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## Introduction

**W**hen generations of Christians have been given a truncated view of the very message they've set their hopes upon, it is difficult and often impossible to breach that entrenched view. This book is an attempt to restore what has been lost to recent generations of Christians. Some readers will discover what they suspected was true all along, yet wonder why they've never heard this message. Some will reject the message simply because it does not line up with their long-held assumptions. Mark Twain once said that, "Often, the surest way to convey misinformation is to tell the strict truth."

It's possible to be forgiven, and yet not free. It takes something in addition to the grace of forgiveness to free people from what hinders them. You may be forgiven, yet bound; pardoned, yet encumbered. — And the heart is at the center of all that. Generations of Christians have been pinned down by some very disabling assumptions about their hearts that have left them both unhealed and untransformed. This book questions those assumptions in light of Scripture, and offers the rest of the Gospel most of us have never been told. The message of this book is not a new teaching. Rather, it is the recovery of what has been known through ages past, yet lost to the recent generations of Christians.

The book you hold is for those who have suspected that something was missing in the message they have been hearing, and who want to live more fully in the Kingdom as they discover the surprising truth about their hearts.

“To be believed, make the truth unbelievable.”

– Napoleon Bonaparte

## Is that actually true?

**T**he answers to the following questions may surprise you.

Note: You may find yourself answering the questions differently once you proceed through the book!

1. **True or False?** The Christian's heart is just as sinful after becoming a Christian as it was before becoming one.
2. **True or False?** The Christian's heart is a mixture of good and bad.
3. **True or False?** A Christian's heart is totally good and pure.
4. **True or False?** Christianity is about right behavior and morality.
6. **True or False?** God is interested in fixing us.
7. **True or False?** Jesus' primary offer to us is the forgiveness of sins.



## CHAPTER ONE

**What have you been told about your heart?**

(The ‘gospel’ of guilt, shame, and pressure)

“The revolution of Jesus is in the first place and continuously a revolution of the human heart or spirit.”

– Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*<sup>1</sup>



**A**t certain points in the book, you will see questions that I posed to Christians I know. I was attempting to get at the message they were being told about their heart—even after becoming Christians. These friends come from different church backgrounds and experiences, yet their stories are indicative of some sad realities facing Christians today. I suspect their stories are more common than you may think.

Question: “There’s a hymn that says we are ‘prone to wander’—meaning that it’s our nature and tendency, even as Christians, to stray from God. Do you believe that to be true?”

Meredith, from Tampa: “Christians are so often told that we are unworthy sinners and not worthy to be in His presence, that we avoid him in an attempt to hide ourselves from Him.”

## Right diagnosis, wrong treatment

Medical mistakes can be made by the most capable and trained doctors. A patient's condition can be misdiagnosed or mistreated, with dire results. Doctor Jerome Groopman, author of the revealing book *How Doctors Think*, tells us from his own medical experience what can happen—for he too had failed to correctly diagnose and treat a patient—with painful consequences:

One of my patients was a middle-aged woman with seemingly endless complaints whose voice sounded to me like a nail scratching a blackboard. One day she had a new complaint, discomfort in her upper chest. I tried to pin down what caused the discomfort—eating, exercising, coughing—to no avail. Then I ordered routine tests, including a chest X-ray and a cardiogram. Both were normal. In desperation, I prescribed antacids. But her complaint persisted, and I became deaf to it. In essence, I couldn't think in a different way. Several weeks later, I was stat-paged to the emergency room. My patient had a dissecting aortic aneurysm, a life-threatening tear of the large artery that carries blood from the heart to the rest of the body. She died. ... I have never forgiven myself for failing to diagnose it.<sup>2</sup>

Either misdiagnosing an illness or mistreating it can prove disastrous. What happens when your quality of life depends upon the correct judgment of a professional whom you believe to be trained and capable, yet you discover he has given you the wrong “cure”? Or perhaps you are seeing a therapist for treatment of depression. You and your past are thoroughly analyzed and you're given some emotional goals to work through; yet the

real problem is somewhere deeper, at a level that analysis won't touch—and you remain stuck.

