

IS THERE A FUTURE FOR GOD'S LOVE?
AN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

Copyright © 2012 by Abingdon Press

All rights reserved.

No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, except as may be expressly permitted by the 1976 Copyright Act or in writing from the publisher. Requests for permission can be addressed to Permissions, The United Methodist Publishing House, P.O. Box 801, 201 Eighth Avenue South, Nashville, TN 37202-0801, or e-mailed to permissions@unpublishing.org.

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been requested.

ISBN 978-0-687-66033-9

All scripture quotations unless noted otherwise are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

*To my parents,
Henry and Mary Knight*

12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21—10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

.....
Chapter Five
.....

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE HEART

What does it mean to say we have a new heart or are living a new life? Evangelicals speak the language of conversion, new birth, and regeneration to denote an inward transformation of the heart by God that decisively changes how we live. But to say *that* it happens is not the same as saying *what* happens or *how* it happens, much less what difference it makes. Although others have certainly addressed these matters, sometimes in an especially comprehensive fashion,¹ I want to focus on three critical aspects of the transformation of the heart. First, what constitutes a changed heart and makes it distinctly Christian? Second,

how does such a conversion occur? And third, what difference does it make for how we live out the new life we have received? Foundational to these goals is the recovery of the language of the affections.

The Recovery of the Affections

Jonathan Edwards, writing during the eighteenth-century awakening that gave birth to evangelicalism, argued that "true religion, in great part, consists in holy affections."² John Wesley, who abridged and published Edwards's *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* in England, made a similar claim: "True religion, the very essence of it, is nothing short of holy tempers."³

In Wesley's theology, "affections" and "tempers" are related terms; some would argue they are synonyms.⁴ For our purposes it is enough to note that both Edwards and Wesley used such terms to describe the content of a heart transformed by God and of lives growing in sanctification. If not equivalent to the Pauline term "fruit of the Spirit," affections and tempers certainly include those aspects of Christian character that are the most central, including faith, hope, and love.

In Edwards and Wesley, affections and tempers are identical to the disposition or inclination of the will. Thus to change our affections is to change our wills. For the Calvinist Edwards, the bondage of our will to sin is bro-

ken by the new birth, in which the Holy Spirit creates in us holy affections. For the Arminian Wesley, the Holy Spirit has already been at work preventively, graciously restoring our liberty such that we can resist the inclination of our will. Nonetheless, he agrees that the power of sin over our will is broken with the new birth through the Holy Spirit giving us holy tempers. The new birth, then, is the inception of new dispositions in the heart, which then grow and strengthen through sanctification.

This understanding of affections or tempers was effectively lost in nineteenth-century Calvinism and Wesleyanism. What replaced it was an anthropology derived from Enlightenment philosophy that envisions the will as caught between a conflict between reason and emotions. Rationalists thought our higher capacity of reason should control the will over our lower, sinful emotions. Romanists believed our more natural emotional nature should direct the will rather than a somewhat artificial rationality. American evangelicals tended toward the rationalist view, but advocates of both had lost the more holistic anthropology of Edwards and Wesley.

Two developments in the second half of the twentieth century laid the groundwork for a recovery of the affections and tempers in contemporary theology. The first was the recovery of virtue or character ethics, initiated by Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* in 1981.⁵ A host of writers

began to develop this form of ethical reflection, including the prolific Stanley Hauerwas and the evangelical theologian Jonathan Wilson.⁶

Virtue ethics has an ancient lineage going back to Greek philosophy and patristic Christianity and was further developed by medieval theologians such as Thomas Aquinas. In contrast to more modern forms of ethics that ask what we should *do* (and thus focus on ethical dilemmas), virtue ethics asks what sort of person we should *be* (and how we can attain that character). Virtues are those habitual inclinations that both enable and predispose us to act in certain ways. If we are honest and compassionate, then we will tend to act in an honest and compassionate manner.

