

THE MEANING OF HEART

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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The Biblical doctrine of the heart is one of the most important studies dealing with the nonmaterial nature of man. To understand the nonmaterial nature of man, one must understand the heart of man. In Mark 12:30, Jesus commands man to love God with all his heart.¹ Since we are to love God with all the heart, it is of utmost importance to the Christian life that the heart be understood. Lewis S. Chafer notes:

The word heart occurs over 600 times in the Old Testament and at least 210 times in the New Testament The extensive use of the word heart in all its varied implications places it in a position of extreme importance.²

Understanding the heart of man is also crucial in light of the contemporary study of the make-up of man. The Bible is not a psychology handbook, but when it speaks on this subject, the Word of God is authoritative. What the Bible has to say on the heart is, therefore, of the utmost value and will shed light on the natural man. When the Bible finds need to dip into the nonmaterial man and construct a psychology, it does not hesitate to do so. As the Bible is authoritative, what is written concerning the make-up of man must be accepted as fact.

The term "heart" (kardia) is never used in the New Testament to refer to the physical organ of man as the term is used when reference is made to heart in the Old Testament.³ But the Hebrews also used the term in reference to the nonmaterial nature of man. The use grew from the concept that the heart is essential to physical life. It was a natural transition to bring the term over to the spiritual world as was done by the time of the ministry of Jesus. The New Testament sees the heart figuratively as the center of the real person, the center of spiritual life. Oswald Chambers recognizes this centrality of the heart:

According to the Bible the heart is the centre: The centre of physical life, the centre of mercy, the centre of damnation and salvation, the centre of God's working and the centre of the devil's working, the centre from which everything works which moulds the human mechanism.⁴

Paul's phrases, "Doing the will of God from the heart,"⁵ and "I have you in my heart"⁶ use the word "heart" as the center of man. Christ in the Parable of the Sower likened the ground to the heart of man, a reference to the heart as the center of the nonmaterial man.⁷ The heart physically is the center from which life is dispersed to the body, so the heart figuratively is the center from which spiritual vitality is spread to the personality. Chambers explains:

The heart is not merely the seat of affections, it is the center of everything. The heart is the central altar and the body is the outer court. What we offer on the altar of the heart will tell ultimately through the extremities of the body.⁸

Whether viewed as a unit or as a section of the personality, the heart remains a picture of the fountainhead of life. William P. Dickson observes these conclusions:

In the great majority of passages, it is absolutely necessary to give to the term the wider meaning, which obviously is implied in the cardinal counsel of Proverbs 4:23: "Keep thy heart with all diligence (literally: above all that is kept--prae omni re custodienda) for out of it are the issues of life." It is not merely the receptacle of impressions and the seat of emotions, but the laboratory of thought and the fountainhead of purpose. Sometimes it appears as pre-eminently the organ of intelligence, as at Romans 1:21: "Their foolish (asunetos) heart was darkened"; II Corinthians 3:15; "a veil lieth upon their heart"; II Corinthians 4:6: "God . . . shined in our hearts"; Ephesians 1:18: "having the eyes of your heart enlightened" (tēs kardias instead of dianoias); . . .⁹

Having established the heart as the central seat of nonmaterial man, a definition of the term "heart" is in order, because it has been misunderstood and disputed. In the circles of Christianity no consensus of thought has settled upon a definition. M. Scott Fletcher has stated "this term is the least disputed in its meaning . . . within the cycles of its use

in Scripture."¹⁰ He has defined heart as "the one organ of all thinking and of all willing as well as all feeling."¹¹ This definition is near to being accurate, although it leaves out the aspect of moral conscience. So the heart is the central seat and organ of man's conscious life in its moral, intellectual, volitional, and emotional aspects. Emotion, intellect, will and the power of morality are all aspects of the heart and are included in the make-up of a normal child when born into the world. An examination of these four aspects of the heart is now in order.

