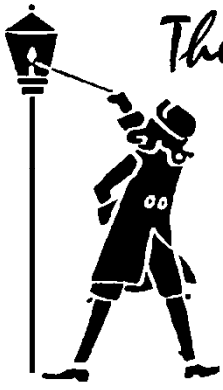


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IN CHRIST AND FOR CHRIST - TO KNOW CHRIST AND TO MAKE HIM KNOWN

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EMOTIONS: MASTER OR SERVANT?

"You know I love you, I always will, My mind's made up by the way that I feel"

I am always surprised, when I listen to the oldies channel, that I can still sing lyrics to songs I heard 40 years ago. Our music saturated our lives so much that we could sing the words without thinking. When I heard these words last night, however, my mind caught up with my lips.

These lyrics appeared in the Troggs hit song, "Love is All Around," first released in Britain in 1967. Hundreds of songs like this one appealed to the untrained and untamed emotions of pubescent listeners, propagandized into believing that when true love finally wrapped its powerful arms around them, they would sing with the Troggs, "I feel it in my fingers, I feel it in my toes."

Love continues to survive in every generation as the preeminent virtue, although its definition fluctuates. In American culture over the last one hundred years, the prevailing sentiment has favored the exhilarating emotional reaction to another person. And this emotion possesses the mastery to command all other capacities of human personality. Reg Presley's phrase illustrates this dominance, "My mind's made up by the way that I feel." Emotional love dictates over the mind's conclusions. Rational thinking bows in servile submission to emotionality.

Biblical theology paints a very different portrait of humanness. Emotions, although not disparaged, are placed in proper balance with the totality of the human inner life. They inform a person's thoughts, conclusions and choices, but they do not have priority or power over those choices. The mind and will hold them in check. When allowed to control conduct, emotions lead people to rash, careless and destructive behavior.

In his passionate zeal to free Israel from the humiliating control of the Philistines, King Saul declared a curse on any person who ate a bite of food before Saul had secured final revenge on his enemies. Unknowingly, his own son, Jonathan, exhausted from a full day of battle, rejuvenated his strength with some honey. When Saul found out, he would have killed his son if the army had not intervened to prevent the injustice (1 Samuel 14). Saul repeatedly acted out of emotionality rather than wisdom or faith.

The definition of the heart adds to some of the confusion. Cultural conditioning directs many Christians to think that emotions reside in the heart, so that whenever they read "the heart" in the Bible they substitute "emotions." Neither Old Testament nor New Testament authors defined the heart in this way. On a few occasions in the Old Testament the term may give preference to the emotions. The vast majority of its uses, however, refer to the totality of the spiritual or inner life. So the author of Hebrews speaks of "the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12), activities usually associated with the mind and the will. Or Paul prays, "that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened," in order that they might better understand the benefits of their calling in Christ (Eph. 1:18). "Thus it is the person, the thinking, feeling, willing ego of man, with particular regard to his responsibility to God, that the NT denotes by the use of [heart]" (*The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 2, p. 182).

Solomon warned his son in Proverbs 4:23, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." Even the heart does not have absolute power over humans. Choices can be made to protect the contents of the heart. Thus, David said, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you" (Ps. 119:11), "I have chosen the way of truth; I have set my heart on your laws" (Ps. 119:30). He made conscious choices to put information into his heart - the truth as revealed in God's law and His word - that would help guide his choices.

It is important to understand the unreliability of the heart, as well. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" writes Jeremiah (17:9). So the prophet commands Israel, "wash your heart from evil, that you may be saved" (4:14). And, in the New Testament, James instructs followers of Jesus, "purify your hearts, you double-minded" (4:8). It is the "broken and contrite heart" that brings favor from God (Psalm 51:17).

Somehow, in the complexity of human nature, we have the ability to make choices for our hearts, the place where choices are forged. This seems to occur as we learn to trust in God's revelation to us of truth and obey Him, rather than depending upon the understanding of our own hearts. This will lead to choices that bring good rather than evil to life (cf. Prov. 3:5-6).

We may not be able to fully diagram the inner workings of man, but what we learn from all this is that "the way that I feel" should never reign over our thoughts and choices. We are not slaves to our emotions. They play an important role in human existence, but they should serve us, not rule us. Followers of Christ are not victims, but are called to live as victors, empowered through faith by the power of Christ in us.

Where are the Christian song writers who are redirecting the thinking of our culture?

Pastor Stan