Emotional Intelligence: A Missing Category in Discipleship Training and Spiritual Formation?

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Abstract
This paper argues that the importance of emotional intelligence (EI) has been underrecognized in church discipleship and spiritual formation programs, and that the development of emotional intelligence needs to be more fully incorporated in such programs in both church and seminary settings. The timeliness and need for additional study of EI is shown; current literature on discipleship and spiritual formation is surveyed; reasons for the relative neglect of EI in theological training and spiritual formation are identified; a biblical rationale for recovering EI as an essential element for discipleship and spiritual formation is presented, with Phil 4:4-9 examined as a biblical case study.

Keywords
emotional intelligence, discipleship, spiritual formation

The concept of emotional intelligence was first popularized by psychologist and science journalist Daniel Goleman in his best selling book of 1995, Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ. Since then it has become a widely used tool in human relations training in school and business settings.
Emotional intelligence (EI) has been defined as the ability to “identify and regulate our own emotions, to recognize the emotions of other people and feel empathy toward them, and to use these abilities to communicate effectively and build healthy, productive relationships with others” (Corliss 2020, p. 3). Those with high EI are believed to be more likely to be able to identify, express, and control their own emotions, and to use emotions to enhance thinking and relationships (Gonzales 2022).

This paper will argue that a) the importance of emotional intelligence has been underrecognized in church discipleship and spiritual formation programs, and b) that the development of emotional intelligence needs to be incorporated in discipleship training and spiritual formation, in both church and seminary settings. The outline of the paper is as follows: 1) the timeliness and need for additional study of EI; 2) survey of existing literature on discipleship, spiritual formation, and sanctification; 3) reasons for the relative neglect of EI in theological training and spiritual formation; 4) biblical rationale for recovering EI as an essential element in discipleship and spiritual formation, with Phil 4:4-9 as a biblical case study; and 5) suggestions for practical application and additional resources for teaching EI in church and seminary settings.

This paper recognizes that EI is only one of many disciplines in recent decades that have examined the role of emotions in human relationships. Scholars such as Robert C. Roberts (2003) and Linda Zagzebski (2004) have made major contributions to the study of emotions from the perspectives of virtue ethics and divine motivation theory. Philosophical analysis of the relation of emotion to reason has been extended in the works of Robert Solomon (1976), Patricia Greenspan (1988), and Robert Gordon (1987). In the last decade or so important research on the emotions from the perspectives of experimental psychology, neuroscience, social psychology, and psychiatry has been published by, among others, Lisa Feldman Barrett (2018), Daniel Kahneman (2011), Antonio Damasio (2018), Bessel van der Kolk (2014), and Jonathan Haidt (2012), and Batja Mesquita (2022).

However, the purpose of this paper is not to make a constructive contribution to any of these specialized fields of study. The purpose is only a very limited one, i.e., to call attention to what appears to be the underrepresentation of the intentional training of the emotions in two areas of Christian ministry, i.e., discipleship and spiritual formation.

Timeliness and Need for Focused Attention on Emotional Intelligence

Multiple trends in church and society highlight the timeliness and significance of the topic of EI. The generation known as “iGen” or “Gen Z” (those born between 1997 and 2012) are spending more time on social media and texting and less time in person with family and friends. They are reportedly experiencing unprecedented levels of anxiety, depression, and loneliness (Twenge 2017; Varadarajan 2022). They are digitally adept, but many have diminished levels of conversational and social skills. One meta-analysis of seventy two previous studies found that in a recent twenty year period there had been a 40 percent drop in empathy among college students, as measured in by standard
psychological tests (Turkle 2015; Konrath et al. 2014). It was suggested that the drop was caused by students having less direct face-to-face interactions with one another.

In many churches, pastors are experiencing high levels of burnout and job dissatisfaction. The fact that many pastors are people pleasers, and in a care-giving profession which can feel like a never ending treadmill of trying to satisfy other’s expectations, means that many pastors today are experiencing “compassion fatigue” and need emotional help (Burns, Chapman and Guthrie 2013).

