

*Book Review**Emotionally Healthy Spirituality:
It's Impossible to Be Spiritually Mature While
Remaining Emotionally Immature*

Peter Scazzero, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014),
240 pages.



Reviewed by EDWARD T. WELCH _____

Book reviews can send us down different paths. In a review of an especially popular counseling and discipleship-related book, such as *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, one path is to consider how it caught fire. People have their reasons for being attracted to it. In this review I will begin with a summary of the book. Then I will consider some reasons for its popularity, suggest topics from the book that invite further work for biblical counselors, and end with thoughts on weaknesses and omissions in the book.

Peter Scazzero wrote *The Emotionally Healthy Church* in 2003. He adapted it for a broader audience in 2006 with *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: Unleash the Power of Authentic Life in Christ*. The present version is *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: It's Impossible to Be Spiritually Mature While Remaining Emotionally Immature*. The book has sold over 500,000 copies and has spin offs for leaders, relationships, personal devotions, and more. The author, having founded a church in Queens and served it for twenty-six years, now oversees the ministry, Emotionally Healthy Spirituality.

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The Basic Structure of the Book

Responsible engagement begins with simply understanding the author's intent and general flow of thought. This means that we avoid being initially tripped up when we spot our pet peeves or details with which we disagree. So here is a brief summary, without much commentary. Most of us would agree with his concerns and observations.

The Christian life, Scazzero suggests, follows certain stages. It begins with the initial enthusiasm that comes from our new knowledge of God. It moves on to new learning and discipleship, and then to an active life of service. At this point, we often hit a "wall," and too many of us are stuck there. We lack contentment and joy; we live with anger, fears, and regrets; and our closest relationships are stagnant. God is relegated to partitioned areas in our hearts so that daily, non-Sunday life looks much the lives of those who do not know Jesus. Perhaps we want a less intrusive god who will let us do what we want, but perhaps we don't even know where to begin. We don't see how God's words speak to the troubles of our modern lives. Something must change.

Change begins, he writes, with taking our emotions seriously. There has been a myth in the church that emotions are unreliable and not to be trusted. In response, Scazzero suggests that we can wrongly approach emotions by quickly confronting them with the truth ("God is in control"), trusting the Lord ("I will follow what God says rather than my feelings"), and changing our feelings ("I will not be angry"). But "to minimize or deny what we feel is a distortion of what it means to be image bearers of God" (p.24). Even more, God "speaks and guides us through our feelings" (p.48), by which he seems to mean that emotions point us to important matters that need our attention, and we must acknowledge certain feelings before we can hear what God says about those feelings. How else can Scripture speak to our hearts if we don't know what is actually *on* our hearts? For example, we cannot know the compassion of God for his suffering people unless we actually understand that we suffer.

Once our feelings are known, we find that we have been influenced by our pasts more than we knew. Life has become duty more than relationship with God; we have no idea how to do conflicts well, and too

much of our time is devoted to pleasing others and building our reputations. Meanwhile, even when we are miserable and feel inadequate, we still stand in judgment over others. Indeed, we need to move from immaturity to maturity.

Next, the book looks to Jesus to find direction on how to be our true selves. It lands especially on how Jesus could love others without being controlled by them. He was not reactive with those who opposed him and he didn't change his message to please others. Scazzero borrows from Murray Bowen's teaching on differentiation to consider how mature people can have relationships with those with whom they differ without losing sight of their own goals. Differentiation means that someone might dislike you or disagree with you, but such displeasure or disagreement does not possess the person.

In short, Scazzero leads us to ask ourselves, how offendable am I? We are, no doubt, people who can be emotionally highjacked by the words and opinions of others, and we are far too quick to take offense. Scazzero suggests that this is where emotions can be counterbalanced by rational thinking in which you maintain your beliefs and values—you can still be yourself rather than you-as-defined-by-them—even if emotions run strong.

The book's prescription is nothing new, which is what we would hope to find. He suggests: solitude and time to reflect, feedback from trusted friends, humility and brokenness before God (the book borrows from St. Benedict's Ladder of Humility), spiritual disciplines, awareness of the seven deadly sins, and surrender of the need to perform, to possess things, and to be popular. These have been reliable guides throughout church history that enhance an appropriate detachment from the world. The test of this growth will be found especially in how we resolve conflicts.

In my opinion, the book is popular for good reasons.

First, the larger problem identified in the book is a problem that biblical counseling has also identified: we are not skilled at connecting life to Scripture and Scripture to life. I overheard a conversation recently in which a parent could not bring Scripture to some ordinary teenage frustrations. The parent was an active member of a church and biblically literate, but Scripture seemed distant and about the future, not the

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