

Orthopathy – 9

One of the most difficult tasks facing the conservative Christian pastor is teaching that the affections are shaped and that Christians ought to give attention to what shapes them.

Once again, many Christians live with an incorrect view of the affections. They see the emotions as more or less reactions to various stimuli. Consequently, they give their attention to merely controlling (or suppressing) emotional expression. They become oblivious to the whole discussion of shaping or molding the affections and tend to regard such discussions as extra-biblical pontificating or even legalism.

All the same, if we see the affections as expressions of value or worth, or more simply, our loves, it becomes obvious that what we love, or treasure, or value can be shaped. We do not love all things immediately but learn or acquire some loves over time. We can strengthen certain loves and weaken others.

The problem is that our loves are not under our direct control. While some of our loves may have been pursued by an act of will, others were picked up without our knowing why. Many of our loves are loves that grew because of what our family loved, what our peers loved, or what was loved by people we respected. Some loves came very late in life, while some were there early. Some loves were hard to develop, while others seemed almost natural. Not many people can explain why they love what they love without some serious thought. The affections do not come by sheer acts of will. The fact that we have a responsibility to shape our loves to be ordinate, when seen alongside the fact that these affections are not all seemingly under our direct control, leads some to deny that such a responsibility exists. It is at this point that many call the affections mere expressions of personality, individual preference and varying tastes. And since no one wants to pass judgment on these things, the discussion is given up altogether. After all, God would require us to change only those things that we can directly address, right?

I sometimes wonder if this kind of thinking comes from imagining humanity as some type of machine or computer. You hear this sort of language all the time: our brain is a “supercomputer,” the body is “an amazing machine,” thinking is allowing people to “process things,” to ask for people’s views is to look for “inputs” or “feedback,” people tell you that they are just “wired a certain way” and so forth. With this kind of idea forming the backdrop of our view of man, we can easily see sanctification as a matter of “entering the right information” to “gain the right outputs.” To be honest, some biblical counseling material sometimes makes it sound that way. When you think of mankind like this, you believe every problem can be solved finding the right Bible verse, programming it into the CPU, and looking for obedience as an output. This, then, is sanctification. None of that elusive affection-shaping stuff. Just give me the “put off/put on” pair of verses, and I’m on my way.

Unfortunately for this theory, we cannot so lightly dismiss the place of the affections in the make-up of man. His nature will have its revenge on our mechanistic views of sanctification and prove them insufficient to replace inordinate loves (i.e. lusts) with ordinate ones. Nor can we deny that the affections must be shaped (Phil 1:9-10, 1 Thes 5:21) and we cannot deny that their shaping involves matters not under our direct control.

We must understand and teach the means of furnishing the inner life with those ideas and images that encourage these loves and affections.

The first and greatest commandment is to love God ultimately. Immediately after giving this command, God went on to insist that this kind of ultimate love be the most conspicuous reality in the homes of His people. Deuteronomy 6:6-9 are commands to structure the home and family life so that loving God is taught through conversation and life indoors and outdoors, at rest, at work, when the day starts, or when it ends. God wanted this kind of love for Himself to be as prominent as one's own hand, as visible as something stuck in front of the eyes. He wanted it to be something His people would know every time they entered or left their dwelling.

God's intention was not that His people would go on to wear strips of leather on their forearms, tie boxes with the law between their eyes, or place tiny versions of the Shema in little receptacles and stick those on their doorposts. God was figuratively teaching that love for Him ought to saturate the home-life of His people.

Deuteronomy 6:6-9 gives us a helpful take on how the affections are shaped. Certainly, the Hebrew parents were to teach their children to love God, quoting the very words of Scripture and explaining them. There was a cognitive, intellectual part to shaping the affections of the Israelites. They needed to know that loving God ultimately was their obligation, and they needed to know why He was worthy of such love. What we love is very much informed by intellect, reflection and learned moral precept.

At the same time, God's words reveal that the shaping of the affections is not an intellectual exercise in the strictest sense, at least not merely an intellectual one. God's words did not mean that He wanted the Israelites to discuss nothing but loving Him in every situation and on every occasion. Rather, God was commanding that parents should structure the environment and atmosphere of their homes to cultivate a sensibility of love for God. It is not merely the cognitive instruction on loving God that counts but the myriads of cultivating influences that express or explain what loving God means and why loving God is beautiful, sensible, wise, compelling, and even obvious. It is one thing to gain an understanding of what is true. It is another matter to gain appreciation for that truth. To know that something is worthy is well and good. To sense the worth of it is more important. One is a matter of cognition; the second is a matter of affection.