In American church life generally, there is evidence that existing methods of discipleship and spiritual formation have not been notably effective in transforming the spiritual lives of those in such programs. The extensive Reveal study of some 1000 churches conducted by Willow Creek researchers found that “Increased participation in church activities by themselves barely moved our people to love God and others more” (Hawkins and Parkinson 2011, p. 17). The programs of discipleship and spiritual formation being used in most churches have not given focused attention to the training and cultivation of healthy emotions.

In a post-Covid environment, church membership and attendance has generally been trending downward. The comprehensive study of trends in American religion conducted by Princeton researcher Mark Chaves concluded that “no indicator of traditional religious belief or practice is going up (italics original) … There is more diffuse spirituality, but this diffuse spirituality should not be mistaken for an increase in traditional religiosity. If there is a trend, it is toward less religion” (Chavez 2011, 110).

This trend toward less religion is evidenced in the rising percentages of Americans who consider themselves “Nones,” those identifying with no institutional church or religion. As of 2021, forty-four per cent of 18-29 year olds were identifying as”Nones”. Seventy per cent of those “Nones” – some forty-one million – were “Nonverts” – those who as adults had left a previous affiliation with a Christian, Jewish, or other religion (Bullivant 2022). These trends may indicate that churches need to give focused attention to the emotional as well as cognitive needs of those they hope to attract and retain.

In recent decades new research in cognitive psychology and neuroscience has shown that much human behavior and motivation is driven by emotion and desire, and not exclusively or even primarily by reason alone. As Antonio Damasio argued in Descartes’ Error, Western psychology and medicine has operated with a Cartesian separation of mind and body, neglecting the emotions and their effects on the mind and body (Damasio 1995). Feelings heavily influence our decisions and “permeate our existence.” Feelings provide vital information about the social condition of our lives, and about “… risks, dangers, and ongoing crises that need to be averted” (Damasio 2018, p. 139). We neglect them at our peril.

In his widely acclaimed book Thinking, Fast and Slow, psychologist Daniel Kahneman has convincingly argued that emotion plays a much larger role in intuitive judgments than has been recognized in the past. Many decisions – in economics, politics, and ordinary life – are “… guided directly by feelings of liking and disliking [the “fast” brain; “System 1”], with little deliberation or reasoning” [with the “slow”
brain; “System 2”] (Kahneman 2011, 12). Kahneman was awarded a Nobel prize in economics for his groundbreaking research on the role of emotion and intuition in economic decision making.

In her book *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain*, psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett of Northeastern University has synthesized much recent research in neuroscience and social psychology. Her research in emotion science demonstrates the integral connections of brain, body, emotions, and culture. She agrees with her colleague Antonio Damasio’s judgment that “a mind requires passion (what we would call affect) for wisdom … Affect is irrevocably woven into the fabric of every decision” (Damasio 1995; Barrett 2018, 80). If wisdom needs to be informed by proper emotions, then discipleship and spiritual formation certainly needs to be so informed as well.

**Literature Survey: EI - a Missing Element?**

A brief survey of recent books on discipleship and spiritual formation indicates that emotional intelligence is an underrepresented category in these disciplines. For example, of the forty titles on discipleship that were examined, thirty five (Allin 2018; Johnson 2021; Chappell 2015; Thrailkill 2022; Carrier 2007; Wilson 1976; Roennfeldt 2022; Chan 2012; Coleman 1963; Harkness 2022; Tozer 2018; Sanchez and Tisby 2022; Daniels 2016; Wa English 2020; Watson 1975; Putnam 2014; Ortiz 1975; Broughton 1973; Churches Alive 1982; Pentecost 1971; Navigators 1973; Bonhoeffer 1959; Edwards 2022; Hartman 1976; Henrickson 1974; Hull 1984; Wallis 2005; Van Eman 2017; Gallaty 2015; Dorsett and Fernando 2015; Shafer 2022; Bird 2022; Harmless and Fitzgerald 2014; Matagora 2022) gave little or no attention to the emotions or emotional intelligence. Only five gave significant attention to this topic (Anderson 2003; 2016; Scazzero 2021; Willis and Willis 2022; Willard 2002). Especially noteworthy were P. Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Discipleship*, (2021), M. Willis, *Master Life Together* (2022), and D. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (2002).

