

PAUL'S DISCIPLINE OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

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“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.” (Romans 6:17 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 we have become is laid at the door of God's action *alone*. Neither man's action or some synthesis of co-action is entertained. To congratulate any other, or ourselves, at any point, would be unconscionable.

Second, the change of “tense” is instructive (i.e., from imperfect to aorist). What they were habitually in the past had been abruptly altered. Conversion is not a gradual change.

Third, the “voice” of the verb in the last phrase (mistranslated in the KJV) is passive. This life-changing truth was not delivered to them; Paul contends *they were delivered to it*. Thus, each phrase is carefully constructed so as to ascribe the whole complex of conversion to sovereign grace.

Fourth, for Paul, *doctrine* was not considerable without *form*. The mind is not moved to obedience by a random collection of facts strewn about with no discernable form. Featureless assertions without evident structure fail to reach the mind, and having failed there, cannot possibly penetrate to the heart.

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. 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. Conversion fully involves the whole man: mind, heart, and will.

While it is granted obedience involves both the head and the heart, not all agree upon the relative emphasis assigned. Nor has the modern mind veiled its bias. Take for instance: Rome's policy of the ‘common man’ which resigns the mind to the custodial oversight of the ‘church’; Pietism's reliance upon ‘inner light’; Liberalism's drift towards ‘existential encounter’; Neo-Pentecostalism's preoccupation with emotive excitation; Fundamentalism's paranoia which suspects that Modernism was a disease contracted in the classroom; common Evangelicalism's impatience with any complexity whatsoever; and even the 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. No one would 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 devastating effects 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 abetted 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*; Proverbs 4:23). 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; or 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 (Puritan)

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. The 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 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. Can a mindless religion of the heart survive? In fact, has it ever existed at all? Nothing grows in the heart that a form of doctrine has not first planted there.

4. False prioritization

For true religion to exist both the heart and mind 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? To put it simply, which must come first? Can the heart inform the head? This is to reverse the polarity of the human personality. No wonder it does not work!

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 backward methodology can neither effect conversion nor sustain a converted life.

Permit a personal illustration. I have for most of my life been fascinated by 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. 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 delight will capture the heart for long without an intellectual appreciation for the subject. The former may induce you to venture out at night, but only the latter will keep you there. Mindless affection will soon dissipate into a cold sentimentalism that has no staying power.

The apostle Paul stands for all time as the Christian’s template of a disciplined mind and life. His discipline, however, was ever theological: a theology which prioritized God’s initiative over man’s responses. But his orthodoxy was not without orthopraxy. He despised both mindless and heartless religion equally. For Paul, the work of God in the soul moved men to think, and in thinking, they were moved.

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. But beyond that, this was precisely Paul’s disciplined thesis: Men’s minds

must be informed before their hearts can be warmed and reformed. Nothing softens the heart like hard fact. “Thanks be to God . . .”