

A Biblical Balance: Preaching to the Mind and Heart Romans 6:17

"But thanks be to God, that, whereas ye were servants of sin, ye became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching whereunto ye were delivered." (ASV)

A most suggestive text, which Dr. Lloyd-Jones called "one of the great striking and outstanding verses in the Bible". Consider the following:

First, God is thanked for the whole complex description. Why? Because there is no one else to thank! What they had become is laid at the door of God's action *alone*. Neither man's action nor some synthesis of co-action is entertained. To congratulate any other, or ourselves, at any point, would be unconscionable.

Second, a change of tense (from imperfect to aorist) is noted. What they were habitually in the past had been abruptly altered—both mind and heart. Conversion is not a gradual change.

Third, the voice of the verb in the last phrase (mistranslated in the KJV) is passive. This *form of doctrine* which had invaded their hearts was not delivered to them; Paul contends *they were delivered to it*. Thus, each phrase is carefully constructed to ascribe the whole complex of conversion to sovereign grace.

Fourth, for Paul, *doctrine* was not considerable without *form*. Neither the mind nor the heart can be moved to obedience by a random collection of facts strewn about with no discernable shape. Featureless assertions without evident structure fail to reach the mind, and having failed there, cannot possibly penetrate to the heart.

Fifth, the great change herein effected was composed of two movements: one of the *head*, and another of the *heart*. Obedience, the primary verbal assertion of the text, proceeds from these two faculties. A selective or random focus overturns the Biblical portrait of conversion which fully involves the whole man: mind, heart, and will.

So much for the overall thrust of the text. Theological discipline requires more than itemizing the elements of truth; those truths must be weighed in their relative proportions and tension. While it is granted obedience involves both the head and the heart, not all agree upon the relative emphasis assigned. Nor has the modern consensus veiled its bias. Take for instance:

- 1) Rome's policy whereby the mind is resigned to the custodial oversight of the 'church'
- 2) Pietism's reliance upon 'inner light'
- 3) Liberalism's drift towards 'existential encounter'
- 4) Neo-Pentecostalism's preoccupation with emotive excitation
- 5) Fundamentalism's paranoid suspicion that Modernism was a disease contracted in the classroom
- 6) Evangelicalism's general impatience with any complexity whatever
- 7) Reformed(?) phobia of 'academic pride' and an 'inken divinity'.

The words of Ezekiel Hopkins (writing 300 years ago) sound strange indeed today:

"Our age abounds with Speculative Christians, whose religion is but like rickets, that make them grow large in the head, but narrow in the breast; whose brains are replenished with notions, but their hearts straitened towards God; and their lives and actions as black and deformed, as if their light had only tanned and discoloured them."

Clearly the scene has changed. Few would nowadays dare accuse modern religion of being too cerebral.

How quickly the heartbeat of one generation becomes the headache of the next! When once the mind is portrayed as a stagnant pond of facts, the heart is soon lauded for its shallow antics. One does not have to look far to appraise the meager returns of such a philosophy. In a technological world, religion has retreated into the mist of romantic idealism.

The current disparagement of the mind in religion is advanced by four false affirmations:

1. False definition

None would deny the heart its honored seat. The *obedience* of which Paul speaks was traced to its source i.e. *from the heart* ('ex animo'). But this was surely no mere emotive or mystical response divorced from cognitive activity. Albeit heartfelt, this was still obedience, and obedience requires an objective standard, *a form of doctrine*.

To reduce the heart to the realm of the subjective, as opposed to the objective, to feeling rather than thinking, is foreign to Biblical usage.

*Feelings come and feelings go,
And feelings are deceiving,
Our warrant is the Word of God,
Naught else is worth believing.* —John Flavel

Blank animation is no part of either the first creation or the new creation.

2. False compartmentalization (either/or)

The modern suspicious distrust of academic piety has concurred that a choice must be made. Failing to appreciate the interworkings of mind and heart, a false option is entertained. Exercising that option, the heart is assumed the most direct and immediate point of entry. Their motto is "Be warmed and filled" but withal attempting to *warm* the affections without *filling* the mind. This fails. It is forgotten that the first sin was just this: a quest for experience, sans revelation. "[Satan]... distinguishes between theology and religion, warmly advocating the latter in order to induce men to abandon the former." Horatius Bonar

*True religion's more than notion,
Something must be known and felt.* —Joseph Hart

3. False opposite

Too often the want of heartfelt devotion is blamed upon doctrinal precision. The *fervor*, it is claimed, has been lost in the *form*. With such a proposal Paul would have no sympathy. Granted, information without affection is sterile. But affection without information is irrational! The notion that men may deny with the top of their heads what they affirm at the bottom of their hearts is an absurdity unfelt, and in fact applauded, by nowadays religion. Fervor is not lost, but found, in the form.