We acquire and develop virtues through practicing them within a particular community. The community is itself shaped by an overarching story or narrative that enables the community to identify the ethical common good as well as the virtues needed to move toward it. For Christians, the story of God as revealed in history and Scripture identifies what is good and the virtues necessary to live our lives accordingly. The virtues are acquired and strengthened through Christian practices or disciplines, such as worship, a devotional life, communal interaction, and service to others.

Along with the resurgence of interest in virtue ethics,

a second development in the 1980s was foundational for the contemporary recovery of affections and tempers. This was the new focus on emotions in moral philosophy, most notably by Robert C. Solomon, Martha C. Nussbaum, and Robert C. Roberts.⁷ Their work interacts with a wider discussion on the nature of emotion involving philosophers, historians, psychologists, biologists, anthropologists, and sociologists. In his book *The Passions*, first published in 1976, Solomon argues against the reason-versus-passions myth,⁸ instead proposing that "the emotions are themselves rational (and therefore sometimes irrational too), ... ways of seeing and engaging in the world."⁹ Both he and Nussbaum understand emotions to be judgments—that is, they are forms of evaluation or appraisal of, or assent to, how the world seems to us. For Roberts most emotions are better described as "concern-based construals," ways of seeing and experiencing the world "imbued, flavored, colored, drenched, suffused, laden, informed, or permeated with concern."¹⁰ Of course, judgments or construals can be inexact or incorrect but the rationality of emotions is not negated by that fact.

It is the confluence of virtues ethics and the understanding of emotions as judgments or construals that has made the recovery of the language of affections and tempers so persuasive and appealing. Affections (to use that term to encompass as well the meaning of tempers for

Wesley) are like emotions as described by the moral philosophers and virtues as described by the ethicists. Yet they have the additional advantage of making clear their inception and development through transforming experiences with God. Two theologians in particular have provided sustained accounts of something akin to the affections.

Robert C. Roberts, as we have seen, understands most emotions to be concern-based construals. By "construal" he means an "interpretative perception," a way of understanding our world or situation in it. As interpretations, "emotions can be right or wrong about the situation." Because they are concern-based they also involve our being affected in some way by the construal—that is, the situation as we construe it is related to something we care about. The emotion—be it fear, compassion, hope, or the like—is the result of the construal related to the concern. Differing construals or differing concerns produce different emotions.¹¹ Hence Roberts defines a concern as an "emotion-disposition"—that is, the disposition to have certain emotions depending on how we construe a situation.¹²

In mature persons some concerns are orienting in that they "integrate and focus the personality and give a person 'character.'" Roberts calls this orienting concern a "passion." Here Roberts draws on one of the several meanings of passion, namely "a person's long-term, *characteristic* interests, concerns, and preoccupations."¹³ Thus he is not

thinking of passion as intensity of feeling but as having a passion for something. Christians have a passion for the gospel and the kingdom of God.¹⁴

What makes the Christian life distinct is that Christian concepts and narratives shape it. "Each of the Christian emotions is a construal of the subject's situation"—both in the immediate and larger context—in terms of the gospel and the kingdom of God, and "incorporate elements of basic Christian doctrine."¹⁵ Thus "Christian joy is joy in the Lord, gratitude is gratitude to God for his grace in Jesus Christ... and so forth."¹⁶ A mature Christian is one whose heart has been shaped by Christian teachings and is thereby disposed to actions "characteristic of the kingdom of God."¹⁷

For Roberts, emotions are one category of virtues.¹⁸ As construals, emotions combine elements of passive receptivity and voluntary control. Sometimes they happen to us as we construe a situation, but often we can alter our emotions by acting as if we see things differently. To begin to worship and serve along with Christians could be the doorway to looking at the world in Christian terms and eventually coming to believe what Christians believe.¹⁹

Among the many valuable insights that can be derived from Roberts's account is one directly related to the issue raised in chapter 2: if conversion is transformational, why do Christians so converted remain oblivious to

systemic racism or uncritically immersed in consumerism? We will later argue, using Robert's terms, that while they may have received and are growing in Christian emotion-dispositions, they are at the same time misconstruing their more immediate context. They are thus disposed to Christian emotions but actually lack them in certain instances because of those errors of construal.