Of 25 recent books on spiritual formation published from 1994 through 2022, eighteen gave little or no attention to the emotions or emotional intelligence (Gangel and Wilhout 1994; Duvall 2008; Machia 2012; Calhoun 2015; Nouwen 2015; Smith and Foster 1999; Arndt 2022; Wilhout 2022; Hughes 2022; Estep and Kim, 2010; Andrews 2010; Schiess 2020; Bruce 2021; Boa 2020; Machia 2019; Ashbrook, Lighty and O’Byrne 2012; Sherrill 2020; Lamp 2021).

Only seven authors gave significant attention to the emotional dimensions of spiritual formation (Chandler 2014; Willard 2021; Wilder 2020; Howard 2018; Pettit 2008; Moon 2017; Mulholland 2016). Notable in this regard were Chandler (2014) and Willard (2021), who each devoted a chapter to the topic, and Moon (2017), who brought a missiological and intercultural perspective to the discussion.

The underrepresentation of the emotions in recent books on discipleship and spiritual formation may, in part, be related to their neglect in systematic theology textbooks on the topic of sanctification. One might expect that Christian theologies of
spiritual growth and Christian maturity would pay significant attention to the emotions, as integral to healthy human flourishing and relationships. This has not in fact been so.

A survey of twenty-five widely used systematic theologies published between the years of 1872 and 2020 reveals that twenty-two of them make little or no reference to human emotion (Erickson 2013; Berkhof 1938; Hodge 1872; Grenz 2000; Grider 1994; Geisler 2004; Shedd 1894; Thiselton 2015; Horton 2011; Akin 2007; Lane 2014; Letham 2019; Ryrie 1999; Moody 1981; Wiley 1952; Buswell 1963; Berkouwer 1952; Baker 1971; Boice 1986; Berkhof 1979; Garrett 1990; Pannenberg 1998; Braaten and Jenson, 1984).

Much attention was given to the question of whether sanctification could be completed or perfected in this life. Little or no attention was given to the cultivation of positive emotions such as joy and gratitude, or to dealing with unhealthy emotions such as unrighteous anger and bitterness. Notable exceptions to this neglect of the emotions were Grudem (2020), Lewis and Demarest (1994), and Frame (2013). Grudem and Lewis & Demarest devoted one paragraph to the role of emotions in their treatments of sanctification. Frame devoted more attention to the emotions than any of the other theologians consulted, devoting four full pages to “Cultivating Godly Emotions” (pp. 756-60). This was a happy exception to the general neglect of the emotions by evangelical and Reformed theologians.

Possible Reasons for the Neglect

Multiple historical factors have contributed to this relative neglect of the emotions in Christian understandings and practices of discipleship and spiritual formation. Classical Greek philosophy privileged reason over the emotions, setting the course of much Western intellectual and cultural life down to the present. In Plato’s famous image of the charioteer, Reason is the charioteer, holding tightly the reins of the two horses that represent the positive and negative aspects of the soul’s emotions (Plato, Phaedrus 246b, 2022). The negative emotions are disruptive and unruly.

Various scholars have argued that under the influence of Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic philosophies, Christian theologians became hesitant to attribute emotions to God, or at least those similar to human ones (Harnack 1986, 207, 211-12; Moltmann 1993, 267-75; Matz and Thornhill 2019, 1-11; Mozley 1926, 7-126). Other scholars, however, have argued that this so-called “Hellenization of the gospel” thesis has been exaggerated, and that the understanding of God’s emotions in the history of Christian theology is more complex and nuanced than the critics have allowed (Weinandy 2000; Gavriluk 2004). It is not within the purpose of this paper to engage in this debate concerning the so-called impassibility (“not able to suffer”) of God.

