and distress, others with joy and love, others with pity and concern for the souls of their neighbors.”<sup>5</sup>

In the years following the Awakening, enough of his converts reverted to shake Edwards into a second round of field research. He posed a supreme question: How does one distinguish between a valid Christian experience that is likely to last vis-à-vis its unstable counterfeit? In 1746, he published his deeper insights in *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*.

Edwards was still sure that Christianity is a religion of the heart. He reaffirmed that emotions drive people’s lives whether they are lost or saved, and emotions are intrinsic within Christian conversion and Christian experience. More broadly, people do not usually act at all unless they are “influenced by some affection, either love or hatred, desire, hope, fear or some other.” Our emotions, after all, are “the spring of men’s actions.”<sup>6</sup> No one, he said, is “brought back from a lamentable departure from God without having his heart affected.”<sup>7</sup>

Still, Edwards discovered that a religious experience with feelings was no guarantee that the person will be a Christian for life. Someone who now

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God” in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, eds., John R. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 86.

<sup>4</sup> Edwards, “Faithful Narrative,” 64.

<sup>5</sup> Edwards, “Faithful Narrative,” 63.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections” in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, eds., John R. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 144.

<sup>7</sup> Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 143, 146.

attends church, quotes Scripture, or gives a touching testimony may not even be around the year after next.

Gradually, Edwards became clear about a dozen distinguishing signs for discerning between gold and fool's gold. At least three of these signs have universal relevance:

1. Since Christian conversion, after all, is supposed to be transforming, people who have experienced a “great alteration” that family, friends, the church, and pre-Christian people can clearly perceive will likely continue and prevail.
2. “Christian practice,” Edwards learned, is “the chief of all the signs of grace.”<sup>8</sup> Authentic Christians follow Jesus, live by his ethic, seek the will of God, and live selfishly no longer. Their lives bear fruit, and they are the agents of God's new creation.
3. That kind of transformation, Edwards declared, is not possible by human resolution alone. If converts live for Jesus Christ as Lord (and not merely as Savior), this takes additional grace and a deeper relationship with the Holy Spirit.

With that third observation, Jonathan Edwards came perilously close to becoming a “Wesleyan!” Actually, Edwards and John Wesley were contemporaries; both were born in 1703, though Wesley was to live much longer. Wesley learned from Edwards' writings as he, with his colleagues, catalyzed and expanded an awakening in the British Isles and beyond.

John Wesley, from the beginning of his new life, comprehended that Christianity is a faith of “the heart.” On the evening of May 24, 1738, in a meeting in London, he experienced justification and describes, “I felt my heart strangely warmed.” This experience, in addition to his reading of Scripture and of Methodism's converts, grounded Wesley in a distinctive understanding of the role of emotions in religious seeking, conversion, and the Christian life. Gregory Clapper's *The Renewal of the Heart Is the Mission of the Church*<sup>9</sup> has distilled many insights from Wesley's extensive writings.

Wesley believed that orthodoxy, as right belief, was necessary for the Christian life, but orthodoxy was only part of (what Clapper has named) *orthokardia*—right heart. For Wesley, the term “heart” was a robust metaphor that referred to the core of a human's conscious and subconscious life. One's heart is the source of one's thoughts, values, imagination, emotions, memories, and of the life and actions that emerge from the heart. In his itinerant preaching mission, Wesley offered to his crowds the Triune God who makes hearts right.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Edwards, “A Treatise,” 165.

<sup>9</sup> Gregory Clapper, *The Renewal of the Heart Is the Mission of the Church* (Eugene Oregon: Cascade Books, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> In the writings of our predecessors, terms like “heart” and “soul” could be used rather interchangeably, as could “affections,” “passions,” and “emotions”—but NOT “feelings.”

John Wesley was a cognitive cousin to the Romantics; God can, indeed, be inferred from a natural revelation. However, God is primarily known through the biblical revelation, and people who know the Lord as revealed can more clearly perceive his signs and presence in nature. Nevertheless, the truth that can be known only through God's special revelation cannot be known from the natural revelation alone.<sup>11</sup>

Wesley distrusted the Romantics' confidence in human feelings, which, he observed, can be fickle; he focused more on our deeper and more enduring affections (or emotions) than on transient feelings. "Religious affections" go deeper than mere "religious feelings," and, in agreement with Edwards, affections play a prominent role in one's pursuit, justification, and Christian life.

