

The Asbury Revival, Emotionalism, and Group Psychology

After one [chapel service](#) at a small religious university in Kentucky, some students did not leave. They stayed and continued to pray and worship for hours. As word spread, by the next day, hundreds of students were participating. And by the end of this second day, students from other universities had arrived to join in.

The revival continued and grew for days as people packed the school's chapel.

The school—Asbury University—has ended the “[public phase](#)” of the events, moving these off-campus because the school (and surrounding small town) simply cannot handle the sudden influx of people who have come to participate.

Emotional Highs

Hearing about this news story, my thoughts have been mixed. If the Asbury revival is a genuine outpouring of the Holy Spirit and faith, then praise be to God. This nation does need true revival and more strong, brave, and faithful Christian men and women. But I am generally skeptical of claims of religious experience solely based on emotional highs, and admittedly, as far as many mainstream Protestants go, I'm fairly stodgy and private with how I practice and experience religion.

From a distance, there's really no way to know what the dynamics of this event are. But a professor of theology at Asbury Theological Seminary writing for *Christianity Today* [says](#):

“As an analytic theologian, I am weary of hype and very wary of manipulation. ...

And truth be told, this is nothing like that. There is no pressure or hype. There is no manipulation. There is no high-pitched emotional fervor.”

[Others](#) are more skeptical and say that some students are taking advantage of the event to push a [left-wing social agenda](#) within the church.

day 8 and my seminary friends are still leading worship.

*Did you know poc, women, and queer students have been leading worship all 8 days? Both student bodies have lended themselves into being us towards the throne of God ♥
pic.twitter.com/Pa8zqSyLSH*

– elijah's final semester (@EdwardVersaii) [February 17, 2023](#)

Either way, the Asbury revival is a microcosm for other group events, crowds, or movements.

Emotionalism is often a key part of many religious experiences for people. There’s nothing wrong with emotion in religion—and, in fact, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit can be an intensely emotional experience. Emotions are integral to the human experience, and I’d be surprised if anyone didn’t have emotions tied into their beliefs: We get angry when someone does something immoral, and we may be joyful in a religious experience or when spending time with friends and family. But emotion as the sole fuel for one’s beliefs is shaky ground.

Feelings will come and go, which means a belief built only on feelings will come and go. Plus, a [worldview built on emotion](#) may not be logically or theologically sound. As an [article](#) from *Not the Bee* explains:

“I heard this trend put best by a woman who once tweeted about how she lost her faith. She grew up feeling like she was deeply in love with Jesus, but then she attended a Taylor Swift concert with the same emotional vibe and she realized she just liked the high she got from attending concerts.”

This same principle can be applied outside of religion as well. If we base any of our foundational beliefs on emotion, we run the risk of having them undermined at a later point when our feelings change, when we discover something else that gives us that same emotional experience, or when we are confronted with factual arguments that refute our beliefs.

Group Psychology

When talking about emotionalism and crowds, I’d be remiss if I didn’t also mention groupthink. Throughout history, there are various examples of people being caught up in the energy or ideas of a crowd and behaving irrationally or in ways they normally wouldn’t.

Especially in public settings, people with dissenting opinions who do not see anyone else dissenting are [likely to conform](#) with the opinions of the group, even if they think the group is wrong.

Psychologists [explain](#):

“There are several causes of groupthink, which makes it preventable. When the group is highly cohesive, or has a strong sense of connection, maintaining group harmony may become more important to the group than making sound decisions. If the group leader is directive and makes his opinions known, this may discourage group members from disagreeing with the leader. If the group is isolated from hearing alternative or new viewpoints, groupthink may be more likely.”

In other words, going along with the ideas of a crowd or movement without logically considering those ideas can result in us easily adopting beliefs that we don't truly understand. For instance, getting caught up in a political movement that we initially have some shared opinions with could lead us to unintentionally hold other opinions that we haven't even fully considered. Some students with conservative parents can move out to college, end up surrounded by left-wing ideology, and return home detached from reality. This is why examining our opinions, and the opinions of those around us, is so important.

Beyond the Asbury Revival

Back to the Asbury revival, I'm not saying that this revival is bad. Rather, I think that emotional and group experiences need to be accompanied by deeper contemplation of our beliefs. And whatever your opinions on the Asbury revival, we can certainly use this event as a catalyst for discussing how we formulate our worldviews.

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