In any of these cases, you are told that the prescribed treatment will work, yet you are not getting better; perhaps worse in some ways. A problem, rightly discerned, but wrongly treated can only lead to further sickness.

The Church in our days has responded with the wrong course of treatment for our greatest needs. What we call the “Gospel” today (which *is* the solution to humanity's condition) is at best a weakened and impoverished gospel, and at worst, not the Gospel at all. We have provided the wrong cure. We have incorrectly treated the disease—with disturbing results: our churches are full of people who remain enfeebled with shame, guilt, and futility. They are pinned down by the same things they struggled with before becoming Christians and are anything *but* restored, free citizens of the Kingdom. In fact, many leaders *use* shame in order to get their congregants to “be more committed, serve more, do more.”

Many have felt cheated by the Christian “cure” they have been given. Not intentionally deceived, to be sure. There were no preachers or Sunday School teachers who set out to mislead them, for those good-hearted leaders have passed on simply what *they've* been given. What most of us who call ourselves ‘Christians’ have been told about the Gospel is, at best, partially true: We have been told that Christianity is about getting your sins forgiven and going to heaven. This is true, yet grossly incomplete. The

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deceptive story line running throughout our modern Christian story is that you are merely forgiven, yet unchanged: that you've been pardoned and are going to heaven, but you remain essentially the same person you've always been. We've been left as Lazarus, called out of the tomb, yet still bound by his grave clothes.

Most Christians have been told to be suspicious of their hearts, *even after* coming to Christ. In essence, the message to us from the Church has been, "Your heart is bad, or at best, a mix of good and bad. Therefore, be suspicious of your heart, your motives, your desires." How often have we heard the self-effacing idiom, "You're just a sinner, saved by grace."? Or that "We're 'prone to wander.'"?

As I talked with my friends who trusted Jesus, I asked the question: "Even after becoming a Christian, have you been told that your heart is:

- totally good and pure,
- not at all good and pure,
- or a mix of good and bad?"

Some of those interviewed, even though they had been Christians for years, were still believing that their hearts were a "mix of good and bad."

More revealing were some responses to the question, "On a scale of 1- 10 ('ten' being 'totally good and pure'), how good/pure do you feel your heart is?" Some of these deeply serious Christians responded with a less than favorable view of their redeemed hearts. Any answer less than "ten" would

indicate a misunderstanding of the thoroughly miraculous work Jesus has already accomplished in them. And it's not their fault. It's the message they've been given. Why are these good people still feeling their hearts are bad in some way—that the deepest part of them is still dirty, marred or unacceptable?

### **What this message is *not***

Please know that I am clearly not speaking of a self-constructed, self-initiated goodness on our part. We were not born good: God must make us so. We once *were* rebellious towards God and our hearts *were* deceitfully wicked. We once *were* incapable of living and loving like Christ. Any honest person can see that human nature, apart from Christ's radical intervention, is not capable of living from the standard (kind or scope) of love that Jesus sets before us. Without regeneration (radical interior transformation), we can only produce human love, but not the very love of Christ.

Further, when I try to help a follower of Jesus see that his heart is now good, I'm *not* offering a self-help, feel-good seminar on how to actualize his inner light. I'm simply advocating the revolutionary and penetrating work of Christ in the heart that occurs when a person says 'yes' to Jesus. The language we use to talk about ourselves and others betrays our theology, for better or worse; and the version of Christianity that is so pervasive today has done such great damage to our sense of identity. This is why it's necessary to provide a better, more accurate language about ourselves and our wholly new identity as God's sons and daughters.

This message of radical change is exactly what we need, yet we are being given a dangerously distorted version of what actually happened to us. Because of this distortion and anemic teaching concerning what Jesus has actually accomplished in our inmost being, there are many of us who are serious about Jesus yet still captive to shame, guilt, and spiritual pressure tactics.

