

# EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN MISSIONS

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Good emotional management is a highly needed commodity in missions work. Without it we can unintentionally make a complete mess out of our service for God. One emotional explosion at the wrong moment can be held against us for a long time to come and we are often judged by others on how we handle our emotions. Many very productive Christian workers have had to leave the ministry because they just could not manage their emotions well and this marred all their relationships. This skill is now called "emotional intelligence" and accounts for 85% of the difference between successful and unsuccessful professionals (if their IQ is about the same).

So, we need to do something – but what can we do? The good secular materials available do not draw on the resources that the Holy Spirit can bring to emotional transformation and few good Christian resources exist that combine biblical insights with good clinical data. This article is an attempt to do that. I have also written a book on the topic called "Biblical EQ" which is available on Amazon.

As mission leaders we require a biblical paradigm with Jesus at its center and the emotional life of Jesus as our model and the Holy Spirit as the main power behind emotional transformation.

## WHAT IS EQ?

Emotional intelligence is the term we use to describe a complex set of human abilities related to emotional management. The four key aspects of emotional intelligence as described by Mayer and Salovey (the pioneer researchers in the area) are:

1. Emotional identification, perception and expression
2. Emotional facilitation of thought
3. Emotional understanding
4. Emotional management

Various other researchers, most notably Daniel Goleman, have broken these into various subfactors which are continually being reviewed. Recent findings in neurology have contribute greatly to our understanding of where emotions arise in the brain. The field is fluid and a final decision on what finally constitutes EQ has not been entirely reached yet and there are two or three main schools. However, much is coming out of these studies that is very interesting from a Christian perspective, as we shall see as we go along.

## WHAT IS THE CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO EQ?

This is the biblical perspective on the above four key skill areas. It doesn't neglect the findings of neuroscience but it adds in the transforming power

of the Holy Spirit and the wisdom of Proverbs. It has as its model the emotional life of Jesus Christ with His personal presence, selfcontrol, emotional expressiveness and discernment of situations. Thus, it has a clear pattern, a master plan that can be used to analyze theories and to determine what is true and false, wise and unwise. Secular theories have no "ideal person" to point to - they merely assemble ideals from their own theories and worldview. In Jesus we have a model , a guide, a point to aim our teaching towards and this is invaluable. The Christian believer is to aspire to have the emotional life of Christ Jesus for that is very much part of being "in His image". Above all this Christian approach is biblical - founded on faith in the inspired, inerrant and authoritative Scriptures.

## THE FAILURE OF THE SECULAR MODELS OF EQ

After reading various EQ books you know that emotions are important, that you should handle them better and a lot about how they arose within you, but you are not shown how to conquer them.

Why is this so? Why has the secular approach to emotional intelligence fizzled? Firstly they have a philosophical underpinning that has no definite direction. There is nothing intrinsic to the theory that tells them what to aim for when helping a person achieve a higher level of emotional intelligence. Apart from being in touch with ones emotions and being able to express them accurately, appropriately and responsibly there is no "big picture" of what the emotionally intelligent person should turn out like.

People end up confused and perplexed. Theories seem at variance with each other and the result is that some practitioners are almost Zen Buddhists while others are extremely businesslike, manipulative and pragmatic. Without any agreement on what an ideal person is they cannot make much real progress.

Secondly much of the work of Goleman and others involves a model steeped in a medical and neurological framework that sees our responses as entirely conditioned by biology, genetics and environment. Alteration of responses is through medication, education and behavior modification.

Thirdly prayer and spiritual disciplines are marginalized in the literature despite their utility. For instance on page 75 of Goleman's first book Emotional Intelligence he says "*Finally, at least some people are able to find relief from their melancholy in turning to a transcendent power. Tice (a researcher into depression) told me "Praying, if you are very religious, works for all moods, especially depression"*. Despite this obvious therapeutic value for prayer it is never again referred to in

Goleman's book. People know that religion works - they are just refusing to admit it much in print. Should we then throw out their work entirely? Not at all. Truth is truth and measurements are measurements. There is an enormous amount of good work and wise information in the current EQ literature. It can be, and is, very helpful in giving us understanding of how our emotions work.