Moreover, Christian conversion is a community affair. Wesley believed that Christian faith is not a solitary individualistic experience; faith is typically experienced, sustained, empowered, and renewed in congregations and group life. Clapper suggests that Wesley's project features many implications for ministries like spiritual formation, preaching, counseling, and evangelism. He suggests that in ministries, Christian storytelling engages people's hearts better than theological abstractions alone.

Wesley believed that Christian role models are imperative for attracting people toward the faith and for imagining one's own new life in faith, hope, and love. He observed that Roman Catholics are inspired by the stories of the lives of the saints, so in his Arminian magazine, Wesley published biographies of role model Methodists.

Wesley also believed that seekers need to be exposed to the two competing emotional worlds and ways of life that Paul featured in Galatians 5. To say yes to Christ and his way is to say no to a very different world and way of life. After all, we live in a fallen world where the will of God is not yet done on earth as in heaven. To become a "real Christian" involves deliverance from a dysfunctional, emotional world into the emotional world of the kingdom.

While the eighteenth-century Great Awakening was an emotionally relevant social force, nineteenth-century evangelicalism substantially dropped this part of Christianity's vision for people. The story of how this happened is complicated, although Lincoln A. Mullen's *The Chance of Salvation: A History of Conversion in America*<sup>12</sup> helps us resolve this. You just know that the nineteenth century was a different time than ours when Mullen reports that early in that century, the Presbyterians "grew enormously!"<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This, Wesley's most famous line, was part of his reflection in his evening journal entry of May 24, 1738. The journal of John Wesley is available in many editions.

<sup>12</sup> Lincoln A. Mullen, *The Chance of Salvation: A History of Conversion in America* (Harvard University Press, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

Mullen's analysis of eighteenth-century American Christianity reminds us of the Law of Unintended Consequences. One major cause of the eclipse of emotional relevance in Christian evangelism was the emergence of the religious tract.

I had not understood how powerfully the American Tract Society (and other publishers) reformatted the conversion paradigm of American Christianity. The ATS published hundreds of tracts, by the tens of thousands. They published over four million of one tract entitled, "The Dairyman's Daughter." Almost half of all the tracts published were intended to script and elicit conversion. Christians widely distributed them to pre-Christian people.

Most of the conversion tracts featured the way to heaven. A tract would present a brief gospel message, call for repentance, urge an immediate decision, and invite the reader to pray "the sinner's prayer" as written or improvised. At first, the prayer was often lifted, or adapted, from some gem in Scripture—such as David's prayer in Psalm 51 or the tax collector's prayer in Jesus' parable. Later prayers were more formulaic.

The tracts were the victims of their limitations; the available space prohibited much explanation. To their credit, they aimed to make their message intelligible to the "way-faring man" who does not read much. However, they transgressed the second half of what later became known as Einstein's rule of communication: "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler."

The tracts helped reach many people, and many Christians' first evangelism experiences involved giving out a tract or walking through one with a seeker. In time, however, the age of tracts contributed to seven changes<sup>14</sup> in the minds of many Christians and their leaders.

First, Enlightenment thinking edged more into Christian thought. The Christian witness typically aimed at a person's left brain; witness and apologetics became more rationalistic.

Second, conversion was now understood as an instantaneous event in a person's life. The earlier understanding from Edwards and Wesley, that conversion is a process and occurs in stages and in measureable time, was forgotten.

Third, the understanding of "salvation" became almost only about going to heaven. Themes like the kingdom of God, reconciliation, justification, sanctification, as well as becoming a disciple, living by God's will, and much more of "the unsearchable riches of Christ" were muted. Some tracts invited new Christians to a new life this side of death, but that new life was little more than a "clean life."

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<sup>14</sup> The innovation and diffusion of the religious tract, undoubtedly, was not the *only* cause of the seven changes that followed in its wake. History's events and trends typically have multiple causes. They often synergize, and identifying all of the causes is a challenge for historians.

Fourth, the tracts' model of conversion became *the* prevailing model of conversion. The steps in the ritual of conversion became gospel truth declared, an appeal for immediate repentance, a sinner's prayer, and the person's confession of faith. Sometimes a tract taught the ritual straight, sometimes in a story. Most churches adapted to the tracts' conversion model much more than the tracts adapted to the churches.

Fifth, the church became optional. One could, many people now assumed, become a Christian and live as a Christian in the world without involvement in any church's catechism, worship, fellowship, accountability, nurture, teaching, or sacramental life.

Sixth, expressions of Folk Protestantism now proliferated in North America almost as extensively as Folk Catholicism in Europe. For a great many people, Christianity now meant what their family, friends, peer group or sub-culture decided it meant. IF they joined a church, they chose one that ratified their folk religion.