First, the heart is said to be the center of intellect. The word "heart" conveys the meaning that is implied to the word "brain" in this modern era. The word "brain" is not found in the Bible. As Chambers states, "in the Bible the heart, and not the brain, is revealed to be the centre of thinking."¹² Franz Delitzsch concludes similarly:

The result of our investigation is pretty much this: that Scripture without excluding head and brain (as we may see on a glance at Daniel 2:28, etc.) from psychospiritual activities and affections, attributes the central agency of these to the heart.¹³

Hebrews 4:12 ("the thoughts and intents of the heart") and Hebrews 8:10 ("I will put my laws into their mind, and on their hearts also will I write them") show the heart is the instrument of thinking and mental processes. Reasoning and memory are aspects of the heart according to Mark 2:8, Luke 2:51 and I Corinthians 14:25. Thinking is definitely a function that takes place in the heart.¹⁴ Chambers agrees to this when he states:

Thinking takes place in the heart, not in the brain. The real spiritual powers of a man reside in the heart, which is the centre of the physical life, of the soul life, and of the spiritual life. The expression of thinking is referred to the brain and the lips because through these organs thinking becomes articulate.¹⁵

Perception is another function within the intellectual capacities of the heart. When Christ speaks of the inability to perceive spiritual things, it is because of a darkened heart (Matthew 13:14). Oswald Chambers places the capacity of perception within the heart.

Perception means the power to discern what we hear and see and read; the power to discern the history of the nations to which we belong, the power to discern in our personal lives. This power is also in the heart.¹⁶

Knowledge and stimuli of the outer world are perceived by the heart and assimilated for mental use. Mary kept all the events of Christ's early life "stored in the heart" (Luke 2:51). In Hebrews 10:16 mind and heart are used synonymously for the storehouse of knowledge, "I will put my laws on their hearts and upon their mind will I write them."

The second function within the heart is that of emotions. According to Chafer the heart is "easily considered the center of sensibility."¹⁷ Man is among other things, an emotional creature and these feelings are resident in the heart. Fletcher places emotions in the heart when he writes:

More than any other Biblical writer Paul regards the 'heart' as the seat of feelings. We shall see later that the Apostle takes over from the Greek certain psychological terms to express the mental and moral aspects of man's inner life, and so is free to develop in harmony with O.T. precedents, the emotional meaning of the heart.¹⁸

Five aspects of emotions as suggested by A.I.Gates will be used as a basis for examining the emotional nature of the heart.¹⁹ (1) Anger is seen by Jesus as coming from the heart: "For out of the heart comes forth evil thoughts . . . railings" (Matthew 15:19). (2) Fear, which can be in the form of dread, terror, anxiety, grief or worry, can grip or control the heart. Jesus said, "Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27), and "Because I have spoken these things unto you, sorrow hath filled your heart" (John 16:6). (3) Joy or love can characterize the third emotion which Gates calls excitement. Acts 2:46 records, "They took food with gladness and singleness of heart." Jesus said, "I will see you again and your heart will rejoice" (John 16:22). (4) Remorse can be pictured as pity, sympathy or sorrow, another type of emotion. Paul expresses this as coming from the heart, "I have great sorrow and unceasing pain in my heart" (Romans 9:2). (5) Finally, the emotion of sex is seen as stemming from the heart. The depraved side of sex issues from the heart, "For out of the heart comes forth evil thoughts . . . adulteries, fornications" (Matthew 15:19). The positive aspect of love is seen as husbands are exhorted to love their wives (Ephesians 5:25) and men are to "love the Lord thy God with all thy heart" (Matthew 22:37).

The third function of the heart is moral consciousness. Deep within man there is a consciousness of a divine being, an enlightenment to a divine standard, this is within the heart. In Romans 2:15 the conscience is placed in the heart, acting as a moral regulator. S. Lewis

Johnson says of this verse: "It seems clear that the heart is here considered as the seat of the moral consciousness."²⁰ Hebrews 10:22 also implies the conscience as being in the heart, "having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience." The root for "conscience" is suneidēsis, a knowing with oneself. Since memory, thinking and volition are necessary functions of conscience, it is natural to place conscience in the heart, because memory, thinking and volition function in the heart.²¹ The conscience and heart are also the place where God works with the individual.²² The heart is the nonmaterial organ in man which has the capacity to perceive an absolute standard and accept a knowledge of the person of God. Fletcher has summarized moral consciousness:

