

The Biblical Conception of the "Heart"

I. Definition/Description of the Biblical View of the 'Heart'

As the image and likeness of God, people are animated subjectively from the core and throughout their being by that primary faculty of thought, affection, and will which the Bible calls the "heart." As Gordon Spykman states, "the *imago Dei* embraces our entire selfhood in all its variegated functions, centered and unified in the heart."¹ Similarly, Karl Barth affirms that, "the heart is not merely *a* but *the* reality of man, both wholly of soul and wholly of body."²

II. Biblical Data

A. Old Testament

Unquestionably, of all the words that are crucial to biblical anthropology, the word 'heart' is by far the most important. The term possesses the nuance of "centrality" since it is used in the Scriptures to refer literally to the inner most part of things, including that of a tree (2 Sam. 18: 14), the sea (Exod. 15: 8; Psa. 46: 2; Jonah 2: 3), the heavens (Deut. 4: 11), and the earth (Matt. 12: 40). In a few texts, 'heart' contains physiological meaning and designates the actual organ which pumps blood (2 Sam. 18: 14; 2 Kings 9: 24; Psa. 37: 15; Jer. 4: 19), and can be strengthened by food and drink (Gen. 18: 5; Judg. 19: 5, 8; 1 Kings 21: 7; Psa. 104: 15; Acts 14: 17; James 5: 5).

The preponderance of biblical passages, however, speak of the 'heart' as the central, defining element of the human person. In Hebrew, 'heart' (*Leb*, *Lebab*) may have been derived from an ancient Semitic root meaning "throb" which suggests an original pathematic meaning. It occurs approximately 855 times in the Old Testament where it stands for "all the aspects of a person."³ In Hebraic thought the heart is comprehensive in its operations as the seat of the

¹ Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 227.

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans., Harold Knight, J. K. S. Reid, R. H. Fuller (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), III/2, p. 436.

³ *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, s. v., "*Leb*, *Lebab*."

intellectual (e.g., Prov. 2: 10a; 14: 33; Dan. 10: 12), affective (e.g., Exod. 4: 14; Psa. 13: 2; Jer. 15: 16), volitional (e.g., Judg. 5: 15; 1 Chron. 29: 18; Prov. 16: 1), and religious life of a human being (e.g., Deut. 6: 5; 2 Chron. 16: 9; Ezek. 6: 9; 14: 3). Because of this ultimate and vital role, to know a person's heart is to know the actual person. It is the mirror image of a man or woman. As Proverbs 27: 19 puts it, "As in water face reflects face, so the heart of man reflects man." Since the heart holds the key to one's essential makeup, its content and condition must be regularly examined. "Watch over your heart with all diligence," admonishes the sage in Proverbs 4: 23, "for from it flow the springs of life." Thus, while others may take pride in appearance or look outwardly upon the bodily frame, God knows what constitutes a person's essential self, and casts his penetrating gaze upon the heart (2 Sam. 16: 7; cf. John 7: 24; 8: 15; 2 Cor. 5: 12).

B. New Testament

The New Testament and the teaching of Jesus advance this perspective. The 150 or so uses of 'heart' (*kardia*) from Matthew to Revelation demonstrate that it is "the main organ of psychic and spiritual life, the place in man at which God bears witness to himself, . . . the whole of the inner being of man in contrast to his external side, . . . the one center in man to which God turns, in which the religious life is rooted, which determines moral conduct."⁴ Indeed, according to various New Testament authors, the heart is the psychic center of human affections (Matt. 22: 37-39; John 14: 1, 27; 2 Cor. 2: 4), the source of the spiritual life (Acts 8: 21; Rom. 2: 29; 2 Cor. 3: 3), and the seat of the intellect and the will (Rom. 1: 21; 2 Cor. 9: 7; Heb. 4: 12). Jesus shares this point of view, teaching that the heart is the spiritual nucleus of the person about which life orbits. He affirms this anthropological reality in the Sermon on the Mount. There Jesus offers a warning about earthly and heavenly treasures as contrasting options for a person's basic pursuit in life, the choice of a *summum bonum* if you will. Terrestrial treasures, he says, are subject to corruption and theft, whereas celestial treasures possess eternal durability. The choice of either

⁴ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s. v., "Kardia."

is all determinative, and for this reason Jesus associates it with that unifying faculty and hub of life, stating “for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6: 19-21; cf. Luke 12: 33-34). Once one’s treasure is identified, the heart will not be far behind. Neither will a particular way of life. Jesus knew that the kind of treasure occupying one’s heart will manifest itself in practical ways through patterns of speech and conduct. He also employed a dendrological metaphor to communicate this point. In fact, he uses both “trees” and “treasures” in several gospel texts, including this one, to illustrate that out of the heart are the issues of life.