How would a child of Israel gain more than mere assent to the truth claim that Yahweh alone is God, but proper affections toward that truth - by hundreds of daily shaping influences. It would be cultivated through what the parents loved. What did the parents prioritize? Was the worship and service of Yahweh first? Did they embrace sacrifice and inconvenience to worship Him? How did their treatment of Him compare to their pursuit of food, or honor, or wealth? What sort of time did they devote to God? How much pleasure did they express in God? When they spoke of Him, how did they speak of Him? When they spoke to Him, how did they speak to Him? In relating to one another, how did husband and wife display the meaning of being in a covenant relationship with a loving God? How did their authority, instruction, chastening and exhortation of their children reveal the meaning of knowing and loving God? In other words, the loves of the parents would inevitably be communicated to the children. Example is a major part of why we love what we do. The prejudices, sensibilities, priorities, pleasures, attitudes, and tastes of our family, our peers, our church, and the wider culture tend to shape our own.

Beyond that, Israelite family life was filled with custom, ritual, and tradition. The parents were to faithfully keep the daily, weekly, monthly and yearly routines of prayers, feasts, celebrations, days of worship, days of assembly or other ceremonies, not to mention all the civil and ritual laws. Through these tangible routines and habits of life, the Israelite's life was filled with analogies to explain not only who God is but how His people respond to Him. They helped him know the

difference between the holy and the common. They provided sensibilities about the truths he knew. In attending worship, he heard the prayers and songs of Israel and was catechized as to how God's people love Him. By hearing, seeing, touching, smelling, and tasting Sabbath meals, slaughtered animals, Solomonic choirs, golden menorahs, Davidic poetry, priestly incense, accounts of the Exodus, unleavened bread, kingly authority, Jubilee celebrations, and hundreds of other things, the Israelite gained living metaphors of truth that evoked and shaped his affections.

The affections of Israel were shaped when they were exposed to forms used by God to help His people rightly respond to the truths they knew. To put it another way, his culture shaped his affections. Moreover, it shaped those of his fellow Israelites, creating common sentiments toward God.

Apart from God's Revelation, none of these forms would shape ordinate affection. But assuming its presence, faithful exposition, and Israel's practical submission to it, these forms were a necessary part of shaping the religious imagination of the Israelites. As Tozer said, what comes into your mind when you think about God is the most important thing about you.

When we think about the situation we find ourselves in today, we have to ask, what common set of symbols, traditions, routines, and rituals shape the sensibilities of the people arriving in our churches, so that we share a common sentiment toward God, the world, and ourselves? The answer is that no such shared sensibility exists any longer. The fragmentation of any kind of cultural consensus is a part of modern life. Existentialism, humanism, positivism, relativism, narcissism, and several other isms make up the fragmented and often self-contradictory worldviews of modern Western people. This does not produce anything like a shared set of tastes, attitudes, and values. Instead, everyone has an eclectic set of prejudices and sentiments, which he usually defends as vehemently as Laban looking for his idols.

T.S. Eliot lamented the situation this way:

Much has been said everywhere about the decline of religious belief; not so much notice has been taken of the decline of religious sensibility. The trouble of the modern age is not merely the inability to believe certain things about God and man which our forefathers believed, but the inability to feel towards God and man as they did. A belief in which you no longer believe is something which to some extent you can still understand; but when religious feeling disappears, the words in which men have struggled to express it become meaningless.

Further, the church has been steadily secularized over the last 150 years or so, meaning that it accepts and contributes to this fragmentation. Instead of expecting or trying to cultivate shared affections toward God, the modern church caters to radically divergent sensibilities toward God by holding traditional and contemporary services at different times or by combining them in blended worship services. In short, every Sunday proves the truth of Eliot's words.

In light of all this, how does a pastor or spiritual leader desirous to shape ordinate affection respond?

The first approach is to adjust his expectations for "success." If the loves of broader secular culture, along with those of the average secularized church and the average secularized family shape those of the average church attender, then we can begin to perceive the magnitude of the problem. Loves are grown over decades, over a lifetime. They cannot be changed by merely pointing out what ought to be loved or enforced by diktat. Someone who has learned to love the trivial, the debased and the sentimental cannot unlearn those loves in a day. Nor will he do so easily, for your loves are just that

—the things you love, and which seem to be a part of yourself. Not easily are our idols torn from us. If there is one thing most moderns will not accept, it is the idea that some of their loves could be wrong, inappropriate, malformed, or inordinate. The matter of shaping and forming the affections is a task that belongs also to the common grace found in entire cultures, not only the special grace found in local churches. If our culture is apostate, our successes in shaping ordinate affection will probably be very small, and it will take a very different kind of shepherd to navigate his church in a Dark Age.