The "heart" being considered in Biblical Psychology the organ of all possible states of consciousness, is pre-eminently the seat of moral consciousness or conscience. In it lies the fountainhead of the moral life of man. Hence in the N. T. "the heart" is the metaphorical term for the whole inner character and its ethical significance cannot be overrated.²³

Volition or the will is the last function of the heart. This is the power or faculty within man to take deliberate action based upon personal desire. To will, man has the ability to make a choice. Paul wrote, "But thanks be to God, that whereas ye were servants of sin, ye became obedient from the heart" (Romans 6:17). Johnson explains this verse as: "This obedience is described as ek kardia. It seems evident that in this passage the heart is considered to be the seat of the will."²⁴ The will is apparently not connected with the brain, but with the heart which is the center of thought. An act of choice taking place in the heart is seen in II Corinthians 9:7, "Every man according as he purposeth in his heart." Obedience is a form of volition and Ephesians 6:5 locates volition in the heart; "Be obedient to them that are your masters . . . with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart."²⁵ Both the fixing of our will (Romans 6:17) and the planning of our will (II Corinthians 9:7) are found in the heart.

Although explanations of the four functions of the heart have been given, the heart must be seen as a whole or a totality to be correctly understood. These functions, in reality, cannot be separated because they interact and depend one upon the other. Therefore, volition, moral consciousness, thinking and emotion stem from the heart, interacting and functioning, dependent on one another. The person acts as a unit, not as a sectionalized being.

With a better understanding of the heart of man, one might ask "But what is the relation of the heart to the nonmaterial parts of man?"

These are soul, spirit, mind, conscience, flesh, old man-new man and old nature-new nature.

The soul and spirit are both nonmaterial and have a relationship to the heart. However, a guard must be taken against using the terms "spirit," "soul" and "heart" synonymously. There are three different capacities in the inner man. Johnson writes concerning these differences:

. . . the term kardia may include the psuchē and the pneuma since their activity takes place in the kardia. From this passage (Romans 5:5) it can be seen that the kardia is the seat and center of the activity of the Holy Spirit, hence also of the human spirit.²⁶

In essence the soul-spirit is amoral. The heart motivates the soul-spirit, being the driving force to evil or belief. It is the heart that is morally good or bad. Fletcher notes this same point, "It (the heart) is the starting point of all his activities."²⁷ The lust of man's heart can motivate the person (Matthew 5:18, 19). The truth of I Peter 1:22 shows that "the purifying of our souls" is the result of the motivation of the heart by obedience. Obedience comes from the heart (Romans 6:17). Also, emotions founded in the heart are expressed through the soul-spirit into the body.

Since the heart, as seen earlier, is the dynamic in man, the soul-spirit must be seen as capacities where the heart functions, the soul-spirit has no power of or in itself. With this proper understanding of the relation of soul-spirit with the heart, certain obscurities confusing the functions of the soul-spirit should be answered. Apparently, Mark 8:12 points to the spirit as the focus of emotions. But the spirit functions through the heart in this capacity. Another function of the soul-spirit in interaction with the heart is receiving the knowledge of God (I Corinthians 2:6-14). Fletcher speaks to this point:

The "heart" then, means the inmost and essential part of man whereby the human spirit functions in response to the presence to the Divine Spirit. 'The love of God hath been shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit.' The "heart" is the meeting place of the human spirit and the Holy Spirit.²⁸

The second function of the soul-spirit through the heart is employing and manifesting spiritual reality, receiving and manifesting spiritual principles and reality. The heart believes; the soul is saved. The heart expresses volition, but "the Spirit beareth witness with our spirit" (Romans 8:16).

The mind is another nonmaterial aspect of man that is not synonymous with the heart in the New Testament.²⁹ Yet, the functions of the mind are sometimes attributed to the heart.³⁰ In answer to this, the mind functions through the heart as does the soul-spirit.