## The gospel of duty, shame and pressure

Question: “In your experience going to church, have you felt *pressure to be good*, or *freedom to be holy*?”

Cindy, from Hartford: “I don’t know that I would call it pressure, but a definite assertion/admonition that as a Christian, I should be behaving a certain way. I don’t believe that I have ever heard (in church, at least) that I am holy.”

Today’s Church preaches a partial, and therefore weakened, anemic gospel. The Gospel has been reduced to: get forgiven—go to heaven. You’ve been pardoned, but now it’s your job to be a “good Christian” and keep your nose clean until Heaven. What starts with grace ends in *pressure* to be good. (Just get people to do the right thing.) The Christian life soon becomes about acting like a good Christian (religious duty) so that you don’t disappoint God or those around you. The externals (behavioral expectations) become more important than internal realities (the new resources of your heart). Even good practices such as serving others, worship, ministry and kindness become religious obligations, rather than the overflow of a new heart that is now genuinely for others and for God.

Here's what one Christian discovered about the emptiness of living from religious duty and obligation:

I was a faithful Christian. I went to church every week and joined the men's ministry—even went on a mission trip to Bulgaria. I want to say I was living for God, but I was living more out of duty and obligation. It was the 'wanting to do the right thing' type of living. On the outside I was the model Christian. However, I had a nagging sense of 'there is something more,' but I could not identify what the 'more' was.<sup>3</sup>

Any "gospel" that *pressures* people to be good inevitably brings shame; because 'good enough' is never good enough. How do we recognize the gospel of duty and pressure, and therefore, shame? This false gospel comes with the following message: "You're not doing enough, you're not spiritual enough, committed enough, selfless enough." It's the "not enough" gospel and it is often called "sanctification." And how can you argue with that? Don't you want to grow spiritually? Shouldn't we serve, become more "Christ-like," be committed to the mission? Here's a troubling question, though: How can you *ever* know when enough is enough?

When you've read your Bible enough?

Shared your faith enough?

Been committed enough?

Love God enough?

In order to meet the expectation of sanctification, is spiritual growth something we must try harder at, doubling our efforts in order to be more like Christ?

## **The bait and switch gospel**

We say people can come into the Kingdom through grace, but once they're in, we switch from grace to duty, obligation, and pressure. Though we preach that you can't contribute a thing to your own salvation and that it's all God's gift for you, once you're "safe" however, you'd better keep up and step up. This fallacy is why Paul had to be pointedly firm with God's family in Galatia when he said: "Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by *human effort*?" In today's distorted Christianity, you can come in under God's power, but once you're in the door, it's about *your* effort to make this thing work. Grace dissolves into exertion. And because you can never do enough, exertion soon turns to shame: "I know I'm supposed to be serving, loving, thinking pure thoughts, but I just can't. It goes well for a while, then I blow it... again." Soon, shame turns into resignation: "I no longer *want* to try harder. I feel like giving up." And God asks the Church, "Why do you turn my glory into shame?!"

## CHAPTER TWO

**The heart is his mission**

(Why the heart has to be the focus of Jesus' mission)

“What is in our ‘heart’ matters more than anything else for who we become ...”

– Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*<sup>4</sup>

“I will give you a new heart...”

– *Ezekiel 36:26*



**W**hat if you went to your doctor because for two months you'd been experiencing stomach pains that would come and go? After examining you, your doctor says that you need to be on an antacid medication for acid reflux disease, and that some changes in your diet should be made. A month later, after faithfully taking the medication for reflux, your pain has continued, with little to no relief. You return to the doctor who decides to increase your medication dosage and add another medication, reminding you to avoid certain foods. Another month and one-half goes by and the pain is becoming unbearable. You return again to the doctor, who recommends you see a gastrointestinal specialist. The specialist decides to

do an endoscopy where she can use a tiny camera to view the lining of your stomach and upper GI tract by inserting a small tube down into your throat. When you wake up from the procedure, the specialist tells you the real problem: you have Stage Four stomach cancer.