### CORE CONCEPTS

To get answers that genuinely help people we need two things, a clear destination, and the power to get there in a reasonable amount of time. Our destination is the image of Christ Jesus, our power to get there is the infilling with and transforming work of the Holy Spirit. These are just the some of the great advantages of the gospel, we have hope, and we have lots of hope! Thus, our central premise is that Christians can have their emotional life redeemed so that it is transformed to mirror the emotional life of Jesus Christ and that the Holy Spirit's power and grace is the key to this process. This involves renewing seven key aspects which are:

1. Renewing our basic perceptions of reality and our perspective on life.
2. Renewing our individual belief system.
3. Renewing the purposes and intents of our heart.
4. Renewing our physical bodies and their influence on our emotions.
5. Renewing our ability to be aware of and to understand our own emotions.
6. Renewing our ability to understand the emotions of other people.
7. Renewing our ability to appropriately express emotion according to the desires of the Holy Spirit.

The first few of these are a very deep work. It takes effort, courage and time to change one's perspective on life or to review and change core beliefs, thoughts and intentions. However, unless this is done, the foundations are not strong and any positive emotional changes will be temporary at best.

### WHAT KIND OF EMOTIONS SHOULD CHRISTIANS HAVE?

While God is emotional there are some emotions that God never has. God is never envious, lustful, greedy, bitter with selfish ambition, small-minded, or petty. Neither is he anxious or fretful but dwells in perfect peace. His emotions are positive, holy, noble and appropriate. God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all. Since we are called to be "in the image of God", then whatever else that means, it means that at the end of our Christian maturity, our emotions should in some measure share these divine qualities. We should be "walking in the light".

Thus, godliness means forsaking some emotions and embracing others. We should be utterly free from unholy and fleshly emotions and moving toward

mature and holy emotional responses. The mature saint of God is filled with love and utterly free from bitter envy and selfish ambition. (James 3:15-18). Petty covetous worldly longings are replaced by the love of the Father (1 John 2:15-17) and perfect love casts our fear so that we dwell in quietness, peace and confidence (1 John 4:18, Isaiah 26:3). Holy people do not easily fly into rages or engage in back-biting and quarrelling rather they are God-centered people full of love, joy and peace (Galatians 5:19-23).

There is thus a grand and holy emotional authenticity that accompanies maturity in Christ. As a rough guide our emotions can be broken down into three classes:

**Holy Emotions** - those experienced by God such as compassion, joy, and holy indignation and those that accompany life in the Spirit such as praise, worship and adoration. These emotions are derived from the kingdom of light and the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18-21, Colossians 3:16-17, Galatians 5:22,23) and are in agreement with true wisdom (James 3:17,18) They are the emotions of Christ in us. They are not necessarily religious or pious emotions. Admiring a flower or delighting in beautiful music or focusing on the beautiful and the good can be just as holy as going to church. (Philippians 4:8)

**Human Emotions** - based in our human situation and the created order and shared by Jesus during His time on earth. This includes emotions such as grief, pain, fear, abandonment, sadness and sorrow, anxiety, stress, anguish and vulnerability. These emotions are well chronicled in the Psalms. For the Christian they are temporary and in eternity there shall be no more crying or sadness or pain (Revelation 21:4). While these emotions may feel bad they are not evil or toxic. They can be painful but they are not poisonous.

**Fleshly Emotions** - are poisonous and destructive and include toxic emotions such as malice, envy, selfish ambition, sensuality, bitterness, overpowering lusts and murderous hatred. They are closely tied up with the works of the flesh and with evil deeds. Their outcome is spiritual death. These emotions were not part of mankind at Creation and are not "natural human reactions" (For instance grief is a natural human reaction but bitterness is fleshly. One can have "good grief" without a trace of bitterness. Bitterness is not natural to the human condition.) Rather these emotions are derived from the kingdom of darkness and have their source in a dark wisdom (James 3:14-16).