The second theologian to provide a contemporary account of the affections is Don E. Saliers. Because the word *emotion* is loosely used to cover a wide range of phenomena such as feelings and moods, Saliers reclaims the term *affection* to designate "a basic attunement which lies at the heart of a person's way of being and acting."²⁰ Affections "are necessarily tied to how we describe and assess the world"; so, for example, to have compassion for human suffering is to see the world differently from someone who does not have that compassion.²¹

Christian affections are shaped over time by the narratives, teaching, and practice of the Christian faith, which are the means through which we come to know God and the world. Thus, "the language of prayer... evokes and educates us in certain specific emotions by ascribing to God what is believed about God, in the vocative mode."²² Thus worship and prayer not only express emotion but critique it as well.

The affections are not only expressions of the Chris-

tian life but also learned capacities that dwell in the heart. Affections are more who we *are* than what we *feel*; they are core aspects of our character.²³ Affections, then, may give rise to feelings but are not themselves feelings. They are dispositions to act and feel, the "motives and wellsprings of desire and action" in the heart.²⁴

Saliers's account in many ways overlaps that of Robert's. He too offers important clues to the possibilities and limits of conversion. The nature of an affection is fundamentally what it is because of its object. To love God, then, is given content through what we believe about God and how we have experienced God. Impoverished practices of worship, prayer, community, and service limit our belief and experience and thereby can make conversion transformative yet inadequate. Although we can always grow in the knowledge and love of God, our growth is in part dependent on participation in a community whose worship and service are as deep and rich as the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Nature of the Affections

Having briefly discussed the recovery of the language of affections (or emotion-dispositions) as most centrally constituting the heart, I now want to provide a more analytical sketch of their central characteristics, highlighting especially what it means for an affection to be "Christian."

We can begin by noting that affections are intrinsically *relational*—that is, they are always directed toward an object. We do not, for example, simply “love”; we always love someone or something. Christians love God as revealed in Jesus Christ, and their neighbor as themselves.

Christian affections are relational in another sense as well. They are evoked and nurtured in response to God's actions and promises in Christ, through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Thus relationship here is not simply being directed toward an object, for this Object is a living, active Subject whom we came to know and experience. This is a fundamentally transforming relationship.

There are three important implications of the relationality of the affections. First, although we *have* affections as traits of Christian character, we cannot possess them apart from God. They are who we are and give us a Christian identity only insofar as we are in an ongoing relationship with God. This means our having affections provides no grounds for claiming inherent righteousness apart from God: salvation remains “by grace alone.” As John Wesley said, “Christ does not give life to the soul separate from, but in and with himself.”²⁵

This means, second, that our character is itself constituted by relationship. In contrast to Enlightenment modernity's assumption that each person is a self-subsisting,

autonomous individual, the logic of the affections is in harmony with the postmodern observation that persons are actually the product of the complex web of relationships within which they live. This is not deterministic, as persons have agency and act on their relational environment as well as being shaped by it. Christian affections govern the lives of those persons who have experienced the transforming love of God in Christ and have had their lives reordered accordingly.

A third implication of the relationality of the affections is that it provides a way of addressing a conundrum in Wesleyan holiness theology—that is, whether the change that occurs in sanctification is substantive or relational. If one assumes an anthropology of autonomous individualism, then to understand sanctification as relational is inherently weak; for if relationships are essentially external to the self, it would leave the self unchanged. To many in the Wesleyan holiness tradition this sounds Calvinistic, changing outward behavior while accepting that sin will always rule the heart. But if who we are is constituted by our relationships, then to change the relationship *is* to change the self. A relationship with God will change us at the very core of our being. This was something understood not only by Wesley but also by the very Calvinist Edwards as well.

