

HEART RELIGION – A MISSING DIMENSION

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“Alas, alas,” wrote Arthur Pink fifty years ago, “that heart religion is rapidly disappearing from the earth, to the eternal undoing of all who are strangers to it.” Perhaps Pink was thinking of his favourite authors and their times: the Reformers, Puritans, leaders of the 18th century Awakening, 19th and 20th century writers in the same mould. Days when, in 1736, Jonathan Edwards could say of his people: “Many of them have been noted for ... their distinct knowledge in things that relate to heart religion, and Christian experience, and their great regards thereto.”

Experiential

What is heart religion? It may be defined as experiential (sometimes called “experimental”) Christianity. Paul refers to it in 2 Timothy 3:5 as “godliness” in “the power thereof. Those with heart religion long for the Lord to come to them in an inward way. They are blessed when He is pleased to manifest Himself (John 14:21), enlighten (John 14:26), enliven (Isaiah 57:15), comfort (Acts 9:31), convict (John 16:8), sanctify through the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:13); assure (Romans 5:5,15) and strengthen (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Heart religion dreads inward hardness, coldness, deadness: conditions that make spiritual exercises such a struggle. What is longed for is a soft heart (Job 23:16), a gracious spirit (2 Timothy 4:22), a little melting (Jeremiah 9:7). When warmed and moved like this, all the graces run and we are drawn out to Him whom we love and are quickened in His way (Song of Solomon 1:4; Psalm 119:25).

Inward

This reminds us that true religion is inward and feeling. Born again through the Holy Spirit, each of us has that Spirit living in us to maintain the life of grace in the soul. We have as much true religion as the Holy Spirit has wrought in our hearts. Given to us by the Father and the Son, He *applies* to us covenant blessings promised before the world began, one of which is to *know* God and His dealings with us (Jeremiah 31:34). These things belong to the realm of our experience. This article maintains that it is a “missing dimension” these days. We do not allege that 21st century religion is not real – we *do* say that emphasis on inward piety is not prominent like it used to be.

Recovery

Recent decades have seen a recovery of the Reformed Faith. A.W. Pink, mentioned above, illustrates this. During his lifetime, he had barely a thousand subscribers to his *Studies in the Scriptures*, yet now his writings are among the best-selling Christian literature of our day. This is matched by large sales of historic and contemporary writers of the same kind. This is very encouraging and hopeful.

However, a recovery of these things is not the same as the possession of them *experimentally*. We can have “the doctrines of grace” but not so much the grace of the doctrines. We can go through Reformed truth, but does Reformed truth go through us? The tragic cases of ministers committing adultery, office-bearers causing trouble in churches, believers not speaking to each other, Christian men dallying with pornography, older believers spending hours of their retirement in front of the TV - are just some evidences that heart religion is not prevalent these days. Let us examine this neglected subject more closely.

1. Heart religion can be easily displaced.

We are, I fear, beset with at least three dangerous substitutes for it.

Firstly, Activism.

This is the snare of being too concerned about outward success and numbers. Ministers and all the Lord’s servants are susceptible to this in our “day of small things.” A heart religion that submits to the biblical priority of church order, purity of worship, a holy and exercised people (Isaiah 66:2), etc., while labouring for the extension of Christ’s kingdom, will not be dismayed if things progress slowly. It knows that they progress *surely* because the work is His (Isaiah 43:13; 1 Corinthians 15:58; Galatians 6:7).

However, professed adherents to the Reformed faith are restless. The frantic way new methods and devices are resorted to, keeping Christians at full stretch, teaching that zealous activity is the benchmark of acceptance with God, the latest tally of church members, etc., can betray a priority that is not the religion of the heart. Our Lord’s

words to the church at Ephesus remind us that an orthodox, busy, active, prosperous, “successful” church may be in dire need of repentance (Revelation 2:4,5).

In all our activity for the spread of the gospel, let us ensure it is the inevitable outcome of inward godliness, and zeal for His glory alone. Such was the piety of Mrs. Elizabeth Prentiss (date): “Those words ‘daily nearer God’ have an inexpressible charm for me. I long for such nearness to Him that all other objects shall fade into comparative insignificance; so that to have a thought, a wish, a pleasure apart from Him, shall be impossible.”