In the Christian tradition, the dominance of reason over emotion and of cognition over affect was furthered by the Arian controversy over the deity of Christ. Correct belief, rather than transformation of behavior, became the key marker of Christian identity and discipleship (Kreider 2016). The focus on the precise, propositional articulation of Christian beliefs was furthered in the medieval period by the introduction
of Aristotelean philosophy into Christian theology. The Protestant Reformation continued this focus on correct belief, as Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and the English Reformers opposed Roman Catholic doctrines believed to be contrary to scripture.

Beginning in the seventeenth century, a tendency to view the emotions with suspicion was strengthened by the rise of modern science and technology. The emerging scientific method seemed to favor the “left” rational brain over the emotional and intuitive “right” (McGilchrist 2009). In modern psychology, the concept of emotional intelligence had to overcome “… an entrenched view of emotions as destabilizing, disorganized forces that prevent logical reasoning” (Brackett, et al. 2016, p. 514).

Fears that strong emotions in religion could be dangerous and divisive were fostered by some of the more enthusiastic aspects of the eighteenth century Great Awakenings in England and the American colonies (Lovejoy 1969). Many of the more conservative clergy in the Church of England and the established churches in the colonies viewed such religious “enthusiasm” as a threat to orthodoxy, church order, and a more rational style of religion. In his classic Treatise of the Religious Affections, written in 1746, Jonathan Edwards vigorously defended the proper role of emotions in religion – the occasional excesses of the Great Awakening notwithstanding – arguing that “True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections” and that stifling the religious emotions “stunts the life and power of religion” and dampens “the graces of many of the saints” (Edwards 2009, 95,121).

The nineteenth century frontier revivals in Kentucky and Cane Ridge, Tennessee, with their emphasis on immediate decisions for Christ and emotional conversion experiences added to the suspicion of emotion among many of the clergy (Thompson 1963). In the twentieth century the Azusa Street revival of 1906 and the rise of the modern Pentecostal movement, with its emphasis on speaking in tongues as the “initial physical evidence” of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, produced a reaction against “excessive concern for physical and emotional signs” among leaders of the older Holiness and Wesleyan churches (Dayton 1987, p.177).

Social psychologists have suggested that American individualism, with its sense of an autonomous self, frequently acting independently of others, may be a factor as well. Such an individualistic self may be very aware of the need to express its own thoughts and desires, but “… relatively less conscious of the need to receive the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others” (Markus and Kitayama 1991, p. 246). The increasingly globally linked social environments of a postmodern world may also make such individualistic construals of the self less helpful for intercultural understanding (Sampson 1989). All the above factors, taken together, may have contributed to a diminished recognition of the importance of emotions in discipleship and spiritual formation.

**Recovering the Emotions for Discipleship & Spiritual Formation: Biblical Rationales**

Any program of discipleship that seeks to train disciples to become “more like Jesus” must impart a fully biblical vision of the humanity Jesus – including the reality of his
emotional life. A more experiential grasp of the emotional life of Jesus draws disciples closer to the Lord, and motivates them to live out and obey his teachings. As B.B. Warfield aptly put it in his classic essay of 1912, reprinted in 2022, “without an appreciation of his emotional life, Christ will always seem to be at a distance from us” (Warfield 2022, 13).

The ability to properly manage one’s emotions is an essential characteristic of a follower of Jesus. For example, a mature disciple subdues the negative emotions of unrighteous anger and worry, and cultivates the positive emotions of joy and gratitude. Jesus warns that unrighteous anger, and disrespecting others as “fools” brings the judgment of God (Matt 5:21-22). The disciple is not to be consumed with worry and anxiety, but to trust in God who supplies their needs (Matt 6:25-34). Paul admonishes believers to get rid of rage and unrighteous anger (Eph 4:31), and to “… not let the sun go down while you are still angry” (Eph 4:26). Followers of Jesus are not to be filled with anxiety, but are to present their concerns to God with prayer and thanksgiving (Phil 4:6).