This classification helps us see the relative value of our emotional responses and to use the techniques described in the succeeding chapters to assist with our sanctification. It also puts the lie to the old humanist rubric "there are no right or wrong emotions." All emotions are not equal. Some are of much higher value than others and some emotions and impulses are positively wrong. This classification also goes a bit beyond the black and white classification of emotions as 'spiritual' or 'unspiritual' that causes so much

pain in traditional missionary circles. When pain and disappointment are seen as “unspiritual” we simply add to the burden the person is carrying.

Hurt, disappointment, pain and frustration are valid human emotions stemming from our creatureliness encountering a fallen world. Human beings were created good but mortal and it is as we explore this mortality that we find out many useful things about ourselves. The above simple classification also saves us from the error of stopping there with our human emotions and being content simply to explore ourselves at that level. It tells us there is something higher, something beyond our mortality and that it is as we focus on our immortality in Christ that we develop the highest and noblest parts of our being.

We are thus called to participate in the holy emotions so that they transcend the human emotions and overcome the fleshly emotions. By this I mean that we must choose our emotional level and which emotions we will be gripped by. When disappointment strikes we can choose to respond with holy emotions and pray through until we trust God and can praise Him. Consider Paul in jail in Philippi in Acts 16. He praised God, sang psalms and rejoiced thus transcending the human emotions of pain and discomfort and effectively banishing any fleshly emotions such as bitterness or desire for revenge.

Paul participated in holy emotions so that they transcended the human emotions and overcame the fleshly emotions. The human emotions are not denied or seen as wrong rather they are acknowledged but not focused on. They are transcended. The saint focuses on and deliberately chooses to move toward the holy emotions. Prayer, fasting, praise and worship, reading Scripture, meditating on good teaching and doing good works are all helpful in this process. However above and beyond these things we need the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit responds differently to each of these three categories of emotion. The Holy Spirit rejoices and assists us when we engage in holy responses. He produces them within us so they can justly be called “the fruit of the Spirit”. (Romans chapters 8 & 12, and Galatians 5) On the other hand the Holy Spirit comforts us when the human emotions such as grief overwhelm us (see 2 Corinthians 1).

Finally, He is determined to break the grip of fleshly emotions such as hatred, lust and revenge. In fact, the Spirit wars against such impulses so that we cannot fully give way to our worst desires (Galatians 5:16-18). The Holy Spirit produces holy emotions, comforts overwhelming human emotions and wars against fleshly emotions. However, we have a choice in the matter. We can take heed of the Spirit’s promptings or we can discard them in fleshly rebellion. This leads Paul to say that the mind set on the flesh and its fractious emotions “is death” but the mind set on the Spirit with His holy emotions is “life and peace”(Romans 8:5,6).

As we will see in other chapters, the Spirit renews

the mind with its personal perspective and belief structure. The renewed mind becomes centred on God and can be validly called “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:14-16). Thus as the mind is redeemed and renewed and set on the Spirit life and peace result. Our emotions need redemption if they are to become holy and the focus of all redemption is Jesus Christ who will be our model and pattern for redeemed Christian emotions.

#### APPLICATION TO MISSIONS

Missions is stressful and the emotional management of cross-cultural stress on a long-term basis is a critical skill. Yet many agencies have theologies that suppress emotional recognition and expression and which then lead to staff who are burned out, drained or even chronically angry and resentful. Overcoming this is not a superficial task, many will need to take a deep look at how they perceive the world, what they believe about themselves and life in general, and how to surrender to the emotional coaching of the Holy Spirit.

Emotions flow from beliefs about reality, and beliefs flow from the deep perspectives of our human spirit (for instance an “embittered spirit” will see life in a way that produces dysfunctional beliefs about life’s circumstances and very painful emotions).

A highly corporate approach to missions that is focused on completing projects will often neglect or minimize the emotional and spiritual life of God’s servants. In these models your spiritual life is your own business and you should take care of it before work, and then put your head down and tail up for the rest of the day. These high-pressure cultures inevitably produce burned-out saints.

At the other extreme we have very pietistic approaches to mission with an over-emphasis on feelings and prayer and intercession and worship. This may at first seem very commendable however they tend to become very legalistic about emotions and can marginalize people suffering from grief, depression or chronic pain and illness for being insufficiently positive.