Secondly, Cerebralism.

The word cerebral means “intellectual appreciation, primarily intellectual in nature, involving the mental processes rather than the emotions.” While the Bible never sets the understanding against the feelings – they are virtually synonymous (Proverbs 8:5) – yet we can do this in our relationship to divine truth. We can intellectually revel in the sublime truths of God’s word and lack the accompanying *application* of those truths to our experience and growth. The truth is meant to be “after godliness” (Titus 1:1).

This barrenness is sometimes found in writers and preachers. It is the tendency to handle divine truth in a purely objective way – to couch things in scholarly, almost philosophical terms, rather than in the simple yet profound terms of Holy Scripture. This makes the message much less accessible to ordinary people. In addition, it betrays a lack of being exercised in that message oneself. How true some words of Dr. Lloyd-Jones are: “The true hallmark of greatness is simplicity. It is little minds that are complicated and involved.” We might perhaps also add, “and experience little of what they profess to know.”

Cerebralism tends to pride: “knowledge puffeth up” (1 Corinthians 8:1). When this is so, *spiritual* understanding of truth will be absent because the Lord has “hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes” (Matthew 11:25). We shall never receive a feeling-knowledge of divine truth while we bring little more to it than our intellect. A test for us is whether we find good sermons and books just intellectually stimulating - or enlightening and enlivening, humbling, searching, directing, transforming, sanctifying, comforting, etc. Would not half the current debates and wrangles over doctrine disappear if we were exercised in the truth as we should be? (Cf Ephesians 1:17).

Thirdly, Formalism.

There is a power in God’s word that warms the heart (Jeremiah; 23:29). Our experience, and the lifestyle that flows from this, will have a corresponding warmth and attractiveness about it. The principal grace of love will seek to do everything in gratitude to the Lord, and in affectionate concern for everybody around us (Romans 12:9-11). Such are “a band of men whose hearts God had touched” (1 Samuel 10:26).

Regrettably, it is possible for us to concentrate upon correctness of behaviour to the point of legalism and fetishism. Certain temperaments are perhaps more prone to this than others. Naturally serious-minded believers can make a virtue out of an excessive sobriety and the things they do *not* do. It can lead to adherence to man-made rules becoming almost a substitute for obedience to scripture springing from joyful gratitude (Ephesians 6:6). Such cold, unattractive religion may well earn John Newton’s comment about a man who was “more to be admired than to be beloved.”

It is possible to be sidetracked by these three more easily than we realise. Many who were enthusiastic for sovereign-grace truth do not walk with us now. They have since turned to other things and have sadly changed. Attitudes to Bible translations, worship, evangelism, preaching, and life-style that were shaped by the love of the truth are now governed by different criteria. The spirit of the age, pressures from other Christians, our corrupt desires, even one’s own family can take their toll if God’s word does not hold us in our inmost being.

2. Heart religion is our relationship with God.

“This is life eternal,” says our Lord, “that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3). John in his letter invites us to this knowledge: “and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). Would we have expressed the acme of Christianity in this way? Yet it is what the Lord Himself seeks: “For I desired ... the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6). The marvel is that God in Christ has not just made us safe for eternity but has brought us to Himself. Our persons are justified, adopted to become His children, and God with enthusiasm blesses us:

“And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; but I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me. Yea, I will rejoice over them to do them good ... with my whole heart and with my whole soul” (Jeremiah 32:40,41).

Our gracious God has a work to do that is chiefly *in* us. Romans 8:29 teaches this: “predestinated ... to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.” The goal of our salvation is not service, but likeness to Jesus – that He might occupy the place of “firstborn” over a people who have the family likeness. He had in mind, not what we *do*, but what we *are*. Christlike character comes before everything else. The eruptions of “sin that dwelleth in me” (Romans 7:20) will militate against it. However, the Lord works to subdue this and bring forth in us the beauty of Christ (John 3:30; Galatians 4:19).

