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A table of contents for *Anvil* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_anvil\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_anvil_01.php)

PETER SANLON

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# Bringing Emotions to the Surface in Ministry

**In this article Peter Sanlon explores the need to engage with people's emotions, as part of biblical Christian ministry. Reflecting on our Christian heritage, he considers four historical figures – Augustine, Sibbes, Edwards and Wilberforce, each of whom engaged in the ministry of bringing emotions to the surface and discovered resources for this vital aspect of evangelical ministry.**

The topic of emotions, when raised in Christian circles arouses, well – strong emotions! Many of us feel personally embarrassed at our ineptitude when it comes to expressing our feelings. We have amusing stories of times when we have stumbled over expressing our feelings. I recall a particularly entertaining example of a person who, over an emotionally charged dinner, accidentally proposed to his future wife when merely intending to say, 'Please pass the salt.'

When we turn to consider the issue of how we ought to engage with emotions in ministry, we can also begin to get very nervous and we find a range of responses. Some feel such release in expressing themselves emotionally that no curbing of excess can be countenanced. Others are convinced that emotions are an optional extra for some, but far from healthy in a Christian. Reluctance to discuss emotions in Christian circles is a great pity. Some secular commentators can admit struggles in a manner that shames the average Christian leader. Consider, for example, the recent, painful reflections of Simon Astaire:

I'm in my mid-forties and have never married. Last year, at an unhappy point in my life, I began to ask myself why I had never in fact had a lasting relationship. I've had some ravishing girlfriends. I've always liked and respected women. Yet however charming or attractive I've found my companions, however much I've felt myself 'in love', I realise now that there is always a point where I draw back emotionally. I have never been able to commit.<sup>1</sup>

Those of us in ministry are all too aware that we bring the gospel to people at some of the most emotional points of life. The damage done by sin, as it insinuates itself into our lives through institutions, experiences, mistakes, expectations and family generations is profoundly emotional. And yet it sometimes seems it is possible to explain the gospel in a theologically accurate manner that entirely misses the emotional tenor of the message. Some only turn to consider their emotional lives when the sense of *ennui* overwhelms, others when pastoral situations become unmanageable.

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1 Astaire 2008.

To those not yet motivated to give careful thought to the importance of emotions in Christian ministry, it may be instructive to note that the Bible frequently commands us to be emotional in various ways.<sup>2</sup> So we are told to love and be zealous (Rom. 12:9-11). We are instructed to feel joy (Phil. 3:1), experience sorrow (2 Cor. 7:8-11) and thankfulness (Col. 3:15-17). We are also warned to stop feeling afraid (Rev. 1:17). In our mutual love we are to learn mournful crying (Rom. 12:15).

Examples of places where the Bible enjoins upon us emotions could be multiplied many times over. Yet it is not sufficient simply to read the Bible, for many of us do so assiduously and still struggle to see what the text says. If the emotions are as central to ministry as the Bible suggests they are, then it is a sad irony that it may well be certain emotions which blind us to the Bible's teaching on emotions. How are we to bring to the surface that which, on many levels, we are reluctant to see? How can we minister to others emotionally, when we do not know how to minister to ourselves emotionally?

One helpful approach may be to turn to church history. As we read of the ways saints of previous generations worked to bring emotions to the surface, we may be stimulated to see afresh what the Bible says on the topic. The possibility of provocative stimulation in the context of a certain distance from our situation, is one of the great values of studying church history. With this in mind, we shall consider four historical vignettes, each of which involved a theological and ministerial effort to bring emotions to the surface. All the following figures engaged in a debate where a key part of their theological endeavour was to bring emotions to the surface: Augustine in relation to the Stoics, Richard Sibbes through his ministry to legalists, Jonathan Edwards in his response to extremists, and William Wilberforce faced with apathy. In each case they are introduced in their context before some practical reflections for ministry today are explored.