Affections, then, are not simply relational; they are also *shaped by their object*. The object of the affection

determines the nature of the affection. For example, to love God as revealed in Jesus Christ is manifested through a range of attitudes and actions such as thanksgiving, praise, obedience, and service. Love for our neighbor is expressed through such things as compassion, hospitality, and self-giving. An unholy affection such as love for money would be manifested by greed, self-centeredness, manipulation of others, and the like. Notice that while the word *love* is used in each of these three examples, what it means concretely to love varies according to its object. Thus the object of an affection leads to distinctive attitudes, values, actions, and ways of relating to others and to creation. Affections in the heart produce corresponding ways of living.

The concreteness of this shaping of affections by their object should be underscored. We have already seen the particularity of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Because the affections are in response to and shaped by that revelation, the affections reflect the particularity of God. That means that to love God is not an expression of some universal human characteristic but is constituted by what it means to love *this* God, who was incarnate in Jesus Christ, living and teaching and then dying out of love for us on a cross. Likewise, to love one's neighbor is not to have some generalized good feeling for others but to have the same love for our neighbor that God has for us in Christ and to identify our neighbor in the same way that Christ

did. Because Jesus Christ is alive and coming again to fully transform creation, to have and to grow in these affections is to already live as members of the eschatological kingdom of God.

Because affections are directed toward objects, and in many cases are also responses to those objects, they are *dispositions* of the heart. When they take root in our lives, they become the inclinations and desires that make us the persons we are. Affections are emotions, but they are not "feelings" as that term is commonly understood. Feelings are transitory; they come and go. Affections are deeper, enduring traits of character that give us the capacity to have certain feelings. Thus to *be* a compassionate person is in part to have the capacity to *feel* compassion, and to be a hopeful person is what enables one to *have* hope. But as we have already seen, more concretely we are persons who are compassionate and hopeful with respect to certain objects (compassionate for our neighbor as defined by Jesus' teaching, hopeful in God's promises, and so on), and this means our feelings will be produced in situations that influence these particular objects of our affections (or in Roberts's language, our concerns).

As dispositions, affections not only incline us to have certain feelings, they also motivate us for action. If we are compassionate for our neighbor and encounter a situation that elicits our compassionate concern, we also have an

inclination to take some action on our neighbor's behalf. We may or may not actually take action—there may be countervailing circumstances that impede action, or a lack of opportunity, or no clear way to act beneficially—but whether we act or not, the motivation to do so is there because of the presence of the affection. And, because they motivate us, they also serve as *reasons* for our actions: the reason we went to the aid of the hurricane victims is because we had compassion for them.

This leads to one further characteristic of the affections: they are *ways of seeing*, lenses through which we perceive and interpret our world. A compassionate person sees and understands the world quite differently from someone who lacks compassion. Christian affections, then, should enable us to gradually see the world as God sees it and to love the world as God loves it. They should enable us to envision what it might mean for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven and thereby participate in God's mission in the world. This capacity to increasingly see with new eyes does not mean we easily and naturally come to see everything with clarity, however; as we have seen, deep-rooted cultural assumptions that are actually contrary to God's reign and love can seem normal and obvious. Nonetheless, Christian affections do provide an inclination and desire to see things as God sees them, as well as an openness to new perspectives.

One important implication of understanding the Christian life as essentially having affections is this distinction: the new life in Christ is first of all about the transformation of the heart by the Holy Spirit in response to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ; it is secondarily and as a result of this transformation our following or imitating Christ. In part this is simply saying that we love because God first loved us (see 1 John 4:19). That is, our experience of God's love in Christ transforms the heart, and it is the resulting affections that give us the dispositions and vision to then love as Jesus Christ loves. To emulate Christ's actions or obey Christ's teachings we must be the kind of people who would desire to do that, and we become that sort of people by responding to what God has done for us in Christ's death and resurrection. This distinction should not be overdrawn: it is also the case that awakened sinners and serious seekers, through trying to follow Christ, can come to experience a transformation of the heart. When they do, they will then find a new desire to follow Jesus springing up within them, one now grounded in knowing God's love and in gratitude for that love in Jesus Christ.