How do you feel about your doctor who kept managing your symptoms, but didn't go after the disease ... until it was perhaps too late? Angry? Misled? Of course, many doctors are competent and want to see the patient healed and well. But assumptions, preconceptions and pressures can lead to misguided decisions—and this is true of any arena of life where critical thinking is needed. For too long, the Church has been managing symptoms and missing the cure. We've made the behavioral externals (even good ones) the point, attempting to manage them in order to get people to act like Christians. In the process, the heart has been missed, and the heart is what Jesus is after: "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." (I Sam. 16:7)

## **Rescue the heart**

Albert Einstein said in 1948 that "The true problem lies in the hearts and thoughts of men. It is not a physical but an ethical one ... What terrifies us is not the explosive force of the atomic bomb, but the power of the wickedness of the human heart."<sup>5</sup> – Albert Einstein, 1948. Any honest person knows the malignant self-absorption they are capable of apart from God's transforming intervention. Who of us has loved equally and unselfishly all who are within our reach? Have we unreservedly given the same quality of love for our enemies that we do for those we really like? Who has loved God with the continuous affection of a whole heart? Do we wake up trusting God, or

distracted with the cares of the unfolding day? Can we say as Jesus did, that “I only do what I see my Father doing” or do we set our day’s agenda on our own terms? The possibility of even Christians living an essentially God-less life, or day, or week cannot be denied; and godlessness or goodness finds its roots in the interior recesses of human personality—within the heart itself. Evil is not something “out there.” It is something within ... unless Christ’s work goes straight to the heart.

Therefore, Christ’s work, of necessity, must deal with the heart, the “inside of the cup.” As Dallas Willard rightly states: “If we would walk with him, we must walk with him at that interior level [the level of the heart]... He saves us by realistic restoration of our heart to God and then by dwelling there with his Father through the distinctively divine Spirit. The heart thus renovated and inhabited is the only real hope of humanity on earth.”<sup>6</sup> Notice that salvation is a rescuing of the heart, for when you rescue the heart you rescue the person.

## Writing on the heart

Each follower of Jesus is a poem—a living poem or letter written by God—says the apostle Paul: “... You are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of *human hearts*.” So where does the Author and Completer of our faith do his writing? Isn’t it upon tablets of the heart? “I will put my law in their minds and write it *on their hearts*,” God says through the prophet Jeremiah. There is something so central about the heart in God’s plan of salvation, that Christ makes it a fundamental location of our union with him, so that “Christ may  *dwell in your hearts* through faith.” It is

where God has put the Spirit of his Son: "...God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts..." (Gal. 4:6) The redeemed heart is where God has made himself available. In fact, it is where we meet with him when we pray. As Theophan the Recluse said, "Find a place *in your heart* and speak there with the Lord. It is the Lord's reception room."<sup>7</sup>

## What is meant by the "heart?"

Contrary to popular culture's view, the heart is *not* the emotional or feeling side of us. Popular culture tends to think of the heart as the sentimental part of us. (Think of *Hallmark* cards.) Biblically speaking, our feelings can *express* what is going on in our hearts, but the heart is much more than feelings. According to the Scriptures, the heart or human spirit is the core of our personality—the true and deepest self. It is also where reason, understanding, and conscience are located<sup>8</sup>. We often think that we only perceive with our minds, yet we can "see" with our hearts. In fact, the heart is the hub that governs all other parts of the self—including the mind, thoughts, feelings, the body and the soul. The function of the heart is "to organize our life as a whole..." says Willard. This description of the self is very much a "systems" way of thinking about life, much like the multiple systems of the human body that cannot function without a healthy heart that effectively pumps blood throughout. An airplane cannot fly in a storm without a properly-functioning navigational system, or it will crash. The heart or human spirit is the navigational system for the rest of the human personality: If it goes wrong, then everything else does as well.

Willard goes on to say that the *redeemed* heart organizes our life around God himself.<sup>9</sup> The unredeemed heart would organize a person's