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The Place of the Mind in New Testament Christianity

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This article is based on a talk given at an Annual Meeting of the Friends of Tyndale House a few years ago by the Rev. John B. Taylor, Vice-Principal of Oak Hill College. In view of its contemporary relevance we are grateful for the opportunity to reproduce it here.

Of the Greek words translated 'mind' or 'understanding' in the New Testament the most common is the simple word *nous*, which occurs twenty-four times and is translated in the AV by 'understanding' seven times, and by 'mind' seventeen times. Another word is *synesis* which occurs only seven times, once translated 'knowledge' and the remaining times 'understanding'. Then there is *dianoia*, used fourteen times and rendered variously 'mind' (nine times), 'understanding' (twice) and 'imagination' (once). Then the rarer word *noēma*, five of its six occurrences being in 2 Corinthians and the other in Philippians 4: 7: 'The peace of God, which passes all *nous*, will keep your hearts and *noēmata* in Christ Jesus.' Other words are *ennoia*, *phronēma* and *phronēsis*, but they occur infrequently.

The important terms are clearly the first three, *nous*, *synesis* and *dianoia*. Basically there is little or no difference between the meanings of these words. Their meanings are almost interchangeable. But as far as usage is concerned, it is to be noted that *nous* comes predominantly in the writings of St Paul. Apart from that it occurs only in Luke 24: 45, 'He opened their *nous* to understand the scriptures', and twice also in Revelation. Similarly *synesis* appears five times out of seven in Paul's writings, the non-Pauline references being Mark 12: 33, 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the *synesis*', and Luke 2: 47, where the people were astonished at the *synesis* and the answers of the twelve-year-old boy Jesus. The word *dianoia* has a better spread, coming in Matthew, Mark, Luke, Hebrews, 1 John, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, as well as in Paul's Epistles.

Paul's use of 'nous'

As used by Paul, the word *nous* is contrasted both with *pneuma*, spirit, and with *sarx*, flesh. Perhaps it is for this reason that credence is still given to the idea that man is a trichotomy consisting of mind, soul (or spirit) and flesh (or body). That, however, is not Paul's teaching, for to Paul man is a unity: he is *sōma*, he is body. Sometimes he is *psychē*, an individual, a personality. And yet there are two

sides to his nature — there is the *nous* side and there is the *sarx* side. These two aspects of man represent the avenues by which man's personality is invaded: the *nous* can be invaded by the *pneuma*, the Spirit of God; the power of evil enters via the *sarx*, the flesh. The result is that if your *nous* is invaded by the Spirit of God, your spirit-filled mind keeps your flesh under control and you are describable as a *pneumatikos*, a spiritual person. On the other hand, if the power of evil enters through your flesh, your *nous* itself becomes depraved and corrupted and you are describable as a *sarkikos* or *sarkinos*, fleshly person. So when in Romans 1: 28 God gave men over to a reprobate *nous*, it was because they had allowed evil to invade their fleshly lives.

That is the contrast between *nous* and *sarx*. There is another contrast that occurs in Paul, between *nous* and *pneuma*. But it occurs in a non-theological passage, and I draw attention to it only for the sake of completeness. In 1 Corinthians 14: 14f. Paul expresses his preference for singing and praying not only with the *pneuma* but also with the *nous*. 'For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind (*nous*) is unfruitful. What am I to do? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also.' Now that illustrates the contrast between the two; but it does not affect the *nous-sarx* analysis that has been suggested above. For what Paul is saying is that it is not good enough simply to be carried away by the divine impulse of the Spirit of God. When the *pneuma* of God invades the *nous*, the *nous* has to exercise some control over it, so that the apostle's intelligence and understanding co-operate with the Spirit of God within him to restrain him from emotional or spiritual excess.

The unredeemed mind

Paul makes it clear that the flesh, unrestrained by the Spirit, indulges in all kinds of excess and dissoluteness (cf. Rom. 1: 18-32). In this unpleasant description of the person who is separated from God and is given up by God to a reprobate *nous*, notice the intellectual terms that are to be found: 'Even as they did not like to retain God in their *knowledge*, God gave them over to a reprobate *mind*, to do those things which are not convenient . . . Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which do commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them (verses 28, 32, AV).

Basic to this is the idea that man is unwilling to know God. It is a rejection, an intellectual rejection of God's truth, and because of that God abandons man's intellect and allows it to lead him into all kinds of moral degradation. So we find that again and again Paul writes of the unredeemed mind as a mind that is puffed up (Col. 2: 18), defiled (Tit. 1: 15), corrupt (1 Tim. 6: 5; 2 Tim. 3: 8), darkened (Eph. 4: 18), alienated (Col. 1: 21) and blinded (2 Cor. 3: 14; 4: 4). Unbelief in a person is a kind of intellectual paralysis that works itself out in moral degeneration.

If that is the state of the unredeemed mind, we may be forced to wonder if there is any place in evangelism for reason and for the intellectual presentation of the gospel. Now we believe that it is supremely the work of the Holy Spirit to release and to heal mental and spiritual 'paralytics', and so did Paul; but that does not mean that human efforts are not acceptable as well. Paul's practice strongly argues for using logical argument and persuasion in preaching to the lost. Evangelism is more than merely precipitating a crisis and exhorting people to put their trust in Jesus. Evangelism presupposes Christian teaching and it includes the opening of the mind to the acceptance of three propositions: the reasonableness of Christianity, the nature of Christ as Saviour and God, and the necessity for some kind of salvation. All that entails mental activity. We are not therefore wasting our time when we indulge in Christian apologetics, explaining to people the reasonableness of the faith. In many cases a great deal of intellectual preparation has to be done before finally the evangelistic message can be put over, which will clinch the matter in personal commitment to Christ.

