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“Fact! Faith! Feeling!” Testing a Common Slogan



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The virtue of slogans is brevity. Their vice is ambiguity. So they are risky ways of communicating. They are powerful and perilous. So we should exploit the power and explain the peril. I would like to venture a corrective explanation to the slogan "Fact! Faith! Feeling!"

It's an old and common evangelical slogan. F. B. Meyer, A. T. Pearson, and L. E. Maxwell all preached sermons by this title. Today a Campus Crusade booklet uses it powerfully. The point of the slogan is the order. First, the facts about Christ. Second, the response of faith. Third, the feelings that may or may not follow.

So what's the ambiguity? There are two: changed "feelings" may be essential to true Christian conversion, not incidental; and "faith" may not be completely distinct from feeling.

In the Campus Crusade booklet the slogan appears as a train: the locomotive is "fact." The coal car is "faith." The caboose is "feeling." The explanation reads: "The train will run with or without the caboose. However, it would be futile to attempt to pull the train by the caboose." But what are the "feelings" the train of Christian living can run without? Do "feelings" refer merely to physical experiences like sweaty palms, knocking knees, racing heart, trembling lips, tearful eyes? If so, the slogan is clear and accurate.

But most people don't think of feelings that way. Feelings include things like gratitude, hope, joy, contentment, peacefulness, desire, compassion, fear, hate, anger, grief. None of these is merely physical. Angels, demons, and departed saints without bodies can have these "feelings."

Apart from the Bible I think Jonathan Edwards has written the most important book on feelings in the Christian life. It's called *The Religious Affections*. The definition of these "affections" (or what most people today mean by feelings) is: "the more vigorous and sensible exercises of the inclination and will of the soul." In other words, the feelings that really matter are not mere physical sensations. They are the stirring up of the soul with some perceived treasure or threat.

There is a connection between the feelings of the soul and the sensations of the body. This is owing, Edwards says, to "the laws of union which the Creator has fixed between the soul and the body." In other words, heartfelt gratitude can make you cry. Fear of God can make you tremble. The crying and the trembling are in themselves spiritually insignificant. The train can run without them. That's the truth in the slogan. But the

gratitude and the fear are not optional in the Christian life. But these are what most people call feelings. That is the peril of the slogan. It seems to make optional what the Bible makes essential.

Minimizing the importance of transformed feelings makes Christian conversion less supernatural and less radical. It is humanly manageable to make decisions of the will for Christ. No supernatural power is required to pray prayers, sign cards, walk aisles, or even stop sleeping around. Those are good. They just don't prove that anything spiritual has happened. Christian conversion, on the other hand, is a supernatural, radical thing. The heart is changed. And the evidence of it is not just new decisions, but new affections, new feelings.

Negatively, the apostle Paul says that those who go on in the same old way of "hostility," "jealousy," "rage," and "envy" "will not enter the kingdom of God" ([Galatians 5:20-21](#)). These are all feelings. They must change. The train won't get to heaven without them. Positively, Christians are commanded to have God-honoring feelings. We are commanded to feel joy ([Philippians 4:4](#)), hope ([Psalm 42:5](#)), fear ([Luke 12:5](#)), peace ([Colossians 3:15](#)), zeal ([Romans 12:11](#)), grief ([Romans 12:15](#)), desire ([1 Peter 2:2](#)), tenderheartedness ([Ephesians 4:32](#)), brokenness and contrition ([James 4:9](#)).

Moreover, faith itself has in it something that most people would call feeling. Saving faith means "receiving Christ." "To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" ([John 1:12](#)). But receive as what? We usually say, as "Lord and Savior." That's right. But something more needs to be said. Saving faith also receives Christ as our Treasure. A non-treasured Christ is a non-saving Christ. Faith has in it this element of valuing, embracing, prizing, relishing of Christ. It is like a man who found a treasure hidden in a field and "from joy" sells all his treasures to have that field ([Matthew 13:44](#)).

Therefore, let us affirm the slogan when it means that physical sensations are not essential. But let us also make clear that the locomotive of fact is not headed for heaven if it is not followed by a faith that treasures Christ, and if it is not pulling a caboose-load of imperfect, but new, affections.