The mind has an ethical aspect.³¹ Titus 1:15 speaks of the mind and conscience being defiled, the conscience and mind functioning through the heart. If man has a corrupt heart, he has a corrupt mind because the latter functions through the heart. Such effects as "a darkened understanding" (Ephesians 4:18) or "a reprobate mind" (Romans 11:28) are the results of an unconverted heart. Regeneration includes the total man, thus the heart and the mind are renewed. Romans 12:2 speaks of regenerate man having the capacity of renewing the mind and I John 5:20 notes a new understanding and knowledge of "him that is true."

Although the mind functions through the heart, it maintains a consciousness to the world outside. The heart and mind have both the capacity of a self consciousness and a perception of outer stimuli. As Fletcher explains:

It (the heart) was regarded as the storehouse into which all sensations were received and the work house from which all acts proceeded. . . . The heart was the one organ of all thinking and of all willing as well as all feeling. It was the meeting place of all man's powers of mind.³²

The conscience, which is another nonmaterial aspect of man, is the ability within man to discern right and wrong on the basis of knowledge, sometimes called a moral regulator. The conscience functions through the heart since the heart is the seat of all moral consciousness. Having survived the fall and being a part of man's perpetual endowment, the conscience is a witness to man of both an absolute standard and the existence of God. Wallace Emerson points out, "Conscience is definitely not, as some would have it, the voice of God's Holy Spirit talking to us."³³ Here he means an infallible guidance system to guide man in moral decisions. As will be seen later, the conscience can make a mistake. Delitzsch in his view of Biblical psychology indicates the purpose of conscience, "the conscience bears witness to man of the universal law of God as set forth in Romans 2:15."³⁴

There is a direct relationship between knowledge and conscience which is inferred by Paul in II Corinthians 4:2, "By the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience." This places close interaction between heart and conscience. Delitzsch asks, "Might not men's knowledge about his relationship to God from the beginning be

called conscience?"³⁵ Thinking, memory and perception all come to action in the operation of the conscience. Having used the processes of thinking to discern, the conscience having no power to motivate then acts as a moral regulator. The conscience discerns; the heart motivates.³⁶

Although conscience is an endowment at birth, as is the mind, both can grow and develop; thus the conscience has the potential of becoming a fair guide to the heart. Paul had developed a conscience that did not offend God or man (Acts 24:16). In I Corinthians 8:12 Paul speaks of a "weak" conscience, inferring the possibility to develop and become stronger. Paul also infers moral growth of conscience in his challenge to have a "good conscience" (I Timothy 1:19). But the conscience can also be weakened. When the conscience discerns moral issues, but the entire man acts evil, the heart has willed to ignore the conscience. The conscience loses its effectiveness to discern moral truth when it is continually rejected and the person gives himself to sin. In Titus 1:15 such a case is spoken of, "Their minds and their conscience are defiled." Here, the conscience had degenerated; not only was it useless to discern but by being defiled, what was wrong becomes right in its regulation. Thus, the heart and conscience have an inner-relationship that is of utmost importance in directing the moral life of man.

The heart has been shown as the motivating power in man; also, the heart has been seen as containing the seat of lust in the individual. These facts relate the heart very definitely to the "flesh" and/or "old man" within the scope of the nonmaterial parts of man. This use of the word "flesh" is explained by James Hastings, "The flesh is the present abode of sin, which requires an obedient subject to execute its belief."³⁷ The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia identifies "the old man" with "the flesh" in defining "old man":

A term thrice used by Paul (Romans 6:6; Ephesians 4:22; Colossians 3:9) to signify the unrenewed man, the natural man in the corruption of sin, i.e. sinful human nature before conversion and regeneration. It is theologically synonymous with flesh (Romans 8:3-9), which stands not for bodily organism, but for the whole nature of man.³⁸

The power that forces man to do evil is called lust in the Scripture. Paul sees lust as proceeding from the heart (Romans 1:24) and the flesh (Ephesians 2:3). This might seem contradictory, but when flesh is seen as functioning through the heart, there is no difficulty. Johnson places lust in the heart:

The heart is spoken of as that which lusts or possesses lust. Of course, the word epithumia is neutral in itself and it may refer to a good desire as well as an evil desire . . . it is used here (Romans 1:24) to indicate evil lusts as the context and the following phrase proves. Thus in the passage under consideration the heart is seen to be the seat of the lust.³⁹

The flesh and the heart cannot be equated. They are different capacities of the nonmaterial man and must be treated as such. Their interaction is complex, the flesh and/or old man having their abode or function through the heart. Since lust is the function of sin and is the focus of sin in the individual, man's total depravity or inability to satisfy God is centered in the heart and penetrates every part of man's existence. John Laidlow has made a good summary:

In the heart lies the moral and religious condition of man. Only what enters the heart forms a possession of moral worth, and only what comes from the heart is a moral production. On the one hand, therefore, the Bible places human depravity in the heart because sin is a principle which has penetrated to the centre, and thus corrupts the whole circuit of life.⁴⁰

The heart issues lust because it is the seat of the flesh and/or old man. Also, the correlation of depravity is seen in this realm because the heart is the center of the nonmaterial man. Because the heart is depraved, the whole inner man is corrupt. The corruption of the heart affects all capacities of the nonmaterial make-up of man.

Thus, the heart, which is the seat of man's conscious life in its moral, volitional, intellectual and emotional aspects is vitally related to and is the center of the nonmaterial man. The soul-spirit, moral consciousness, mind and flesh of man are vitally related to the heart and function through the heart.

DOCUMENTATION

1. All references to Scripture in this article will be from the American Standard Version of 1901.
2. Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, II, 187-88.
3. Exodus 24:29; I Samuel 25:38; II Samuel 18:14; II Kings 9:24.
4. Oswald Chambers, Biblical Theology, p. 100.
5. Ephesians 6:6.
6. Philippians 1:7.

7. Cf. Luke 8:12.
8. Chambers, op. cit., p. 107.
9. William P. Dickson, St. Paul's Use of the Terms Flesh and Spirit, pp. 201-2.
10. M. Scott Fletcher, The Psychology of the New Testament, p. 74.
11. Ibid., p. 76.
12. Chambers, op. cit., p. 97.
13. Franz Delitzsch, A System of Biblical Psychology, p. 302.
14. See also Matthew 24:48 and Romans 10:6.
15. Chambers, op. cit., pp. 124-25.
16. Ibid., pp. 110-11.
17. Chafer, op. cit., p. 187.
18. Fletcher, op. cit., p. 79.
19. A. I. Gates, Psychology for Students of Education, p. 165. The listing of five types of emotions is accepted for use in this article and no attempt is made to establish the validity of only five classes of emotions.
20. S. Lewis Johnson, "A Survey of Biblical Psychology in the Epistle to the Romans" (unpublished Doctor's dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas, 1949), p. 76.
21. See Footnotes 11, 14 and 16.
22. See Romans 5:5; Ephesians 3:16; II Corinthians 1:22; Colossians 3:15.
23. Fletcher, op. cit., p. 88.
24. Johnson, op. cit., p. 102.
25. Also see Hebrews 3:8 and Acts 7:39.
26. Johnson, op. cit., p. 101.
27. Fletcher, op. cit., pp 76-77.
28. Ibid., p. 87.
29. Note Mark 12:39 and Philipians 4:7.
30. See Hebrews 4:12; Romans 10:6; Acts 24:38.
31. Colossians 2:18; Romans 7:25.
32. Fletcher, op. cit., p. 76.
33. Wallace Emerson, Outline of Psychology, p. 435.
34. Delitzsch, op. cit., pp. 160-61.
35. Ibid., p. 167.
36. Note Hebrews 9:14, 13:18; I Peter 2:19; Romans 9:1.
37. James Hastings, A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels, II, 600.
38. Dwight M. Pratt, "Old Man," The International Standard Bible Dictionary, IV, 2183.
39. Johnson, op. cit., p. 93.
40. John Laidlow, The Bible Doctrine of Man, p. 122.