This realistic outlook should not be mistaken as pessimism. Pessimism is unbelief in God's power to ultimately bring about the hope of believers or fulfill His promises. We have faith that the miracle of regeneration begins the process of reforming the loves. We know that the Word of God preached and practiced will partly reform the loves. We know that examples of ordinate affection and pious living will partly reform the loves. If God wishes to, He may choose to bring about another Reformation. Ultimately, we have every expectation that Christ will impose His victory and glorify Himself. What we do not expect is that the remaining fragments of Western culture will bring forth a flowering of true worship to God, since the affections of most are radically deformed by the dominant secularism, and all too many churches exacerbate the situation, rather than attempting to counter it. Our expectation is to have (smaller?) churches in which we will make our best efforts to encourage ordinate affection in our members. There is a chance for limited success with our adult members and perhaps a higher chance of success for the children that grow up in churches devoted to cultivating ordinate affection (assuming they trust Christ when they are able to). Part of our task may be to keep some things alive and available for future Christian generations who will be better prepared to receive and appreciate them.

Given this realistic expectation, the pastor or spiritual leader is no defeatist. He actively labors to encourage a church "culture" that cultivates, to a certain degree, ordinate affections. The second approach is to see how other areas of Christianity shape the affections. We have already covered this matter, but consider their relationship to the affections.

- ≡ Since regeneration is essential to ordinate affection, a conservative Christian church preserves and propagates the biblical gospel. Apart from the heart being given an entirely new disposition, it will always love creature more than Creator and therefore become more warped in its affections.
- ≡ Since a right understanding of God, ourselves and the world is essential to right loves, a conservative Christian church conserves and teaches a comprehensive biblical and systematic theology. Without a systematic exposition of God's Word, with practical submission to it, no one will love what God loves and hate what God hates.
- ≡ Since example and exposure are necessary for the shaping of appropriate loves, the conservative Christian church conserves biblical worship and understands one of its roles as a 'catechism of the affections.' Corporate worship, with its forms, order and structure provides a lesson in proportion, decorum and appropriate responses. Corporate worship is the opportunity for adjusting the sensibilities of the worshipers so that a common sentiment towards God, the world and ourselves is developed. It is not meant to be a venue for competing sensibilities to all find expression in the name of individual taste and Romans 14.
- ≡ Since sanctification is essentially re-ordering our loves to bring them in line with God's, the conservative Christian church gives much attention to teaching individual piety and encouraging discipleship relationships. When Christians observe ordinate love for God,

mankind and the created order, it is often caught. Therefore, piety is to be encouraged in the life of the individual and that of the family. Practical obedience is to be stressed as essential to knowing and loving God.

- ≡ Since understanding a biblical view of man is crucial to loving God ordinately, the conservative Christian church gives time to teach on the importance of the affections, the nature of the affections, and their application: what ought to be loved and how. A pastor who gives himself to all these things is well on his way to shaping ordinate affection in his hearers.

Having said all that, all of the above is not sufficient. The conservative pastor must become aware that the affections are not only shaped by regeneration, sound doctrine, sound worship, true piety, and teaching on the affections. The point of the section above on the Shema was to illustrate how God shaped the affections of His people, and it was not only through information and obedience. He filled their lives with a large variety of symbols, ceremonies, and rituals. These did more than regulate health and civil life in Israel. They dressed up the mere material existence of God's people with the drapery of symbol, metaphor, and analogy. Notice, God did this in addition to the moral imperatives of the Law.

God knows that while our hearts can be partly shaped by what our minds know and by what we choose, the heart's responses are primarily affective responses, taught by analogy. Affective responses are essentially about proportion - an object deserves a particular kind of love. There is a response to an object or person that is proportionate to what it is in reality. This kind of proportionate response, or just sentiment, is not taught cognitively. It is taught through analogy, wherein the analogy provides the sense of proportion. The symbol, if correctly chosen (and properly understood), contains the kind of affections required for the observer to correctly respond to the realities behind the symbol. Seeing an animal die at the altar evoked certain affections commensurate with repentance for sin. Comparing God to a captain of an army called for certain affections proportionate to His nature. Conversely, the high places with their analogies of sexual potency and fertility evoked inordinate affection.

All of this is to say that the pastor who wishes to shape ordinate affection in his people must become aware of how our knowledge of God and ultimate reality is analogical knowledge, and therefore our affections are shaped by the right analogies. Since God cannot be seen, how can we know how to love Him justly and appropriately? When our affective responses are responses to biblical or well-chosen images, analogies, metaphors, symbols, and signs, they will be correctly proportioned. In other words, the conservative Christian pastor must give attention to the imagination.