Is Love In The Bible An Emotion?

**What’s True about Emotions?**

To begin with, is love considered an emotion outside the Bible? How does psychology describe love? Once passed the technical debate in psychology over what really constitutes an emotion with respect to class inclusion it is generally agreed that an emotion is different from such things as knowledge or an intellectual process like reasoning. Describing emotions however, can get complex and as such individual, mixed and clustered emotions have not been identified uniformly. Basically an emotion is described as an instinctive or intuitive response that registers as a feeling and associated with physiological cues or sensations, which together trigger thoughts, feelings and behaviours in the individual. Usually there is a dimension of pleasantness or unpleasantness to the emotional feeling. In addition emotions and the reactions they cause seem to provide direction to each other. Love is usually identified as consisting of mixed or blended emotions or pleasant feelings such as joy, trust, affection and longing. And like all emotional reactions love lives or dies depending on the thoughts, feelings and actions through which we express or feed it. What keeps our love of Jesus going is its connection with our thoughts, feelings and actions in obedience to His teachings.

Is our love for Jesus the same kind of reaction as we have in all other areas of our life? The answer has to be: Yes. It is unrealistic to believe we feel the emotion of love for our child, spouse and parent etc. but that it is not possible to feel the same for Jesus. A feeling or emotion always prompts or sustains action. When you feel love for someone you strongly want to share time, do certain actions: like touch, hold (as Mary when Jesus appeared to her at His grave), protect, give things to or do things for that person (as was the case at the beach when Peter received the invitation to continue Jesus’ Mission and later took leadership of the Church).

It is by what we feel compelled to do consciously or not, that indicates to the recipient and observers, the nature of that love. For example, because couples love each other they want to do the things that make each other happy and that will sustain the bond they have. The emotion is expressed in “want to”. The more two people love each other the more strongly they will want to do what it takes to keep the two happy together. Similarly my love for Jesus should prompt thoughts and behaviors consistent with what will please Him. He tells us that by obeying His Teachings we tell Him we love Him and by continuing to show such allegiance we keep our relationship strong (John 14:15).

The strength of the feeling or emotion constitutes the passion that gives the love reaction power!

God says in Deuteronomy 6:5: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”

In other words the Lord is saying: “Let passion for Me dominate your life”.

God gave us emotions and feelings. They are important for our survival. We can do nothing without an emotion. Therefore, neither the feeling or emotion nor the action it prompts should be denied expression. Nonetheless we have the ability to change our feelings because they are not fixed. Once we are aware of them it is within our power and choice to redirect the course of these feelings or emotions. We can just as well make ourselves love, hate, detest, distraught as we can stop these reactions from taking hold. We feel love, sadness, joy, anger, grief; and we also feel challenged, lazy, inclined or disinclined, able or unable and so on. These are all reactions that are the effects of our emotional states.

**The Bible Acknowledges God and Jesus’ Emotions**

It is easy to find abundant support in Scripture that God has and expresses emotions. The oft-quoted verse: “God so loved the world that He gave…” (John 3:16) describes an action of God that His Love Nature prompted. I have heard pastors claim the verse as evidence that love is action not emotion. Listening to the frequently repeated line that love is an action it seems sometimes as if it is not understood that an action is the vehicle of demonstrating love. Particularly in this passage, the act of giving His Son is a consequence of God’s emotional feeling of love for us. Another undeniable picture of God showing emotion is in the story of the raising of Lazarus (John 11:33-37). In that passage it seems clear that it was the emotional expression in Jesus’ demeanor of sadness (“deeply moved”) that caused the people standing around to comment: “See how He loved him” – even before Jesus performed the act of raising Lazarus. And we heard earlier (verse 5) that:  “Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.” This statement stands without any stated action though we know He came in response to the message that Lazarus was ill. John the Evangelist, the author, included the descriptions of Jesus’ sentimental behavior as evidence that He was as fully man as He was fully divine. Most would agree to this. There is very little room if any to see Jesus’ behavior as anything but an expression of human emotion, although in its “pure” or unconditional form. He was sad so He wept. That’s how human emotional life works.