We must examine the Scriptures at depth for what they say about our emotions and how to manage them. We need a theology of emotions and we need to understand the emotions of Jesus. Jesus is God and yet He was also fully human and tempted in every point as we are, He still retains that humanity in Heaven as our faithful high priest.: *(Hebrews 2:10-18 NASB) For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings. {11} ...Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. {18} For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.*

This passage and others like it in Hebrews (4:14-16, 5:7-

10) emphasize that life or Jesus was difficult. It was so difficult that it was quite rightly described as suffering and had all the emotional hallmarks of suffering. It was no light suffering for it was to have the effect of perfecting Him! It was a suffering that matured His obedience by testing it under very stressful conditions. As we shall see Jesus was pressed again and again to almost breaking point but He never sinned. Though He was God He laid aside those privileges (Philippians 2:5-11) to become fully human and a servant and was "made like His brethren in all things that He might become a merciful and faithful High Priest". He was made like us in our experiences of hunger, thirst, tiredness, frustration, misunderstanding, betrayal and even of unjust treatment by others. Even a cursory reading of the gospels will tell you that He did not just cruise through these experiences. He wept, He rebuked, He cried out, He rejoiced, He got angry, He became "troubled in spirit", He groaned in anguish and sweated drops of blood. Life for Jesus was difficult and it was often emotionally intense. This has made Him merciful in His role as high priest for He has fully been where we are.

*In fact the reason we can be like Jesus is because became very much like us.* In fact He calls us brethren" (Hebrews 2:11 ) which means that we are enough alike Him to be considered family and to bear a close "genetic relationship" that has some sort of equality about it. Romans 8:29 tells us that we will be conformed to His image almost like someone pressed into a mold. Our shape will be the same as His shape. We will be like Him. There will be a resemblance. We can resemble Him because he chose to resemble us. Finally, Ephesians 4:15, says we are to be made like Him "in all respects". That's a very close likeness that includes our emotional life!

Once we understand the emotions of Jesus, and the role of the Holy Spirit in producing those emotions within Him, through His faith-filled perception of life, and through His beliefs which were based on Scripture, then we will have a start in addressing our own emotions and the emotions of our staff.

Any attempt to define Christian emotions apart from Christ will lead us astray. We need to look at our model and our High Priest! We need to behold Christ, for He is our spiritual destiny. Once we do this we will be able to help missionaries and pastors to move out from carnal emotions, and being stuck in human emotions and lay hold of the holy emotions that God has ins tore for us!

### SOME STEPS FORWARD

1. Recognize the importance of emotional intelligence in missions leadership
2. Create clear biblical expectations regarding the area of emotional intelligence
3. Have emotional intelligence training as a part of the recruitment and orientation process
4. Be intentionally Christ-centered in your approach to emotional intelligence

5. By all means use some secular approaches, but filter them through Scripture
6. Look to the Holy Spirit as the primary power for emotional transformation.
7. Do not have a sterile and mechanical emotional environment focused entirely on individual productivity and zeal.
8. Do not be legalistic about the kind of emotions your staff should have
9. Do not ignore clear signs of emotional distress but address them promptly
10. Get beyond the "just pray and read your bible" approach to emotional distress
11. Make emotional empathy and consideration an important team quality
12. Monitor how people express their emotions in your team, inappropriate outbursts can create high levels of discomfort and disunity.
13. Coach those who have problems expressing emotions appropriately
14. Be prepared to terminate people who are consistently emotionally destructive even if they are very talented and zealous.
15. Remember that different cultures have different emotional expectations and train your staff in how to fit in with those expectations in order to be relationally effective.
16. Develop a biblical theology of emotional transformation that is consistent with your faith tradition and denominational perspective and which is clearly and deeply taught.
17. Develop a theology of emotional suffering consistent with Job, Psalms and the life of hrist and that of the apostles.
18. Coach staff through suffering, disappointment, and loss. Support them in the gradual process of arriving at a biblical perspective on Christian endurance.
19. Be understanding of those with long-term motionally draining situations such as unwanted singleness, infertility, chronic pain, and financial insufficiency.
20. Develop an emotionally affirming missions culture which blessed people at the core of their being and recognizes their full humanity and personal value rather than just their value to an organization.



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