Seventh, although new converts often reported that they experienced God's assurance and emotions like peace and love, religious affections were now considered incidental. One would never know from most of the tracts that people's "hearts," including their emotional life, needed inner revolution. The understanding of human nature that helped inform the eighteenth century's Great Awakening was largely forgotten as the nineteenth century closed—a myopia that continued through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century.

Meanwhile, as many people in the West have deserted the Enlightenment project and have become "post-modern," leaders in many fields have been rethinking human nature. Consider, as one example, our changing view of economics. Our predecessors taught that people spend and invest their money from rational calculations. Then, in this century, it became obvious that stock market trends can be substantially driven by two emotions—fear and greed.

More recently, the 2017 Nobel Prize in Economics was awarded to Richard Thaler, professor of behavioral economics of the University of Chicago. His work has challenged the long-conventional assumption that people's thinking in areas like finance, education, and health care is objectively rational; biases and emotions often hijack or shape our thinking. When the press asked what he would do with his 1.1 million-dollar prize, Thaler responded that he would spend it "irrationally."<sup>15</sup>

Leaders in many fields are now clear that people are not, after all, essentially rational creatures who still experience emotions. People are essentially emotional creatures who sometimes think. What they think about is influenced by their background emotional state, and how they think about

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<sup>15</sup> Derek Thompson, "Richard Thaler Wins the Nobel in Economics for Killing Homo Economicus," *The Atlantic*, October 7, 2017.

it is influenced by the feelings of the moment. People often make important decisions emotionally, then work to rationalize the decision, and then convince themselves that reason alone informed their decision!

In churches today, counselors and many leaders in youth ministry and recovery ministry have learned to engage people's hearts, but many church leaders are still clueless. Meanwhile, the publication of Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence* in 2012 revealed and helped catalyze an emerging industry. The people who produce the "Great Courses" on DVD report great demand for their course that teaches people to manage their emotions. The drug epidemic (quite including alcohol) is a sure and certain sign that people are self-medicating their pathological emotions, finding temporary relief in their drug of choice, and finding synthetic fellowship in the drug (or bar) culture. If church leaders did not notice in 2016 that the "Brexit" campaign in the United Kingdom and the campaigns of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the United States were emotionally driven, they were not paying attention. Meanwhile, soap operas feast on viewers' emotional needs, and the 24/7 news cycle of CNN, Fox, MSNBC, and much of the talk on radio and websites has morphed into never-ending improvisational soap opera.

The biblical "harvest" has changed. In all of our communities, many people are drowning in anger or rage, anxiety or fear, desire or greed, pride or low self-esteem, guilt or shame, sadness or depression or grief, or entitlement or envy or jealousy or resentment. When we "lift up our eyes," perceive this harvest, love this harvest, and begin where the people are, the once-contagious Christian Movement will be positioned for another Awakening.

HOW we engage people's emotional struggles in outreach ministry is a complex question. After all, ministry in response to grief is different than response to greed, and people are often driven by multiple emotions. Nevertheless, the following guidelines should help chart the course.

1. The Bible communicates a wealth of insight about human emotional issues, IF we study it with that quest in mind. One might begin with the Psalms.
2. Our predecessors in the First Great Awakening can serve as models, and I can immodestly commend my *Celtic Way of Evangelism*<sup>16</sup> for models like St. Patrick's apostolic engagement with the hyper-passionate Irish.
3. We could learn from literatures than inform counseling and recovery ministries and from the behavioral sciences.
4. With emotionally struggling people, the ministry of conversation is essential. Analogous to naming the demon in an exorcism, having them name and own the emotion that is destroying them is a major step; include the Lord in the conversation.

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<sup>16</sup> George Hunter, *Celtic Way of Evangelism* (Abingdon, 2010).

5. Following the basic perennial Church Growth model of field research, we can learn how from churches that are already pioneering in emotionally relevant ministry.
6. Following the Church Growth model, we can ask our people who have experienced emotional healing how the church could help many others to heal.

### **About the Author**

George Hunter taught evangelism at Southern Methodist University's School of Theology, led his denomination in evangelism, and served as founding dean and then distinguished professor of Asbury Theological Seminary's School of World Mission and Evangelism. Now emeritus, he does some field training, consulting, and writing. He has written over twenty books, mostly with Abingdon Press, including, *How to Reach Secular People*, *Church for the Unchurched*, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: The Apostolic Congregation*, *The Recovery of a Contagious Methodist Movement: Should We Change Our Game Plan?*, and, most recently, *GO: The Church's Main Purpose*. Now, pushing 80, George still "pumps iron."