On the positive side, Jesus commands his followers to find joy in the midst of persecution (Matt 5:12), and to rejoice that their names are written in heaven (Lk 10:20). Jesus himself experienced joy in the Holy Spirit (Lk 10:21). Paul even goes so far as to command believers – twice - to rejoice in the Lord in all circumstances: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Phil 4:4). The imperative implies that the ability to feel joy is, to some extent, under the power of human choice. Joy, like gratitude (cf. Phil 4:6, “with thanksgiving”), is a feeling and a disposition that the Christian can intentionally cultivate and practice.

At the same time, Christians are admonished not only to “rejoice with those who rejoice” but also to “mourn with those who mourn” (Rom 12:15). Both rejoicing and mourning can be proper and desirable expressions of Christian virtues and Christlike character. Even though lament is a prominent feature of the Psalms, the book of Lamentations, and elsewhere in scripture (Westermann 1981; Ferris 1992; Rah 2015), it is often marginalized or absent in modern worship and discipleship training.

The ability to properly manage one’s emotions is an important qualification for church leadership. In 1 Tim 3:2 Paul states that the church leader must not be violent (lit. “not a striker,” me plekton), nor be quarrelsome (amachon). Similarly, in the parallel passage in Tit 1:7, Paul states that the church leader is not to be quick tempered (me orligon) or violent (me plekton). These requirements indicated that the church leader is not to have an anger problem, but rather be able to manage anger appropriately. Likewise, the qualities of self control (1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:8, egkrate) and hospitality (1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:8, philoxenon, lit., “lover of strangers”) also imply that the church leader has the needed levels of emotional intelligence and maturity. One commentator has noted that the quality of self control that is specified here means “control over one’s behavior and the impulses and emotions beneath it” (Towner 2006; p. 252).

These character qualities of church leaders – desirable, indeed for all Christians – are consistent with human nature as God intended it, and with the holistic nature of salvation itself. It is God’s will that the disciple be sanctified and matured in the whole
spirit (*pneuma*), soul (*psuche*), and body (*soma*) (1 Thess 5:23) – including the sanctification of the emotions.

As the Cappadocian church father Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389 A.D.) stated in Epistle 101, in his oft-quoted aphorism, “That which he [Christ] has not assumed [in the incarnation] he has not healed, but that which is united to his Godhead is also saved” (Gregory, 1954, p. 218). Since Jesus in his humanity was fully human, he assumed the full range of human emotions in his incarnation. Consequently, through his life, death, and resurrection he provided healing for our sin-damaged emotions. For the Christian, emotional intelligence can be a gracious fruit of the Holy Spirit.

The Christian’s emotional intelligence and well being is ultimately grounded in God’s own emotional well being and intelligence. God is perfectly self-aware. God is perfectly aware of and empathic with the feelings of others. God responds appropriately to the emotions of others to build healthy, joyful, and flourishing relationships.

Our emotions of joy and peace are grounded in the joy and peace that God himself enjoys. Joy and peace are intrinsic to God’s nature and are essential attributes of his character. We can sing “Joyful, joyful, we adore thee” because God himself is a joyful God. The wrath of God is real, but most truly and precisely, wrath is an *accidental* and not essential attribute of God. Wrath is God’s righteous reaction to sin – and sin, properly speaking, is an accidental and not essential property of the world created by God.

The Bible repeatedly teaches that God feels the emotion of joy. God takes great delight in us and rejoices over us with singing (Zeph 3:17). Jesus portrays God as a good shepherd who rejoices in finding his lost sheep (15:6), as a woman who rejoices in finding her lost coin (Lk 15:9), and as a compassionate father who rejoices in the return of his prodigal son (Lk 15:23,32). There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents (Lk 15:10; cf. Heb 12:22). Jesus himself is filled with joy through the Holy Spirit (Lk 10:21), and reveals the things of God to us so that we might share the full measure of his joy (Jn 17:13) – the joy that he himself enjoys with the Father.