### **Augustine (354-430): Ministering to Stoics**

In his early life Augustine operated from an unexamined Stoic framework of ethics. Working from the philosophical reflections of Cicero, Augustine assumed that people simply choose to do virtuous actions. A person wills and consents to do that which is good. Augustine's engagement with Stoicism has until recently been underestimated. A good summary of his experience is found in 'The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion':

The early Augustine is blandly Stoic, but Augustine soon comes to outgrow his Stoicism... It becomes his habit to look intently at the motives behind consent, the sources of delight and aversion.<sup>3</sup>

Augustine began to discard his acceptance of Stoic ideas by the time he was ordained. Perhaps the best explanation for the theological change occurring at that point was that he had been spending large amounts of time reading the Bible. Afraid of being unprepared for ministry, Augustine had requested time to devote himself to study of the scriptures.<sup>4</sup> The impact of his extensive reading showed itself in the dramatic increase of scriptural quotations in 'Confessions' compared to his earlier writings. It was also seen in the development of an anthropology which would form a crucial part of Augustine's theological outlook.

<sup>2</sup> See Dow 2005: 16-18.

<sup>4</sup> Letter 21.3 in Augustine 2005, vol. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Wetzell 2007: 350.

The Bible made sense of Augustine's life experiences in a way the Stoic account did not. Stoicism disregarded the emotions and assumed a person had the rational ability to choose that which is good. As Augustine reflected on his longings for wealth, sexual pleasure, fame and friendship he saw emotional desires and longings as being far more important than Stoics would allow. Famously, Augustine observed, 'My weight is my love. Wherever I am carried, my love is carrying me.'<sup>5</sup> In his mature reflection Augustine observed that Stoic philosophers are as much empowered by the sinful flesh as Epicureans.<sup>6</sup> Although the former resist external sin and the latter embrace it their motivations reveal that, despite the fact they behave differently, they are both empowered by the flesh.

It was not because of his personality or background that Augustine developed an interest in emotional motivations and the heart's desires. He came to a hard-won theological conviction that people are fundamentally desirous in their created natures because he discovered that the Scriptures revealed this. Furthermore, he found that the popular Stoic alternative account of human nature did not explain his experience nearly so well as the biblical narrative. So, when he preached, Augustine made it clear that he was hoping the Holy Spirit would use his words and the Scriptures to impact desirous hearts:

When the Spirit of God calls the human race, telling us what we ought to do and promising us what we ought to hope for, he first makes us hot for the reward.<sup>7</sup>

Augustine knew that Stoic effort which ignored underlying emotional desires would not be enough to turn people back to God. So he preached:

Even now the fire is burning, the heat of the Word is on, the fierce glow of the Holy Spirit... That heat belongs to the Holy Spirit we are told by the apostle in Romans 12:11. So for the time being treat the scripture of God as the face of God. Melt in front of it... Under the heat of the Word, when the tears begin to flow, don't you feel yourself rather like wax beginning to drip and flow down as if in tears?<sup>8</sup>

Augustine's focus on the desirous power of love has been one of the most influential contributions he made to the Church. It impacted all parts of his theology and ministry. Until he examined the issue of how a person functions and acts in this world, with careful reference to Scripture, Augustine assumed the pagan Stoic views current in his day. Unexamined, his anthropology was Stoic. We can easily miss the fact that Augustine's embrace of a desirous anthropology which paid more attention to the emotions was a theological step which made him swim very much against the flow of secular thought:

It is no accident that charity assumes a paramount importance in the Augustinian tradition and discretion in the pagan, nor that delight in the one case and assent or choice in the other are the corresponding terms in their respective philosophies of action. The terms denote divergent ontological contexts within which selfhood, action and virtue are construed.<sup>9</sup>

Why was Augustine led to this counter-cultural position? It is worth remembering that Augustine's ability to speak to the heart, giving due recognition to the centrality

5 *Confessions*, 13.9.10 in Augustine 1991.

6 *City of God*, 14.2 in Augustine 1972.

7 Sermon 16.1 in Augustine 1990, vol. 1.

8 Sermon 22.7 in Augustine 1990, vol. 2.

9 Hanby 2003: 100.

of emotions in people, came from study of the Scriptures and a humble recognition that he needed more than Stoic exhortation to do the right thing.