For there is no good tree which produces bad fruit, nor, on the other hand, a bad tree which produces good fruit. For each tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they pick grapes from a briar bush. The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart (Luke 6: 43-45; cf. Matt. 7: 17-20; 12: 33-35; 15: 18-20; Mark 7: 21-23).

For Jesus, then, in the heart a treasure resides, out of it fruit is produced, and from it words and deeds emerge. Regardless of the metaphor he uses (trees or treasures), he was obviously convinced that the cornerstone of a human being, the very foundation of a human life, is to be found in the heart.

III. Worldview Implications

On the basis of this anthropological perspective presented in the teachings of Jesus as well as the Old and New Testaments, I would like to offer three suggestions regarding a biblical approach to ‘worldview.’ The first is that the phenomenon of ‘worldview’ itself must be comprehended in terms of the biblical doctrine of the heart. In other words, the heart of the matter of worldview is that worldview is a matter of the heart. Of course, this notion of worldview as a life-determining vision of reality was conceived and promoted extra-biblically out of the Western philosophical tradition, and intuitively it seems to express something very real and profoundly human. Assuming its legitimacy and value as a concept, its essence must be explained from a biblical vantage point. What did the originators of ‘worldview’ accidentally stumble upon, what were they unintentionally identifying about humankind when they invented this notion? I propose that they were putting their finger, in an adequate though incomplete way, on the biblical

understanding of the pivotal nature and function of the heart in human experience. What the heart is and does in a biblical way is what the philosophers were getting at unconsciously in coining the term 'worldview.' Without knowing it, they were mining an insight from the ore of divine providence, to use Augustine's language from his Egyptian gold illustration. Having been excavated by the labor and resourcefulness of the philosophers, the true origin, the fuller meaning, and the proper use of this valuable nugget of truth can now be identified biblically. As a precious stone, it needs to undergo the process of Christian refinement, transforming it into a vessel useful for the smith (cf. Prov. 25: 4). Thus, when 'worldview' is reinterpreted in light of the doctrine of the heart, not only is its true source located, but it becomes a richer concept than its philosophical counterpart, being more than just a reference to an abstract thesis about reality, but an Hebraic expression of the existential condition of the whole person.⁵ It is even conceivable that a perceptive interpreter apart from philosophical stimulation could have (and perhaps should have) invented the notion of 'worldview,' albeit in its fuller sense, on the basis of a careful, inductive study of the term 'heart' as it appears in Scripture. For what he or she would discover there is what we have already seen in our previous study, namely that the heart is the religious, intellectual, affective, and volitional center of a person. Believing, thinking, feeling, and doing all transpire within it. It is concerned with a particular treasure as an ultimate good. It is the source of how one speaks and lives. It is a reflection of the entire man or woman. It constitutes the springs of life. Consequently, human existence proceeds "kardiologically" on the basis of a "vision of the heart," for according to its specific disposition, it grinds its own lenses through which it sees the world. According to the Bible, therefore, I propose that the heart and its content as the center of human consciousness creates and constitutes what we commonly refer to as a *Weltanschauung*.

⁵ Actually, Wilhelm Dilthey approximates what I am suggesting here. He argued that worldviews are formed according to the dictates of character, and possess a structure that reflects the inherent psychic order of human beings, namely, intellect, emotion, and will. These are functions that the Bible associates with the heart.

Second, *into* the heart go the issues of life.⁶ Before the springs of life flow *out of* the heart, something must first and even continue to flow *into it*. The heart not only expresses the life within it, but also receives it from without. Things are internalized *before* they are externalized. For indeed the life-shaping content of the heart is determined not only by nature or organic predispositions, but very much by nurture. Certainly one's natural genetic inheritance, basic personality, and inborn insights are critical components of the heart's composition. But it is also deeply influenced by what enters it from the outside through the manifold experiences of life. This is why, for example, that both Plato and Augustine were very concerned about the narrative education of the young. The latter was very anxious for children who were receiving great draughts of Virgil's poetry into their unformed minds, quoting Horace on one occasion who observed that "new vessels will for long retain the taste of what is first poured into them."⁷ Certainly from childhood on, a torrential amount of content is poured into the reservoir of the heart from seemingly unlimited sources of varying quality, some of it pure, some of it polluted. Various heart-shaping influences include religious, philosophical, and cultural traditions, socio-economic conditions, various institutions such as marriage, the family, and education, human relations and friendships, vocational choice and work experience, psychological and physical health, sexual experiences, warfare, and so on. Because the consequences of these factors in due course will be retained and form the wellsprings of life, the wisdom teacher in Proverbs admonishes his hearers to watch over the heart most diligently (Prov. 4: 23). Hence, the sum and substance of the heart—its essential religious posture, patterns of thought, basic affections, and volitional activity—in short, what I am calling a 'worldview,' sustains an *interactive or reciprocal* relationship with the external world. As an individual passes through the various stages of human

⁶ This phrase is from Nicholas Wolterstorff, "On Christian Learning," in *Stained Glass: Worldviews and Social Science*, Christian Studies Today (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), 73. I have taken his suggestion of an *interactive* relationship of the heart to life and the world as a corrective to Kuyperian expressivism to heart in this paragraph.