The Nature of Conversion

How, then, does this transformation of the heart occur? The short answer is through conversion, a gracious work of the Holy Spirit. Because it is an act of God, we should not be too quick to prescribe a specific set of events

or experiences that must occur, or insist on their arrangement in a fixed sequence. Gordon T. Smith, for example, has identified a cluster of seven elements in Scripture that together constitute a holistic conversion but wisely avoids placing them in a necessary sequence or insisting that they occur in a particular way.²⁶

Yet allowing for this diversity, conversion does have a logical shape. Conversion necessarily implies change—moving from one set of dispositions to another, one set of beliefs to another, one way of life to another, one governing passion to another. The call for conversion presupposes a need for conversion. Conversion is discontinuous; it argues that what is needed is not to go deeper into ourselves but to encounter the living God who is other than ourselves. What we need is not self-discovery but transformation. This does not mean that God is not already at work within us. It means that the God who works within us does so without losing God's transcendent otherness and awakens in us a holy discontent with the shape and direction of our lives. The effect of this prevenient grace is more convicting than affirming; it seeks to break us out of our illusion of self-sufficiency and enable us to recognize our real need.

Two theologians who are especially helpful in developing an understanding of conversion compatible with the approach I am taking here are George W. Stroup and

Cheryl Bridges Johns. Stroup centers his discussion on the role of narrative; Johns focuses hers on the affections.

Stroup describes conversion as precipitated by a "collision of narratives," when "the narrative identity of an individual collides with the narrative identity of the Christian community" and the revelation of God is thereby experienced.²⁷ This collision creates the possibility that the one who has encountered "the Christian community with its narratives, common life, and faith claims about reality" will then "begin the lengthy process of reinterpreting his or her personal history in light of the narratives and symbols that give the Christian community its identity."²⁸

This encounter can occur to persons who are outside the community or to those who have spent their lives in the church but have yet to appropriate the Christian faith and understand themselves in terms of it. Of course, some will reject the new narrative in favor of maintaining their preexisting identity and others may seek to modify their previous self-understanding in light of it. But those undergoing conversion "experience significant disorientation, a sense that the world as they know it is coming apart, that their understanding of reality no longer quite coheres with their experience."²⁹ It is at the point where narratives collide that faith can be born, "that identities, even worlds, may be altered and reality perceived in a radically new way."³⁰

In Stroup's account the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is encountered as a narrative that calls into question understandings of self and reality. To those who trust in Jesus Christ it promises and enables a new understanding of self and the world and consequently a new identity and way of life.

Cheryl Bridges Johns draws upon the earlier work of James E. Loder,³¹ modifying his five steps in terms of a more Wesleyan and pentecostal theology of transformation and the affections. The first step, *conflict*, "occurs in the dissonance between that which is and that which should be." The cause of our present condition is a brokenness of creation and humanity that "results in a distortion of reality and misguided affections." The dissonance reveals not only our condition but also our inability to repair the damage.³² It underscores our need for grace.