Similarly, we can experience peace because Jesus wills to give his own peace to us (Jn 14:27). The peace of God that passes all understanding (Phil 4:7) is not only the peace that God gives us in Christ, but ultimately, the peace that God himself enjoys, and that is intrinsic to God’s own being. Peace – *shalom* – is a fundamental attribute of God. This peace of God is a “calm serenity that characterizes God’s very nature and that grateful, trusting Christians are welcome to share” (Hawthorne 2004, p.246). Such is the peace that an emotionally mature and intelligent Christian can experience.

**An Apostolic Teaching on How to Cultivate Emotional Intelligence: Phil 4:4-9**

In the closing section of his epistle to the Philippians, Paul gives practical instruction on how believers can cultivate Christian emotional intelligence. Consider the passage (Phil 4:4-9):
4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! 5 Let your forbearance be known to all. The Lord is at hand. 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in all things, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your concerns be known to God. 7 And God’s peace, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – whatever is excellent or praiseworthy – think on such things. 9 Those things you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put those things into practice. And the God of peace will remain with you.

Paul lists five specific actions that can cultivate emotional intelligence: 1) rejoicing; 2) praying; 3) giving thanks; 4) imitating good examples; and 5) focusing attention on the positive. The first action is rejoicing, commanded twice in v.4, and is the central idea in this first half of the text. It may seem strange that Paul commands us to have a certain emotion – joy – when it seems that we have limited control over the feelings that we spontaneously experience at any given moment. But even though we lack complete control over our feelings, we do in fact have some degree of control. In the present case, experiencing joy is an emotion that we can cultivate by applying the steps that he enumerates. We are instructed to voice our concerns to God in prayer, calling to mind the good things that God has allowed us to enjoy, and in so doing cultivating an attitude of gratitude (v.6). The very actions of praying and thanking God for past and present blessings give us some emotional distance and mental space from the immediate pressures that we may be experiencing.

Because we have been given the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38b; Eph 1:13) and have been united to Christ, we can participate in the joy that Jesus himself enjoys (Jn 17:13) in his fellowship with the Father in the Spirit. Jesus received the Spirit at his baptism (Lk 3:22), rejoiced in the Spirit when the seventy-two disciples returned from their mission (Lk 10:21), and experienced joy in the Spirit in the presence of God on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:28; Ps 16:8-11). As adopted sons and daughters of God, we now have that same Spirit that caused Jesus to rejoice in God (Gal 4:6). We experience the joy given to the citizens of the Kingdom of God (Rom 14:17).

The basis of rejoicing is not in the goodness of our circumstances, but in the Lord (v.4) – rejoicing in our relationship to God in Christ, and in his unwavering good will toward us. It should be noticed that Paul gives this directive to rejoice in all circumstances when he himself is in prison in Rome, facing a very uncertain future. This is the apostle who has suffered beatings, shipwreck, hunger, thirst, sleepless nights and persecutions (2 Cor 12:24-29) in his service to Christ. Paul’s ability to experience joy in a prison in Rome or in Philippi (cf. Acts 16:25) was grounded not in his outward circumstances, but in his relationship to Christ.

Similarly, Jesus instructed the seventy two disciples not to rejoice in the outward success of their ministry at that time, but rather to rejoice that “their names were written in heaven” (Lk 10:20). Having their names written in heaven meant that they were
immutably secure in the electing love of God, and that nothing in all creation would be able to separate them from that love (cf. Rom 8:35-39).

Centuries before, a similar message was given to the prophet Habakkuk. As the judgment of God was about to fall on rebellious Judah through the invading Babylonian armies, Habbakuk was taught that the “righteous are to live by faith” (Hab 2:4) – even when external conditions are terrible – trusting in the justice and sovereignty of God. Habakkuk is inspired to trust in God in spite of it all: “Though the fig tree does not bud, and there are no grapes on the vine, though the olive crop fails, though… there are no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord [emphasis added], I will rejoice in God my savior” (Hab 3:17,18). Habbakuk, Jesus, the apostle Paul – and we – find our abiding joy not in temporal good fortune, but in the unwavering and steadfast goodness of God in his relationship to us.