Sermon 365 is one example of a place Augustine explicitly argues against Stoic ethics. He represents the Stoic philosophers as saying that, 'Our nature is good, our understanding good'.<sup>10</sup> In response, Augustine preaches that true life consists in love,<sup>11</sup> given by the Holy Spirit.<sup>12</sup> The Stoic conception of virtue is unable to resist sin.<sup>13</sup> Allusions to scriptural images, so typical of Augustine, are apparent in his exhortation:

If you have this gift from nature, you are rendering vain the death of Christ, his passion, his cross...Give back to the Lord the lowliness of the manger, the curse of the cross, the generous shedding of his blood – it is all fruitless if you are entirely self-sufficient.<sup>14</sup>

### Reflections for Ministry

Too often today people assume that emotions, and ability to minister to them, are a matter of indifference, personality or church background. Augustine's theology highlighted the centrality of desire. His famous comment, 'Our hearts are restless till they take their rest in You,'<sup>15</sup> is far more than a slogan or catchphrase. It is indicative of a deep and profound concern with emotions. That Augustine's focus on desires and emotions came about as a result of extensive biblical study means that we ought to be very reluctant to accept modern ambivalence in this area. Indeed the role Scripture played in Augustine's rejection of Stoicism may even suggest to us that, apart from God giving us insight through the Bible, we are very likely to be ignorant about the fundamentally emotional makeup of our true natures. It is all too easy to think that by effort and discipline I can make reasoned decisions to avoid sin and embrace virtue. The darkness of the Fall means that I should be wary of making any such assumptions – especially about myself. We should be alert to the fact that the problems Augustine faced are not confined to his time and that, just as John Calvin despaired in his day that, 'among the Christians there are new Stoics',<sup>16</sup> so there are forms of Stoicism found among Christians, including evangelicals and Anglicans, today.

### Richard Sibbes (1577-1635): Ministering to Legalists

As a student in Cambridge, Sibbes sat under what he came to regard as legalistic preaching. He was subsequently converted under the ministry of Paul Baynes. After five years of lecturing in Cambridge, Sibbes was forced to resign due to his Puritan sympathies. Subsequently, in 1617, he was appointed preacher at Grays Inn, London. From here he exercised a highly influential preaching ministry.

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**10** Sermon 365.2 in Augustine, 1990, vol. 10.

**11** Sermon 365.1 in Augustine, 1990, vol. 10.

**12** Sermon 365.4 in Augustine, 1990, vol. 10.

**13** Sermon 365.3 in Augustine, 1990, vol. 10.

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**14** Sermon 365.4 in Augustine, 1990, vol. 10.

**15** Augustine 1991: 21.

**16** *Institutes*, III.8.ix in Calvin 2001.

Sibbes was well known for his warmth and affection but it would be a mistake to think that this was simply his personality trait:

Rather, he was a persistent but careful advocate of a distinctively affective theology that he recovered and developed from some of the earlier reformers, including Martin Luther and John Calvin.<sup>17</sup>

English Puritanism was not a monochrome movement. There were debates and disputes within the group, for example over possible relationships to the established denomination. Another important dispute was over the role of the Mosaic Law in the life of a believer. The majority of Puritans gave the Mosaic Law a leading role in their theology: assurance was derived from obedience, godliness was experienced in obedience. As a result, the Mosaic Law shaped much of Puritan religion. However, a minority of Puritans came to believe that the New Testament taught that the believer is freed from the demands of the Law. A corollary of this insight was a vision of the Christian life shaped by rather different theological loci than the Mosaic Law. With the Law no longer shaping the Christian life, much more care was taken over the Spirit's work upon the emotions. The nature of faith, assurance, conversion and godliness were transformed. Sibbes was one of the leading Puritans in this tradition which, though often misunderstood as immoral antinomians, claimed that their theology was faithful to the Scriptures and Reformation.