⁷ Augustine, *City of God*, 8 (§1. 3).

development, the heart obtains a vision of reality, even though it cannot explain exactly how.⁸ Over time, this outlook is probably discovered, followed, confirmed, challenged, put in crisis, reaffirmed or replaced, and solidified as the individual clings to a first, second or even more “naïvetes” until death. There are periods of stability as well as tumult and change as new input makes its way into the heart where it is filtered, accepted or rejected. Worldviews, in one way or another, are always works in progress. Through out life, therefore, the heart not only gives but receives, and *what flows into the heart* from the external world eventually determines *what flows out of it* in the course of life.

Third, *out of the heart* go the issues of life. Once the heart of an individual is formed by the powerful forces of both nature and nurture, its content constitutes the presuppositional basis of life. Presuppositions are those first principles that most people take for granted. They are multifaceted in character, and knit together, they make up the most basic psychic layer of life. They constitute the background logic for all thinking and doing. They do not rest upon other principles, but are rested upon; they are not argued *to*, but argued *from*. They are responsible for how the world appears and life is conducted. “They refer us,” says Ted Peters, “to our fundamental vision of reality and the self-evident truths which are tacitly acknowledged in everything we comprehend and assert.”⁹ They are the work of the heart which establishes the foundation for all human expression and experience. Though mostly hidden, and often ignored, these most basic intuitions guide and direct most, if not all, of life. They are a compass-like in effect, a polaris in the night sky. They are gyroscopic amid many imbalances, a thread in the labyrinth of life. These baseline beliefs are so humanly significant, they are like a nest to a bird or a web to a spider. As Michael Polanyi states, when we acknowledge a set of presuppositions as

⁸ William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1925), 13.

⁹ Ted Peters, “The Nature and Role of Presupposition: An Inquiry into Contemporary Hermeneutics,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 14: 129.

an interpretative framework for life, "we may be said to dwell in them as we do in our own body."¹⁰ Therefore, examine a person carefully (perhaps even yourself): listen to him speak, watch him act, observe his attitudes, detect his beliefs, and in a short while you will be led back to the tap root of his life in the presuppositions of the his heart which supply him with his conception of life.

From a scriptural point of view, therefore, the heart is responsible for how a man or woman sees the world. Indeed, what goes into to the heart from the outside world eventually shapes its fundamental dispositions, and determines what comes out of it as the springs of life. Consequently, the heart establishes the basic presuppositions of life and because of its life-determining influence, must always be carefully guarded.

IV. Educational Implications

Christian anthropology, especially this biblical conception of the 'heart,' must be at the root of a solid philosophy of education. The question, therefore, for Christian university professors (indeed, for all kinds of teachers and teaching), is this: how ought the heart as the central, unifying, vision-giving, and life-shaping component of the human person, be educated?

A. Spirituality:

What kinds or forms or expressions of Christian spirituality on the university campus will most effectively result in the authentic biblical sanctification of students and professors alike?

B. Curriculum:

What specific content ought to comprise a Christian university's undergraduate curriculum such that the student's is enabled to form a biblically based view of the world and experience the life-transformative effects of liberal education, moral, and professional education?

Also, what view or understanding of "knowledge" (aka , epistemology) ought to be central to this enterprise?

C. Pedagogy:

¹⁰ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, 1962), 60.

How should the content of this curriculum be taught so that the truth and wisdom it contains sinks deeply into the hearts of students and has a lasting, life-transforming, church-renewing, city-shaping, world-changing impact?

What model for this endeavor is suggested by the incarnation and the life of Jesus with his disciples in terms of relationship, apprenticeship and mentoring?

IV. Concluding Quotes

It is only with the heart that one can see rightly;
what is essential is invisible to the eye."
—Antoine de Saint Exupéry,
The Little Prince, 1943.

For what you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing: it also depends on what sort of person you are (125).
—Uncle Andrew in C. S. Lewis's
The Magician's Nephew

Watch over your heart with all diligence,
For from it flow the springs of life.
Proverbs 4: 23