This begins the *scanning process* in which we actively seek solutions to the problem revealed by the conflict. At the same time, the Holy Spirit is at work, seeking to guide our search and draw us to God. Some may at this time begin participating in the life and practices of a Christian community. In John Wesley's language, this is akin to being awakened and under conviction, and having what he called "the faith of a servant." Johns notes that the most difficult part of this process "is the need to wait, to tarry awhile in the conflict." Although tempted to seek "prema-

ture closure," it is as we wait that we already begin to grow in grace and are drawn ever closer to God.³³

The culmination of this process is *interruptive insight by transforming Presence*. This heals the rupture in our understanding of the world, brings new meaning out of the conflict, and creatively gives new "birth to the imagination." This in turn brings *release and mundane ecstasy* in which the "beauty of holiness is revealed and our hearts are realigned toward the object of our affections. This movement is characterized by testimony and worship."³⁴ For Wesley, this is regeneration, or the new birth. In the final stage, "we experience the *verification* of God's transforming power."³⁵ This, Wesley would call "assurance," the witness of the Spirit. Johns says it enables us to newly see how God has been working in our lives as well as look forward to our growth in love for God and neighbor in the future.

What Johns contributes is to provide a description of conversion from the standpoint of the one undergoing it. Whereas it is rightly depicted as a process, it is a process initiated by a crisis, a conflict between *is* and *ought* that only God can resolve by a transformation of the understanding and the affections.

If we can now draw these two proposals together with what has been previously said about God's revelation and the affections of the heart, something like the following picture of conversion emerges. First, we live in a fallen

world, and our affections and beliefs reflect that world. We desire those things our culture has identified as good and understand our lives and the world in terms of its depiction of normality. This means our lives are governed by unholy affections, some on account of having inappropriate objects and others whose objects are appropriate in themselves but have taken on disproportionate significance, supplanting the centrality of God.

Second, the Holy Spirit is at work cultivating a sense of unease concerning our lives and our world. While in one sense the way things are seems both natural and normal, there is the countervailing sense that all is not as it should be. Things are not all right with the world, nor are we living as we should. We do not perhaps understand the fullness of the problem, but we do have a sense that there is a problem.

Third, this conflict between *is* and *ought* is clarified and intensified by an encounter with the message and promise of the gospel. Whether by proclamation, testimony, worship, devotional reading, or the like, there is now a diagnosis of our condition and the promise of its healing through Christ. It is here that our preexisting "narrative" and identity collides with the gospel narrative and we have to decide whether to hold on to the old or seek to embrace the new through trusting in what God has done in Jesus Christ. This trusting, or faith, is more something

we desire than a product of our will. Our faith itself is a gift we receive from God, perhaps, as Johns says, after much tarrying, but always with a receptive heart. It may come to us with perceptible suddenness or we may more gradually become aware that we have begun to trust in Christ. But either way, this trust in Christ begins a lifelong process of reinterpreting our lives and the world in terms of the gospel narrative, and living accordingly.³⁶

Conversion, then, is a work of God in the heart and the life. It brings with it new understanding, new relationships, and new affections. In terms of understanding, conversion brings, in the words of Helmut Thielicke, the "death of the old Cartesian self."³⁷ The gospel is not something we can incorporate into our preexisting understanding; it reconstructs our understanding of the world and of ourselves. Instead of interpreting things from our perspective, we begin to interpret things from God's perspective. The ground for this new understanding is the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which not only is the first fruits of the age to come but also precipitates a paradigm shift in which old ways of thinking must be rejected or reinterpreted in light of the new.³⁸

It brings new relationships through the atonement of Jesus Christ. Because we experience forgiveness of our sins through the cross of Christ (justification), our relationship with God is fundamentally altered. Rather than avoiding

God or simply dutifully seeking to obey God, our hearts and lives are now responding to God's gracious love in Christ. We are now free to love both God and neighbor—not to obtain acceptance but because we have been accepted.

This transformation of our relationship with God enables the transformation of the heart. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is now the object of our governing affection, and close by it are love for our neighbor and for God's creation. And as our affections are changed, so is our life. We begin living differently because we *are* different.

Conversion does not of course change everything at once. We grow in our affections and our understanding (sanctification) as we grow in the knowledge and love of God and of our neighbor and world. But conversion does lay a new foundation in the heart, awaken a new set of desires and motivations, and give life new meaning and direction.

P a r t I V

FREEDOM TO LOVE