The second section of the passage (4:8,9) contain two imperative verbs, both of which are important for the cultivation of emotional intelligence: “think on these things” (v.8, tauta logizesthe), and “these things put into practice” (v.9, tauta prassete). The first verb, logizomai, is a favorite word of Paul, being used 34 times in his epistles, out of a total of 41 occurrences in the New Testament. It can have the sense of “count”, “reckon”, or “impute”, depending on the context. Here (Phil 4:8) it has the meaning of “think about”, “consider”, or “meditate upon”. The present tense of logizomai indicates that “thinking on these things” is to be a continual and habitual action (Rienicker 1976).

Paul is here drawing our attention to the importance of choosing to direct our attention to those things that will enhance the quality of relationship to Christ and the quality of our lives generally. This command presupposes, in terms of cognitive psychology, the ability of the executive function of our brain’s prefrontal cortex to focus on a specific person, place, object, thought, memory, or feeling.

More generally, it is not an exaggeration to say that the overall quality of our lives is determined by the quality of the objects of our attention, and by the quality and amount of attention that we give them over time. This relationship could be expressed in the equation below:

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QL = Q_{\text{obj}} \times Q_{\text{att}} \times T_{\text{att}}
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Here “QL” stands for “Quality of Life” or one’s general sense of life satisfaction. “Q_{\text{obj}}” stands for the quality or value of the object of one’s attention at a given moment. For example, focusing attention on a stupid TikTok video or a pornographic website would add low or negative value to the quality of a Christian’s life. On the other hand, meditating on scripture or on the person and work of Christ would add positive value.

“Q_{\text{att}}” is a measure of the quality of our attention: focused and intentional, or distracted, sporadic, and divided. For example, texting on our phones while listening to a lecture could give a poor quality of attention to both the lecture content and to the recipient of the text. On the other hand, listening to a troubled friend, empathically and with undivided attention, would give high value to that conversation and greater relief to the stress or anxiety that our friend is experiencing.
Cognitive psychologists and philosophers distinguish between focal and subsidiary attention, and between attention that is pulled vs. attention that is guided or intentionally chosen (Polanyi 1962; Siegel 2018). If I am driving down an interstate highway at 70 miles per hour, my focal or primary attention should be on the traffic ahead of me, and my subsidiary attention, if any, on the audiobook or music that I may be playing in the background. If I am in the middle of a conversation with a friend visiting in my living room, my attention may be pulled by the unexpected sound of a police siren outside — but then guided back to my friend when the emergency has subsided.

Emotional intelligence involves a learned ability to guide our attention to chosen objects of high value, rather than being constantly being pulled away by social media, smartphone notifications, or other low value stimuli.

“Tatt” stands for the time of duration that we spend looking at or thinking about a given object of attention. For example, late in the afternoon or in the evening we might suddenly become aware that we have spent over an hour following one YouTube music video after another. “Where has the time gone? I was just taking a break from the document I was editing and then somehow lost track of time.”

The equation QL = Qobj × Qatt × Tatt is not intended to be a mathematically precise formula, but only a mental device to suggest that our quality of life experience is a joint product of the quality of the objects of our attention, the quality of the attention that we give them, and the amount of time that we focus on them. The point is that if we choose to meditate on high value objects such as scripture, the character of God, and the person and work of Jesus Christ, with undivided attention, for substantial periods of time, then our emotional intelligence and quality of life will be greatly enhanced.

The positive things that we are commanded to think about (tauta logizeste, v.8) are specified by the apostle as things that are true (aleithei), worthy of respect (semma), just and righteous (dikaia), morally pure (hagna), lovely rather than ugly (prospilei), admirable and well-spoken of (eupheima), embodying excellence and virtue (aretei), and being worthy of praise (epainos). These bear resemblance to the so-called transcendental values of the classical Greek and Christian traditions (truth, goodness, and beauty), and the classical Greco-Roman virtues of wisdom, justice, courage, and moderation. These qualities are not only to be thought about but also to be emulated and put into practice (v.9).