The question therefore arises as to why some sermons tend to underplay or even seem to eliminate the role of emotions in Christian faith and practice. One explanation may be an assumption that sins people commit as well as their lack of total commitment to Christian values and expectations are all due to emotions or feelings. The belief appears to be that feelings and emotions are diametrically opposed to our will and therefore if we accommodate emotion the will to be spiritual is disempowered. Theologically speaking the will is of great value as it is the basis of spiritual engagement; but interestingly, scientifically speaking, there can be no will without emotion. Denying the influential role of emotions in human behavior however will not remove the power of emotions.

**Holy Spirit Can Help Us Change ‘Bad’ Emotions not Hide Them**

As pointed out earlier although emotions do give power to thoughts and actions and other feelings, a specific feeling is not tied permanently to a specific reaction; we can use our thinking to reject a triggered emotion that’s coupled with an undesired behavior and replace it with another emotion that will produce an alternate desired behavior. There is nothing psychologically complex about changing emotions. For example if I feel like having ice cream, although I know it is inadvisable I may change my mind especially if I have none at home or decide it’s not a good idea considering I am on a diet and instead settle for reading a book. The words in italics indicate how a feeling or emotion can be changed, replaced or redirected. Since an emotion simply motivates a behavior, the critical question is what do we need to do (how) to motivate ourselves in the “right” direction; or inspire others to do so?

Paul sees the Holy Spirit as playing a significant role in taking over our emotions to give us a powerful passion that will keep our focus on Jesus.

This appears to be the main message from the words God spoke through him in Ephesians 3:16-19:

“I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”

The teaching by psychology is in line with this passage in considering that the emotion, love, is more powerful than knowledge. Clearly, the appeal is not to our intellect (knowledge). It is to our passion or strong emotion under the control of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus says we are to love our enemies. Is it our will or our emotion that allows us to do so? This behavior that Jesus requires of us is not natural; it requires special effort, ability or thinking. Essentially we are being called upon to redirect our previous emotional reaction of hating our enemies to a new one: loving both friends and enemies. For some, the change will be easy; but others may need to exert willpower in order to succeed. As such the will is not always required to achieve at least some spiritual goals. God has equipped us to be able to use both of these steps and the Holy Spirit is on ready standby to help us redirect our thinking to produce the new emotional reaction to our enemies.

If the foregone comments make sense, let us stop being paranoid about feelings and emotions. In addition to practice and prayer, let us rely on the Holy Spirit to help us direct or redirect our and others’ feelings and emotions in the right direction. We only make ourselves appear extreme, hypocritical or (at the very least) confusing to non-Christians, especially those who know better, when we try to make emotions seem unchristian or unnatural. Might we also be showing potential converts that the Christian faith is unrealistic or difficult to practice?

Viewed by psychologists these knowledge shortcomings besmirch the credibility of the Christian speakers who are not careful to make accurate statements relating to psychology, whether from the pulpit or not. Curiously the same person undoubtedly would avoid the shame of stating wrong facts relating to biology, history, math or geography, for example. As with teaching from Scripture, providing the source of one’s secular facts whether from literary documentation or personal communication is always advisable. Of course it goes without stating that it is honorable to express the possibility of being wrong when one is unsure.

All emotions are natural; and in the Church that is not different. As Christians this is what motivates you and me and makes it possible to badly want to do the things we should for Christ’s sake. Such strong desires teach us to more clearly understand the extent of the love of Christ, which leads to achieving more complete knowledge of God Himself. So let’s open the door wide for non-Christians to enter, feel loved and be at home in our midst with their universally acknowledged, biological, God-given emotions. Through the mutuality of emotional experience we may perchance win souls for Christ!

**More Examples of Emotions in the Bible**

Let’s consider a few more passages giving examples of human-style emotions occurring in the Bible.

