THE HEART OF CHANGE IS A CHANGE OF HEART

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The Briefing

LIVING BRIEF
The Challenge of Daily Christian Life
November 2003 | Issue 302

What is the engine room of change in the Christian life? It's an important question, because we all find change hard to bring about, and we generally don't see as much of it as we would like. As followers of our Lord Jesus Christ, we want to change to be like him, but we cannot seem to escape the almost constant allure of sin.

The answer, of course, is that only God brings about change as he works in us through Christ by his Spirit. But can we say more than this? Can we delve a little deeper and discover something more about the way God changes us?

I was recently reminded of one of the key Reformation principles: *what the heart loves, the will chooses and the mind justifies*. Most Roman Catholic and enlightenment thought is based on the assumption that humans have the capacity to choose what they know to be right. That is, if we are presented with a choice, we can figure out the right thing to do, and then we have it in our power to choose to do right rather than wrong. Education is therefore the key to developing an understanding of what is right and wrong, and effort is the key to breaking bad habits and actually choosing right over wrong.

The Reformation challenged this basic assumption. Through their reading of the Scriptures, the reformers were acutely aware that our will, our ability to choose, is captive to our heart. And our heart is captive to sin, the flesh and the devil. But more than this, far from freeing us from this captivity, our mind actually *justifies* this weak-willed slavery as being right.

It's a scenario we have all experienced; I like chocolate and want to buy some, so I decide I will. Of course, I then think to myself, 'Well, I have been working hard and I do deserve a reward. And I'm not buying the biggest block. And after all it is on sale. Anyway, I'm sure I read somewhere that chocolate is good for you.' Ultimately, it is my love of chocolate which drives my will, and my mind dutifully makes me feel better about the whole situation. It's often this way with gluttony, but it is also the case with greed and gossip and sexual immorality and any other sinful behaviour. What our heart loves, our will chooses and our mind justifies.

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It's not surprising, then, that when the Bible talks about the heart of change, it talks in terms of a change of heart. Ezekiel provides us with a classic example. Throughout Ezekiel, God rebukes his people for their stubborn, wandering hearts that refuse to follow him. The Lord challenges Israel in Ezekiel 18:31, 'Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!' Of course this only serves to highlight their, and our, problem – we cannot change our heart, and so we continue to wander from the Lord. It is God alone who can do this for us as we read in Ezekiel 36:26:

> And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

The first thing we must learn about change is that we cannot change ourselves, but God can – and he does this by changing our hearts.

But the second thing we must learn is this: what our heart loves is the engine room driving our words and actions. The greatest command is that 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind' (Luke 10:27). If we get this right, everything else will fall into place. It won't happen immediately, nor without effort and failure, but if we have a sincere love of God we have the right foundation for change, the right engine to power the Christian life.

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I think this is the logic behind Paul's grand poetic prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21. It's a well-known passage, but have you ever stopped to reflect on how it links the material in the first few chapters of Ephesians with that in chapters four to six? In the first three chapters of Ephesians, Paul lays out God's cosmic plan for his creation and his people, a plan to set all things right in Christ (1:10). It is a plan by which 'God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ' (Ephesians 2:4-5). And it's this love which Paul prays we might have power to comprehend at the end of chapter 3:

> For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is

> named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith – that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (vv. 14-19)

In that extraordinary prayer, Paul reminds us that we have already been 'rooted and grounded in love', a point he has established in chapters one and two. He points us to our need for divine help by praying that the Spirit would strengthen us with power, or in other words, that Christ would dwell in our hearts by faith. In all this, Paul's purpose is that we might know the unknowable, grasp that which is beyond measure – the love of Christ for us. And it is this knowledge in our inner being, in our hearts, that can fill us with all the fullness of God. Whatever else it means to be filled with all the fullness of God, for sinners like you and me it certainly means change. And so Paul continues in chapters four to six, outlining the sort of change God is bringing about in his people.

The key point to make here is that it's only as we are divinely enabled to understand God's love for us that we are able to change, and love God and our neighbour. But, just as the reformers recognised, there is always the danger that our hearts might love the wrong thing, and, as a willing accomplice, our minds will justify our wrongdoing. Our mind must rather be the willing servant of a heart that loves God. And our heart will only ever truly love God by continually returning to the love of God for us shown in Christ Jesus.

If we want to change, we must follow the Apostle's teaching and keep returning to our Lord Jesus Christ, the perfect expression of God's love for us. We must apply our minds to understanding afresh what Christ has done, and so by the Spirit rekindle in our own hearts a love for God which expresses itself in right action.

Or, to put it simply, we will change because Christ's love compels us.