The nature of Sibbes' views may most clearly be seen in his exposition of 2 Cor. 3:

In power and efficacy, the gospel is beyond the Law. The Law had not power to convert, to change into its own likeness; but now the gospel, which is the ministry of the Spirit, has a transforming changing power, into the likeness of Christ whom it preacheth... The ministry of the gospel hath the Spirit with it, whereby we are changed from the heart-root inwardly.<sup>18</sup>

Sibbes realised that if the New Covenant is genuinely different in nature from the Old Covenant then there must be significant consequences for the actual experiences of those living under it. So, for example, assurance was found not in assessing obedience to the Law, but in the emotional nature of faith itself:

I may discern that I am in Christ, if upon my knowledge of him, my heart is united to him, and I find peace of conscience in him. Faith has a quieting and establishing power.<sup>19</sup>

The more Sibbes grasped the insight that the Christian life is a life freed from the Law, the more he suspected that those who opposed his preaching were going beyond a Pauline defence of the good nature of the Mosaic Law (as, for example, in Rom. 7:7-12) and were advocating a form of legal living which smothered the joy out of knowing Christ. In contrast, Sibbes preached, 'God delights in us and we delight in him.'<sup>20</sup> He considered the emotional state of Jesus, 'The human nature of Christ is the happiest creature there ever was.'<sup>21</sup>

For Sibbes, certainty in Christian matters could never be found in mere intellectual understanding. There must be, 'not only a light in the understanding,

<sup>17</sup> Frost 2004:80.

<sup>18</sup> Sibbes 1983: 4:239.

<sup>19</sup> Sibbes 1982: 4:123.

<sup>20</sup> Sibbes 1982: 7:62.

<sup>21</sup> Sibbes 1982: 7:87.

but some heat in the affection.<sup>22</sup> This is because the nature of a person is seen in their emotional commitments: 'We are not as we know, but as we love... our affections are those things which declare what we are.'<sup>23</sup> To those who thought his insights were merely personal preference, Sibbes warned, 'If we have religion only in the brain, and not in love, we shall be stripped of all. Satan will rob us of any truth.'<sup>24</sup>

### Reflections for Ministry

Sibbes' focus on the emotional life in his preaching and ministry was the result of careful exegetical work on the New Testament's teaching upon the Mosaic Law. His writings are a warning to any who think that emotions are peripheral to biblical ministry. It should give us pause for thought that one as studious, godly and influential as Sibbes perused the Bible and was convinced enough of his conclusions to abide by them even in the face of bitter recriminations and rejection. The straightforward challenge he makes to those of us who see emotions as secondary or even peripheral concerns in Christian ministry is that we should read the Bible more carefully and consider whether we know it as well as we assume.

Sibbes' explanation of the role of the Mosaic Law in salvation history also encourages us to reflect on the nature of legalism. No Christians describe themselves as legalistic! However, Sibbes' concern with the emotions is intimately related to his theology of the Mosaic Law. He would think it very likely that somebody who struggles to engage with emotions is in such a position due to an unbiblical over-emphasis on Law in their life. As the Law shapes and forms a person's religious life, key parts of the gospel get remade in the Law's image. So subtle is the problem that a person can even accept Sibbes' view on the Mosaic Law, but in practice replace the Law with other Christian activities such as evangelism or Bible reading. By such means a person can teach, explain and believe all the words of the gospel, but be a legalist to the core. What would be Sibbes' counsel to any who recognise that they shape their lives by Law but desire to enter deeper into the emotional reality of the Christian life? It would simply be to draw near to Christ, recognising that all is of grace: 'By his light our eyes are enlightened, we are quickened by his heat and love.'<sup>25</sup>

### Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758): Ministering to Extremists

As minister in Northampton during the American Great Awakening, Edwards was well placed to observe the impact of mass conversions and spiritual hysteria. He spent many hours studying to compose both philosophical treatises and elegant sermons, becoming known as America's most famous philosopher and preacher.<sup>26</sup>

As Edwards surveyed the impact of the Enlightenment and the state of preaching in his day, he felt that he ministered in the midst of extremes. On the one side there were cool rationalists who thought that ministry merely involved explaining the truth clearly. On the other side, there were those who enthusiastically embraced every sign of emotion as an outpouring of God's Spirit. Edwards came

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<sup>22</sup> Sibbes 1982: 7:274.