This fatherly training is usually through scripture. The read or preached word will reveal our sin, or neglected duty. Sometimes, though, it has to be through affliction and calamity. And as surely as heart religion sees the Lord behind the exercising word (2 Timothy 3:16,17), so it sees Him behind every outward trial. Job did (Job 1:21,22; 2:10), although Satan was the instrument and the Sabeans, Chaldeans, great wind, and sore boils were the means. “God is the Cause of causes” (Christopher Nesse). Therefore Job’s confidence was “he performeth the thing that is appointed for me: and many such things are with him” (23:14).

However, it is another thing to have the word and afflictions *sanctified* to us. We rationalise what the Lord is doing: “despise ... the chastening” - or feel sorry for ourselves and go down under it: “faint when thou art rebuked of him” (Hebrews 12:4). Heart religion, on the other hand, is “exercised thereby” (12:11). This means that if the Lord convicts with His word, we meet His rebukes with a tender conscience (2 Kings 22:19) and “vehement desire ... to be clear in this matter” (2 Corinthians 7:11). We respond with repentance *and reformation* – which Luther said is the evidence of genuine repentance.

Moreover, if He smites us, we love even a chastening God and we kiss the rod: “It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes” (Psalm 119:71). Like Job, it can say, “he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold” (23:10). And even if the Lord should strip us of everything and bring us to nothingness, still the gracious heart will not repine but submit, saying with Job “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him” (13:15). This is because it knows that when God seems to bring the worst upon us it is to bring the best out of us. All this is knowing God and His gracious dealings with us: a religion of the heart.

3. Heart religion maintains the inner life.

“Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life” says Solomon (Proverbs 4:23). We realise that we must diligently attend to certain matters. Although all is by grace, yet grace works by our co-operation (Philippians 2:12,13). Heart religion manifests itself in piety that keeps a careful watch over the inner life. “Christ, the Scripture, your own hearts, and Satan’s devices are the four prime things that should be first and most studied and searched,” wrote Thomas Brooks. These are included in the following particulars.

a] A forgiving spirit.

If we do not forgive those who have wronged us, we harden our heart and act as though we had never known pardoning love ourselves (Matthew 18:32,33). We then forfeit the daily forgiveness *we* need (Matthew 6:15). This is why, when Paul appeals to the gospel as the ground of our forgiving others, he urges: “Be ye ... *tenderhearted*, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.” Forgiving grace toward others springs from within us, as we are melted by the cross: “from your hearts” (Matthew 18:35). David’s forgiveness of Shimei (2 Samuel 16:10-12) came from his brokenness, as he realised this flinger of insults was the instrument of the Lord’s chastening. The more contrite we feel, the more we will cover the sins of others with forgiveness - and the less we will be disposed to criticise others.

b] Godly fear.

The fear of the Lord has been defined as deeming “the smile of God our greatest delight, and the frown of God our greatest dread.” This is a gracious, heart-disposition that consciously lives under the eye of the Lord (Genesis 16:13; 1 Peter 3:12). It transforms everything. It sanctifies our conduct as much as it preserves us from sinning. As one of the Puritans said: “The best way never to fall is ever to fear.” It is the sacred joy of a child to his Father (Malachi 1:6; 3:17), it makes things clear (Proverbs 9:10), and it expresses itself in simple prayer (Matthew 6:9).

c] “A conscience void of offence.”

Tenderness toward sin was something Robert Murray M’Cheyne was particularly concerned for:

“I am persuaded that I ought to confess sin more. I think I ought to confess sin the moment I see it to be sin; whether I am in company, or in study, or even preaching, the soul ought to cast a glance of abhorrence at the sin. If I go on with the duty, leaving the sin unconfessed, I go on with a burdened conscience, and add sin to sin. I think I ought at certain times of the day – my best times, - say, after breakfast and after tea, - to confess solemnly the sins of the previous hours, and seek their complete remission” (*Memoir and Remains*, page 150).

This “keeping short accounts with God” means that “debts” never accumulate but accounts are kept clear. It is surely the essence of heart religion. It is such a close walk with the Lord that nothing is permitted to come between Him and us to spoil that sweet fellowship.

d] Avoidance of inward idolatry.