MIXED EMOTIONS:

“ Among those nations you will find no repose, no resting place for the sole of your foot. There the LORD will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart.“ (Deuteronomy 28:65)

“… and those the LORD has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.” (Isaiah 35:10)

“Yes, you are [the source of] our pride and joy.” (1 Thessalonians 2:20)

"Then my anger will cease and my wrath against them will subside, and I will be avenged. And when I have spent my wrath on them, they will know that I the LORD have spoken in my zeal (jealousy).“ (Ezekiel 5:13)

“Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.” (Ephesians 4:31)

“But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips”. (Colossians 3:8)

FEAR:

Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning." (Exodus 20:20)

“Fear the LORD and the king, my son, and do not join with rebellious officials…” (Proverbs 24:21) [If this was to Rehoboam we know how well that son listened! (1 Kings 12:12-15; 2 Chronicles 12:1)]

“Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind”. (Ecclesiastes 12:13)

“Do not call conspiracy everything this people calls a conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it". (Isaiah 8:12)

“But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.” (Luke 12:5)

ANGER:

“Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools.” (Ecclesiastes 7:9)

“How the Lord has covered Daughter Zion with the cloud of his anger! He has hurled down the splendor of Israel from heaven to earth; he has not remembered his footstool in the day of his anger.” (Lamentations 2:1)

“I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.” (Hosea 11:9)

“Who can stand before his fierce anger? Who can survive his burning fury? His rage blazes forth like fire…” (Nahum 1:6)

POSITIVE EMOTIONS:

“I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit..” (Romans 15:13)

“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” (John 15:11)

“You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder.” (Isaiah 9:3)

“Your love has given me much joy and comfort, my brother, for your kindness has often refreshed the hearts of God's people”. (Philemon 1:7)

“But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness…” (Galatians 5:22)

**Emotions Shown By And Around Jesus**

“He looked around at them angrily and was deeply saddened by their hard hearts.” (Mark 3:5)

“This shamed his enemies, but all the people rejoiced at the wonderful things he did.” (Luke 13:17)

“When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.” (John 11:33)

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.” (John 15:9)

“Looking at the man, Jesus felt genuine love for him…” (Mark 10:21)

**Divine Emotion vs. Human Emotion**

It is important however, to understand that while the concept of emotion as a reactive feeling-state is applied to both people and God its essence as manifested in humans is different from the kind that is attributed to God. God always exhibits the perfect form of everything, including emotion, while man normally shows imperfect emotion. Apparently we have the Biblical concept of divine emotion to demonstrate our natural alignment with God and present a pattern to guide the imperfect human condition. As such both God and man get angry, sad, glad etc but not in exactly the same way. In the divine pattern of emotional expression Love dominates not as just as a feeling-state as in man but also as an unchanging behavior controlled by an obligatory relationship with us (as in Lamentations 3:22-23). In the Old Testament God’s response is always within a Covenant and in the NT God is moved to act by a self-sacrificial need to regain us, always directed by His Unconditional Love (as in John 3:16). It is instructive that God consistently tells us not to fear and fearfulness is not one of His attributes; but He tells us to trust and love. Thus it appears we need always to work to remove fear reactions from our behavior. Love however, is in His Nature, which is reflected in ours and we are to grow more and more in it.

I hope I have convinced you that feelings and emotions are not unchristian and that in God’s creatures they are biological in origin and serve as the prompt for almost everything we think, say or do though as displayed, God’s emotional reactions are different from ours. Indeed, when we become aware of them our emotions are responsive to spiritual and personal management. One important lesson from this article is that Christians and their leaders need to remember that God has given us a complex world of people and things. Among the people and things that display God’s Gift of Love are the Bible and believers and also scientists and science. We need to use the confirmed products of each, to His glory. Together both theology and science can teach and contribute so much more about the complexity of the world and the Creator.

Therefore Christians need to recognize that in applying proven science to their understanding of the world they are in fact honoring God. By understanding through science how love works in us we have a better appreciation of the Biblical view of God’s Love for us and of Himself. Isn’t that why God gave us intellect and curiosity? To say God’s Nature is Love makes sense to us because we know (through our own experience) it means that His Nature constitutes everything that the emotion of love demonstrates or expresses. The Apostle John explains it as follows:

“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God… And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.” (1 John 4:7, 16)

This quote seems to wrap up the topic with room to add only the following from Paul:

“Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Keep on growing to maturity, feel encouraged, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you..” (2 Corinthians 13:11)