<sup>23</sup> Sibbes 1982: 7:413.

<sup>24</sup> Sibbes 1982: 7:312.

<sup>25</sup> Sibbes 1982: 7:77.

<sup>26</sup> The works of Edwards are available at <http://edwards.yale.edu/>

to believe that people needed not primarily an intellectual rational enlightenment, but an inner enlightenment wrought by the presence of God.<sup>27</sup> Facing these contrary excesses of his contemporaries, he complained, ‘we easily run from one extreme to another’,<sup>28</sup> noting that a few years previously it was common in his part of the world to unquestioningly accept all emotional excesses but that, ‘of late, it is much more prevalent to reject all religious affections.’<sup>29</sup>

It would be easy to surmise that, in such a situation of extremes, Edwards would encourage moderation, advocating a half-way house or a third way. We might imagine him saying that a Christian approach to emotions would be to avoid both extremes of excess and rejection; to sagely sit in the middle on a *via media*. It was the genius of Edwards that he resisted this approach. Instead he argued for two points – the primacy of the affections in biblical Christianity and therefore the need not to decry emotion but rather to distinguish between true and false affections.

Edwards contended that the Bible taught that, ‘those who condemn religious affections in others, and have none themselves, have no religion.’<sup>30</sup> He rejected the idea that one could understand Christianity and not experience its emotional impact – to not feel it was to have failed to understand:

If the great things of religion are rightly understood, they will affect the heart. The reason why men are not affected by such infinitely great, important, glorious and wonderful things, as they often hear and read of in the Word of God, is undoubtedly because they are blind. If they were not so, it would be impossible, and utterly inconsistent with human nature, that their hearts should not be greatly moved by such things.<sup>31</sup>

Edwards refused to settle for a mere muddling of rationalism and emotionalism. He perceived that the Bible so exalts the place of the affections that, ‘the religion which God requires, and will accept, does not consist in weak, dull and lifeless wishes, raising us but a little above a state of indifference.’<sup>32</sup> While Edwards affirmed that there must be truth as well as emotional response – light as well as heat,<sup>33</sup> to use his terminology – he insisted that the affections held a position of primacy: ‘True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections.’<sup>34</sup>

Since the affections occupy such a central position in the experience of real Christianity, Edwards counselled people not to denigrate emotions but rather to distinguish between those which are good and those which are bad. One must, ‘distinguish between affections, approving some and rejecting others.’<sup>35</sup> The bulk of Edward’s famous treatise on the Religious Affections was an attempt to delineate signs which may or may not suggest an affection is holy and from God and, while unable to be explored further here, the pastoral subtlety with which Edwards went about this task still repays careful reading nearly three centuries later.

### Reflections for Ministry

In a context where people adopt extreme positions, it is tempting simply to affirm parts of both sides and sit securely in the middle. We do so when we accept

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**27** Moody 1997.

**28** Edwards 1961: 48. See also Marsden 2003: 285.

**29** Edwards 1961: 49.

**30** Edwards 1961: 50.

**31** Edwards 1961: 50.

**32** Edwards 1961: 27.

**33** Edwards 1961: 49.

**34** Edwards 1961: 23.

**35** Edwards 1961: 50.



reductionistic anthropologies which merely say we must minister to both head and heart. We do so when we sing charismatic songs to give an impression of emotional warmth, but do not examine our fundamental theological convictions about the nature of a person. We do so when we are happy to say that different people have varying levels of emotional capacity, and then use that observation to relegate the affections to a matter of indifference.

One of the challenges that Edwards lay down to succeeding generations of ministers was whether we will dare to affirm what the Bible actually teaches, even if that might be misunderstood or misrepresented. In particular, if, as Edwards concluded, the Bible affirms the primacy of the affections, then the golden mean may appear to be safe, but it is incorrect and unbiblical.