"Like the Puritan movement out of which they emerged, the Calvinistic Baptists (who framed our Confession) were thoroughly aware of the fact that the coals of orthodoxy are ever necessary for the fire of spirituality. Where orthodox doctrine is regarded as unimportant, the fire of Christian Piety will inevitably be quenched." Michael Haykin

4. False prioritization

For true religion to exist both the mind and heart must be engaged. To dispute this is to argue with Paul. The question however remains: Is this only a matter of presence and balance, or, is there a logical priority? Put simply, Which must come first?

J.I. Packer lists the first axiom of Puritan thought to have been "...*the primacy of the intellect*. It was a Puritan maxim that 'all grace enters by the understanding'... It follows that every man's first duty in relation to the word of God is to understand it; and every preacher's first duty is to explain it. The only way to the heart that he is authorised to take runs via the head. So the minister who does not make it his prime business to teach the word of God, does not do his job, and the sermon which, whatever else it may be, is not a didactic exposition of Scripture is not worthy of the name."

The old saying: "The way to a man's heart is through his stomach" is perhaps true. But on a more profound level it is far more important to assert that the way to a man's heart is through his mind. The vacuous lack of content in modern preaching, whilst aimed at the heart, finds it unapproachable. Not only does it lack substance; it has failed procedurally. This were to reverse the polarity of the human personality. No wonder it does not work! This backward methodology can neither effect conversion nor sustain a converted life.

"The Puritans loved and worshiped God with their minds. They viewed the mind as the palace of faith... The Puritans preached that a flabby mind is no badge of honor. They understood that a mindless Christianity will foster a spineless Christianity. An anti-intellectual gospel will spawn an irrelevant gospel that does not get beyond 'felt needs'. That's what is happening in our churches today. We've lost our Christian mind, and for the most part we do not see the necessity of recovering it." Joel Beeke

Permit a personal illustration. I have for most of my life been fascinated with astronomy. I confess to be more intrigued with optics than observation, but I enjoy to hear my friends *ooh* and *aah* as they see Saturn's rings for the first time. Their affections are engaged. But I notice few pause to inquire about the refractive index of extra-low dispersion glass or the apochromatic potential of fluorite crystal. I understand.

I also observe most lose interest as soon as I point to some 'faint fuzzy' at the threshold of visibility. A real treat for me, but not enough to entrance an audience on a cold night. They retreat. There aren't enough Saturns to hold them.

No amount of existential (or celestial) delight will capture the heart for long without an intellectual appreciation for the subject. The former may induce them to venture out at night, but only the latter will keep them there. Mindless affection will soon dissipate into a cold sentimentalism that has no staying power.

All of this is not to disparage the necessity of heartfelt religion. Not at all! The Reformed faith is poorly represented as a nonchalant adjustment of opinion, however profound those adjustments may be.

Spurgeon speaks of a class of men who "...have creed but not credence... I am sick of those cries of *the truth, the truth, the truth*, from men of rotten lives and unholy tempers. There is an orthodox as well as a heterodox road to hell, and the devil knows how to handle Calvinists as well as Arminians."

Yes, there must be a stirring of the affections. It is only insisted that the heart is never struck by aiming directly at it.

Consider our Lord's own procedure (Luke 24:25-32). Granted and gladly, their hearts burned within them (32), but their slowness of heart (25) was rectified by a sustained and systematic mental investment (27). He who rules the heart yet pauses to warm their minds before kindling their affections.

The reverse operates as well. Where God deigns to freeze the heart, He first chills the mind (Isaiah 6:9-10).

J.C. Ryle was described by his successor as "a man of granite with the heart of a child". An encomium which reflected a personality molded by a form of doctrine having taken up residence in the heart. Paul concurs, equally disowning both mindless and heartless religion. For Paul, the work of God in the soul moved men to think, and in thinking, they were moved.

Nothing softens the heart like hard fact. "Thanks be to God..."

Tom Lyon
Providence Reformed Baptist Church
University Place, Washington
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