Things that are true could include the doctrinal truths of the Christian faith, the truths about God’s creation revealed by modern science, and the truths of history and our own personal lives. For example, we should ponder the truths of the Apostle Creed, such as the return of Christ (“… and he shall return to judge the living and the dead …”) and the resurrection of our mortal bodies (“I believe … in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting”). Recalling these and other truths can give the Christian hope in the midst of difficult circumstances and fortitude in the face of illness, disability, and loss of loved ones. Christian leaders are commanded to encourage the flock with sound doctrine (Tit 1:9b), and we can encourage ourselves with the truths of our faith. Sound doctrine can support and strengthen our emotional and mental health.
Our emotional health can also be nourished by reflecting on the truths of creation revealed by modern science. The remarkable images of distant galaxies and the vastness of the universe revealed by the Hubble and James Webb telescopes should remind us of the power, wisdom, and glory of the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. The heavens are indeed telling the glory of God (Ps 19:1; cf. Rom 1:20). Pondering God’s power in the heavens can lift our spirits and remind us of God’s power to sustain us.

The truths to be pondered also include the truths of history and our own personal histories. In the midst of an all-too-politically divided time in our nation’s history, it is good and emotionally healthy to recall the more noble elements of American history: e.g., Washington at Valley Forge; the truths of the Declaration of Independence; Lincoln’s leadership during the Civil War; American soldiers landing on the beaches of Normandy to liberate Europe; Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” speech and the Civil Rights movement, and much more. At the same time, acknowledging the darker truths of American history – slavery, the treatment of Native Americans and other minorities, senseless acts of gun violence, homelessness and unequal access to health care – should foster a sense of humility and a commitment to seek a more just and equitable society.

It is emotionally healthy as well to remind ourselves of the attributes of God such as faithfulness that we have experienced in our own lives. With words of a hymn such as Great Is Thy Faithfulness we can remind ourselves with gratitude that “… morning by morning new mercies I see [and have seen].”

Semna (worthy of respect), dikaia (just; righteous), and hagnos (morally good) are qualities generally considered desirable for leaders, including leaders in the church (cf. I Tim 3:8,11; Tit 2:2, semna). These qualities reflect virtue (arete) or good character, qualities that are praiseworthy (epainos) and well-spoken of (eupheimos). Arete (virtue) was a central theme in Greek ethics and a comprehensive term for moral excellence (Beare 1959).

Such arete or moral excellence has been embodied in varying degrees by notable figures such as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, Confucius, Billy Graham, Pope John Paul II, Mother Teresa, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr., Queen Elizabeth II, and many others. Readers can think of worthy figures from their own respective cultural heritages. Consciously choosing to think about admirable individuals can counterbalance the negative examples from modern culture, and help to maintain an emotionally positive frame of mind.

We are also instructed to think about things that are lovely or pleasing, things aesthetically pleasing and attractive. Such beauty can be found in the visual and performing arts, in music, in nature, and in the beauty of good human character. Cultivating emotional intelligence means making wise choices in the music we listen to, the movies we watch, the websites we visit, the time we spend on social media, and in enjoying or ignoring the beauties of nature. Good choices in these areas will contribute to our emotional health and well being.
Summary and Conclusion

This paper has identified a relative lack of attention to the topic of emotional intelligence and to the emotions generally in current literature on church discipleship and spiritual formation. It is hoped that practitioners in these fields will have greater awareness of this relative lack, and that trainers in discipleship, directors of spiritual formation, and teachers of theology will give greater attention to the emotions in their respective disciplines, and in cross-disciplinary conversations with one another. This research needs to be extended beyond the limits of this paper through further study of early church, medieval, and pre-modern texts dealing with catechesis, spiritual formation, and discipleship.

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