Recently there has been a measure of conflict between evangelism and theology. Some have reacted against the old idea of the evangelist (if he ever existed) who came along like a whirlwind and swept people into decisions for Christ, and they have said that we are not to do that, we are just to present the truth. Present the truth, they say, expound the Scriptures, and leave it to the Holy Spirit to do the rest. Perhaps now we are approaching a synthesis between these two extremes. The evangelism of yesterday could be based upon the knowledge of the Scriptures which people learned at their mother's knee. Today when knowledge of the Bible is at a low ebb, that knowledge must first be imparted. Those who occupy Scripture teaching posts in school have immense responsibilities here. Their job is not evangelism; it is the imparting of information, showing children that Christianity is reasonable, that the way of salvation is a necessity for people who are cut off from God, in a word, that Christianity is not just a morality but a redemption. Later on the evangelist can come and, because the mind has been soundly conditioned to the truth, he can put in the sickle and reap the harvest.

The mind in conversion

Again I want to refer to a passage, Ephesians 4: 17-24, and ask you to note the intellectual phrases that are to be found. 'Now this I affirm and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their *minds*; they are darkened in their *understanding*, alienated from the life of God because of the *ignorance* that is in them, due to their hardness of heart; they have become callous and have given themselves up to licentiousness, greedy to practise every kind of uncleanness. You did not so *learn* Christ! — assuming that you have heard about him and were *taught* in him, as the truth is in Jesus.' Now what is that but an intellectual description of conversion? Far different from a common evangelical approach which deals with it almost exclusively as a matter of the emotions or will.

The reason that we have understated the place of the intellect in the preaching of the gospel, in the crisis of conversion, and also in Christian discipleship is, I think, because there have been two common fallacies among evangelicals. One is that Christianity is a religion of the heart. But what is the heart? The centre of the emotions? Perhaps it is in English usage, but not so in New Testament thought; nor is it the will prompted and driven by the emotions. Both the Hebrew and the Greek words for heart, *lēbh* and *kardia*, are words which refer to the centre of the faculty of thinking as well as of feeling; and when we love the Lord our God with all our heart it means in an intelligent, thoughtful way and not just emotionally.

The other fallacy is connected with the idea of Christianity as a religion of revelation. Rightly understood, that of course is true. But if revelation is associated in our minds with blinding flashes that come in the night, it is certainly far from true. There was a very great deal of mental conditioning done by the Holy Spirit in Saul of Tarsus before the actual blinding flash came, not least being the sight of the martyred Stephen. No, when we say that Christianity is a religion of revelation, we are saying that it is a religion that has been revealed to mankind in the great acts of God in history as recorded for us in the Bible. It is a revelation in history, it is a revelation in the Bible, recording and interpreting history, and it is a revelation that is being made by God day by day through His disciples who represent the truths of the Bible. Revelation is just as effective through preachers today who preach the Word of God as it was through an Amos who presented to the hearers of his day the living Word of God. And Amos preached to men's minds, as did the other Old Testament prophets. Paul too preached to men's minds, and it is no contradiction to our belief in the revelatory character of our religion that we preach to men's minds as well. We need to remember that it is our task to persuade men to be reconciled to God.

The mind in Christian discipleship

The classic passage on consecration is Romans 12 : 1, 2. 'I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.' Consecration is not simply a matter of full surrender or of non-conformity to the standards of the world. It also involves being 'transformed by the renewal of your mind'; cf. Ephesians 4: 23, 'Be renewed in the spirit of your minds.' This emphasis is found also in 1 Peter 1: 13, on which A. M. Stibbs comments, 'We must begin to act as those who mean business. Note that it is in the realm of the *mind* that this serious new activity is demanded. Conversion to Christ and regeneration by the Spirit are meant to be accompanied by mental awakening, by a new exercise of powers of understanding now divinely released and renewed' (Tyndale New Testament Commentary, *ad loc.*). If a person who is brought to a knowledge of Jesus Christ does not find that his mind has new powers stimulating it because of his new-found obedience to Christ, then his conversion has not affected his full personality and to that extent he is still unconsecrated. There must be many Christian people who were converted long years ago, whose minds have never yet been dedicated to the service of God; they have never given their intellects over to hard thinking, either to understand their faith or to grapple with the Scriptures that God has given to them. They are therefore still 'babes in Christ'.

Now those of us who are engaged in any kind of pastoral ministry have three important responsibilities. The first is altogether too obvious, but let it be stated. *We must develop our own intellectual understanding of God's truth.* To fail to read, to study, to dig deep, to wrestle with theological problems is a denial of God's intention for us as His redeemed people and represents an incomplete obedience on our part to His will. All too many evangelical Christians are giants in fervour and enthusiasm, but intellectual pygmies — and that is not quite the emphasis of Paul in 1 Corinthians 14: 20!

Secondly, *we need to re-examine the thought-content of our sermons.* They must be more than orthodox, scriptural statements of the basic truths of Christianity: they must influence the minds of the hearers, opening them up, persuading, convincing, stimulating. How often do our hearers go away *thoughtful*? The preachers I admire are those who can express profound thought in simple language so that I think differently as a result of hearing them preach.

Finally, *we must encourage young Christians to 'come out' intellectually.* This is mainly the role of the local pastor. He is not to be a one-man evangelistic outreach in the parish, nor is he just a trainer of the congregation in evangelism (though that side of his work is very important). Essentially, he has to help the people of God towards fuller maturity in Christ and this, as I hope we have seen, involves him in leading them to understand more fully what Christianity is and what God wants of them in today's world. It is no easy task.