The primacy of the affections has implications for our ministries. We should see that prayer, sacraments, singing and preaching are all given by God 'to excite and express religious affections.'<sup>36</sup> Perhaps one of the areas of ministry where we understandably, but erroneously, fail to appreciate the primacy of the affections, is evangelism. It makes sense intellectually that an unbeliever needs to understand that of which they were previously ignorant. This is indeed necessary (Rom. 10:14) but Edwards would affirm that the main point of spiritual work in conversion is in the affections. To engage in mission which takes seriously the primacy of the affections would involve a radical overhaul of our present day reliance on programmes, courses and rational explanations:

There is a difference between having an opinion that God is holy and gracious, and having a sense of that holiness and grace. There is a difference between having a rational judgement that honey is sweet, and having a sense of its sweetness. A man may have the former, that knows not how honey tastes.<sup>37</sup>

A compelling case could be made that much evangelical ministry today is geared at giving people an opinion and rational judgement about God which falls far short of the sense of sweetness Edwards encouraged people to taste. In a time when people are starving for lack of the pleasure of tasting the sweetness of God, we should not denigrate emotions but rather seek to stir up any emotion which tends towards inculcating the emotional heart-felt plea, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us' (Luke 17:13). We must do this in evangelism, because, 'the way to draw men and women into Christ's kingdom, Edwards believed, was through his listeners' affections.'<sup>38</sup>

### **William Wilberforce (1759-1833): Ministering to the Apathetic**

The achievements of William Wilberforce, one of England's most famous evangelical Christians, in spearheading the arduous campaign to abolish the slave trade, are well known. Rarely, however has the significance of emotions in the Yorkshire MP's life or appeal been focused upon.

Our impression of the Houses of Parliament is often that of dull, monotonous speeches and reports. Doubtless there is far too much of that but, in an age when oratory was prized, Wilberforce stood out as passionate and eloquent. When he

<sup>36</sup> Edwards 1961: 44.

<sup>37</sup> Edwards 1966: 129.

<sup>38</sup> Bailey 2003: 78.

<sup>39</sup> Hague 2008: 179.

presented the shocking facts about the slave trade to parliament, Wilberforce 'included his opponents in his feelings of outrage.'<sup>39</sup> Wilberforce's mission to abolish slavery was not to be accomplished quickly; the path was long and full of disappointments. Sustaining his energies was not a case of naïve, relentless optimism; he frequently suffered bouts of depression. However, persisting in the pursuit of his goal was made possible only by an appropriate bringing to the surface of the relevant emotional concerns. He observed, 'Mere knowledge is confessedly too weak. The affections alone remain to supply the deficiency.'<sup>40</sup>

Engaging with emotions was an important part of Wilberforce's conversion to evangelical Christianity. When he read the Greek New Testament he was 'intellectually convinced by, but not yet emotionally committed to, the need for a new approach to life.'<sup>41</sup> In his own experience, genuine transformation only occurred once he set aside the shame and fear of his colleagues' distaste for evangelicalism, and allowed his emotions to enjoy the graciousness of God.

In bringing the cause of abolition before the English people, Wilberforce's main hurdle was that of apathy. The issue of apathy was intertwined with what he came to see as sub-biblical Christianity. He published a book which highlighted the issue in no uncertain manner. When the full, original title is considered, the bone of contention Wilberforce had may be seen for what it was – 'A Practical View of the prevailing religious system of professed Christians in the higher and middle classes in this country contrasted with real Christianity'. Wilberforce thought that the middle and upper classes held to a form of Christianity which was not real Christianity. As he considered the outrage of slavery, Wilberforce also surveyed the state of the church and asked, 'Are the service and worship of God pleasant to these persons?'<sup>42</sup> The difference between the genuine and false article was, he concluded, the level of emotional commitment: 'they know indeed that they are mortal, but they do not feel it.'<sup>43</sup>

Wilberforce saw that the main reason for his difficulty in abolishing slavery lay in the apathy of people to others' suffering. He perceived that the only solution lay in genuine Christianity which engaged the emotions in their God-designed role of making a person feel as he or she ought to feel. Only if approached in this way could people be moved to action.