Like the children of Israel, we are habitual idolaters. Although they came out of Egypt, Egypt did not so easily go out of them. The golden calf showed that, and much later they even “set up their idols in their heart” (Ezekiel 14:3). This proneness to inward idolatry is a matter of deep exercise for us. How easily we can inwardly entertain earthly objects! Immoderate love for things, constantly thinking and daydreaming about them constitutes mental idols that provoke the eyes of His glory. Heart religion jealously watches over the heart because we know we love a jealous God. It has always been that those who love God most and would do most for Him have struggled with such inward rivals.

And they who fain would serve Thee best,
Are conscious most of wrong within.

And have for that reason ensured that King Jesus sits unrivalled upon the throne of the heart.

e] Recognising providence in all things.

Real religion sees the Lord in everything according to Proverbs 3:6 “In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.” Not one area or item of life is excluded: “in *all thy ways*.” It is not being over-pious to pray about the needed parking space, to submit to the Lord over the household accident, to be patient when others annoy, etc. Heart religion believes that “of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen” (Romans 11:36). Things do not happen of themselves, nor are they just “allowed” by God – rather, they are all appointed by Him for our good and His glory.

f] Maintaining a right spirit.

Scripture mentions the inward spirit of believers (Job 7:11; Ecclesiastes 7:9; 1 Corinthians 16:18). Although equivalent to “the heart,” it perhaps highlights the disposition or attitude side of our nature, our reactions to things. How we feel and respond to situations and people is an important part of heart religion. Therefore, we will want to watch this carefully. We need to pray constantly against at least three kinds of spirit: a heavy spirit (1 Kings 20:43), a hard spirit (Mark 16:14) and a hasty spirit (Psalm 31:22). The ultimate preventive – or cure- of course, is to live under the apostolic benediction: “The Lord Jesus Christ be with thy spirit” (2 Timothy 4:22).

g] Our relationship to God’s word.

This is the chief medium of our knowing Him. By nature, we find a strange disposition to rebel against His right to mould our beliefs and direct our steps. We struggle with the self-will that seeks its own way (Proverbs 14:14), or the presumption that runs ahead of the Lord (Numbers 14:44). Is not the genius of heart religion seen here – in that it will recognise this propensity and be exercised about it? Its constant prayer will be for a soft heart, teachable spirit, submissive will. This right spirit is irresistible to God (Isaiah 66:2). It is nothing less than a religion that reverences God’s word as much as God Himself, is practical and a blessing to others.

h] It will also evidence itself concerning prayer.

In the last issue of the *Quarterly* we considered the parable of the importunate widow (Luke 18:1-8). We saw that prayer is not just asking and getting, but the Lord dealing with us. “Unanswered” prayer is learning vital lessons in faith, patience, and submission – all part of our relationship with God. There is more for us in prayer than just the answers we seek. Almost ironically, those who are most exercised in prayer can find it hardest to pray in the first place. The Lord’s deep dealings also uncover our corruptions and unbelief. John Bunyan writes,

“And verily, may I but speak my own experience ... when I go to pray I find (my heart) loth to go to God, and when it is with him so loth to stay with him that many times I am forced in my prayers, first to beg of God that he would take mine heart and set it on himself in Christ, and when it is there that he would keep it there. Nay, many times I know not what to pray for, I am so blind, nor how to pray, I am so ignorant; only,

blessed be grace! the Spirit helps our infirmities. Oh the starting-holes that the heart hath in the time of prayer! None know how many by-ways the heart hath, and back lanes, to slip away from the presence of God; how much pride also if enabled with expressions; how much hypocrisy if before others; and how little conscience is there made of prayer between God and the soul in secret, unless the Spirit of supplication be there to help" (*A Discourse on Prayer*).

Fruits

So heart religion is real religion. The heart is where "the root of the righteous (that) yieldeth fruit" (Proverbs 12:12) is planted and nurtured. It is known by its fruits, as delineated above. It also results in God being glorified and our being humbled. He is the Source and Giver, we are dependent receivers. God is on the throne, we are in our place – and at our happiest, because God's glory and our good are in His purposes forever joined. May the Lord grant us a revival and restoration of this in our day. If we are favoured to see it, it is not too much to say that estranged believers will be reconciled, churches healed, false ways forsaken, holiness promoted and distinguished, worship reformed, preaching anointed, sinners converted. These would be days of religion in "the profession of its truth and the practice or exercise of its power" (John Owen).