

THE “EMOTIONAL” LIFE OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST (Part 2: History of “emotions”)

Before we delve into all of the passages that provide us with a full and accurate view and proper place and use of the Perfect Man’s, Jesus’s, affectivity—the active power of His affections, sentiments, and passions and how they relate to the theme of love in the Bible (cf., 1 John 3:17)—we need to understand a little history of the introduction of modern concept of “emotions” by the likes of David Hume and other Scots, which was then popularized in modern society by materialists and Darwinians through academia, which then spread throughout culture through the graduates who enter businesses, the arts, cinema, and yes, the ministry. Almost no one today understands and appreciates the active powers of man’s affectivity because of the conceptual framework of “emotions.” There are Christians on one end of the spectrum who overly exalt emotions, while others tend to depreciate them. Both groups begin with the modern concept of emotions and do not even bother to do a study of the concept in history, let alone look at the perfect “emotional” life of Jesus Christ, the sinless man who had a very active, not passive, “emotional” life (Matt. 14:14; Mark 1:41, 6:34)—but more on this later.

The word and concept “emotions” was primarily a Scottish creation, most notably by David Hume, Thomas Brown, and Thomas Chalmers. It is in Hume that we find the earliest sustained use of the term in the English language in a way that is very similar to today’s usage. In his *Treatise of Human Nature* he created the category of “emotions,” which supposedly meant raw, non-cognitive feelings, and sensations. Hume as much as anyone created the new category of “emotions” as a non-cognitive category, and thereby removing the rich understanding of man’s affectivity that previously existed for centuries throughout classical Christianity. If emotions have no cognitive value, then they certainly cannot be a locus for virtue. If emotions have no cognitive value, then when Jesus was moved with compassion to heal and teach, it was only a non-cognitive and thus a passive materialistic act—void of cognitive value or virtue.

While Hume was one of the earliest developers of the term “emotions,” it was Thomas Brown (1778-1820) who really introduced the term “emotions” as a major psychological category in the academic and literary worlds during the first half of the nineteenth century. He was the first major mental philosopher who systematically replaced active “passions” and “affections” with passive and physicalistic “emotions” in his lectures. He made the terminological transition from the ‘active powers’ – ‘appetites,’ ‘passions,’ ‘desires,’ and ‘affections’—to passive ‘emotions/feelings.’ Several writers picked out Brown’s treatment of emotions as the high-point of his work. Moreover, Brown’s work was extensively referred to and became the standard for understanding the basic classification of emotions among psychologists. In sum, Brown was iconoclastic in his approach to previous classifications as he gave short shrift to the classical division endorsed by Christian theologian between the understanding and the will. He attempted to do whatever he could to be an innovator and make mental feelings and affections mere passive states of the mind rather than active mental powers and faculties of the soul.

Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847) was a fervent evangelist who embraced Brown’s secular and material view of emotions. In fact, Chalmers was even more explicit than Brown in defining emotions as passive, non-cognitive, and “altogether unmodified by the will.”

So, from where did “emotions” really come? It came from a conceptual shift as part of a de-Christianized materialistic mindset, which took man’s active affective powers of the soul and reconceptualized them into passive products of the operation of the laws of physics and chemistry of the brain. Such reductionism is a departure from the classical Christianity and theism and is very different from what we see in the Bible, in reality, and what we will begin examining in the next essay that begins with an examination of the perfect, active, “emotional” life of Jesus.

Advancing in the Sacred Romance,
Pastor Don