Wilberforce's critique of unemotional and apathetic Christianity remains penetrating. He noted that a 'hot zeal for orthodoxy' was not the same thing as genuine internalised acceptance of the gospel.<sup>44</sup> He warned that what people paraded externally as 'charity' could often be 'nothing other than indifference.'<sup>45</sup> Wilberforce suggested that in the case of many who had been 'converted':

Their hearts are no more than before supremely set on the great work of their salvation, but are chiefly bent upon increasing their fortunes, or raising their families. Meanwhile they content themselves on having amended from vices, which they are no longer strongly tempted to commit.<sup>46</sup>

In all of this searching critique, Wilberforce laid the majority of the blame at the door of ministers who failed to engage with people at the level of their emotions,

**40** Wilberforce 1996: 56.

**41** Hague 2008: 77.

**42** Wilberforce 1996: 111.

**43** Wilberforce 1996: 110.

**44** Wilberforce 1996: 243.

**45** Wilberforce 1996: 246.

**46** Wilberforce 1996: 245.

claiming that most Christian preaching spoke of 'general Christianity' rather than bringing to the surface 'the workings of the heart':

Ministers who preach the truths of the Gospel with fidelity, ability, and success, are liable to the charge of dwelling altogether in their instructions on this general religion, instead of tracing and laying open the secret motions of inward corruption.<sup>47</sup>

Much of the preaching which Wilberforce heard and rejected as less than full-orbed evangelical proclamation could be summed up in the phrase, 'accurate, but apathetic'.

### **Reflections for Ministry**

It is sobering to reflect that Wilberforce blamed superficial Christian ministry for the failure to garner support for the abolition of slavery and it is humbling that it was a Member of Parliament rather than a minister of the church who wrote 'Practical Christianity'.

Today, society is very conscious of social evils and deprivation. As a result there have been renewed explorations of what the social duties and role of evangelical churches should be. Most of the discussions have so far focused on such external practical issues as the balance of resources between proclamation and social care, the relationship between inner-city and rural parishes and the quantifiable effectiveness of action. Wilberforce's analysis leads us to ponder the inner emotional workings that lead to apathy. As Christians impacted by God we are becoming certain kinds of people. Even as we discuss practical concerns, we should perhaps wonder what our feelings reveal about the sort of people we are, for how we feel about those who suffer and are disadvantaged has a huge significance. Our ability to communicate the gospel to the watching world is affected by whether or not we have an inner emotional apathy about the poor. A ministry which does not bring these emotions to the surface and challenge apathy will, in time, find itself to have been built on sand.

### **Conclusion**

It is surprising how often in the history of the Christian church, a debate about one issue hides an issue of more fundamental importance. We have seen how, in four very different ministries from diverse periods, attitudes to the role of emotions played a crucial part in disputes. Stoicism, Legalism, Extremism and Apathy are all alive and well today and unless we become adept at bringing emotions to the surface in ministry we will find ourselves entangled in one of these problems or some other superficial reaction to them.

The books of Daniel Goleman have brought to the attention of the secular business and social world the fact that most of our interactions are shaped more by emotions than intelligence.<sup>48</sup> People struggle to learn how to engage with their emotions, often driven by the desire to become more attractive, popular or successful. Christians have better reasons and better resources to engage emotionally. We should be bringing emotions to the surface because we understand how God has made us and we want our ministries to connect with people as they

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<sup>47</sup> Wilberforce 1996: 262.

<sup>48</sup> Goleman 1996.

really are. We are able to do this with the God-given resources that flow from a personal experience of having our emotions renewed by grace. In the words of one of the less well known verses of 'And Can it Be', by Charles Wesley:

Still the small inward voice I hear  
Which whispers all my sins forgiven  
Still the atoning blood is near  
Which quenched the wrath of hostile heav'n  
I feel the life his wounds impart  
I feel the Saviour in my heart.

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