

## **The Hidden Heart: Why We Still Sin When We Know So Much**

Dr. John H. Coe

Director, Institute for Spiritual Formation, Talbot School of Theology

© Copyright 2004 John H. Coe. All rights reserved.

Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."  
John Calvin

One of the great frustrations for pastor and parishioner alike is when the response to the Word of God in teaching or counseling is "I know those scriptures pastor, so what is wrong with me? Why do I still struggle with that same sin?" This is a significant situation and opportunity for the church, for it is both telling about *the complex nature of sin* in the Christian life and about *the complex process of transformation*. It is also telling about our training of pastors. Unpacking this situation reveals the following observations:

1. Most believers' sins of omission and commission are not conscious intentions of the will but are typically contrary to their better judgments and intentions, that is, they are in some sense against their will and what they know to be good.
2. Thus, most Christians do not seem to intend to sin but rather "leak," a descriptive term for a habitual response to certain situations stemming from deep characterological sins or vices of the hidden heart that to some degree enslave the heart and for which the believer both is responsible and feels regret.

I do not have time in this brief examination to thoroughly argue for these observations. Rather, I will build upon them in order to develop some of the groundwork or contours for a theory of the nature of sin in the life of the believer and the process of transforming the heart. I do not intend to argue for or provide a thoroughgoing account of these matters but merely hint at what might be a productive research project. If time permits, I look forward to my audience's comments and criticisms for future investigation. If my suggestions are correct, it will be significant for a pastor to come to grips with the fact that (a) most of his parishioners do not intend to sin but do so from a hidden heart and (b) that no amount of quick correcting of sinful, irrational beliefs will alter the course of these vice habits. This is also significant for theologians, for perhaps our seminary training has room for developing an even more robust hamartiology regarding the complex dynamics of the sins of the heart and pneumatology regarding the complex process of transformation that would be helpful to the church. From this vantage point, the spiritual formation movement, with all its excesses and goods, is perhaps providing the church an opportunity in the history of doctrine to address these issues in a more thoughtful and exhaustive manner.

The fact that believers sin against their better intentions is borne out by both experience and Scripture. Most believers that I am around do not wake up in the morning intending to sin but, rather, the opposite: they hope and pray that they live for God and sin less. This is their conscious daily intention. We work on our sins - we memorize verses not to worry, to love our spouses, to not exasperate our children - we pray about these things - we might even see a wise counselor about them. But once in

the door of our homes, out comes our worries over finances, our anger towards our spouse, and impatience with our children's folly. Whence cometh sin?

The ancient pagans in Plato and Aristotle were also struck with this phenomenon of how we often act against our best intentions, which they termed *ακρασία*, a want of power, lack of self control or incontinence (by medical extension, a kind of moral bladder-control problem!). According to Aristotle, there were three types of experience that were not dominated by conscious intentions of vice:

1. Incontinence: The situation in which a person in some sense knows the good, desires the good, chooses the good but fails to do the good.
2. Continence: The situation in which a person knows the good, desires the good, chooses the good and does the good but with no joy.
3. Virtue: The situation in which the person knows the good, desires the good, chooses the good and does the good with joy.

We all know the experience of wanting to pray more, to love more, to not worry, to not be impatient and then, against our best wishes, do the opposite or resist but with great difficulty. In this case, *joy* is the operative word and the sign of full virtue – where the person loves, truly desires and “gets off on” doing the good. As the ancient pagans reflected on this problem of why someone would act against their desires and beliefs, they reasoned that *there must be another set of deep beliefs and desires which are hidden from simple consciousness but are in some way implicit in the deep habituated dynamics of the human soul and are triggered by certain human circumstances*. These deep beliefs and desires, upon being cued, control the behavior of the person against their better surface, conscious beliefs and desires, typically resulting in grief and regret.

Is something of this phenomenon of *ακρασία* discussed by the Greek pagans reflected in Scripture? On the surface, this seem to be evident in the standard Reformed interpretation (e.g. Charles Hodge, John Murray etc.) of Romans 7 regarding the struggle of the mature believer in which the good that he wishes he does not do but practices the very evil that he does not wish (Rom. 7:19). This is also apparently evident in Paul's discussion in Galatians in which the flesh sets its desires against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh, for these are in opposition to one another so that the believer cannot do the things that he pleases (Gal. 5:17). Of course there is much controversy over these text as to the precise nature of this struggle and to whom it applies (see, e.g., Moo's excellent discussion of Romans 7: 14-25 as being Paul's “pre-Christian situation, as a Jew who reverences the Mosaic law but finds that the power of sin is too strong to enable him to comply with the demands of that law . . .” (Moo, *Romans*, NICC, 465).

However, I would argue that the problem of *ακρασία* is evident with either interpretation and, interestingly, could even be predicted given Moo's interpretation of Romans 7. According to Moo, the believer no longer belongs to the old age of flesh (sin and death) but of the new age or realm of the Spirit (life and righteousness), and yet despite this still continues to sin. Thus, perhaps we can best make sense of the believer's experience of *ακρασία* on Moo's interpretation given two facts:

1. that the *power of sin has been broken* in the believer's life by his participation in the new eschatological realm of Spirit in the New Covenant resulting in new, Godly intentions of the heart (Rom. 8:9, 6:6, Jer.31: 31), coupled with

2. that we still live in an unperfected state in which we must continuously “put off” and resist the sinful habits of the heart that remain and plague the believer as the residue of the pre-converted dynamics of the heart habituated in the weakness of human autonomy that are carried into the Christian experience and have not as yet been transformed as instruments of righteousness (Eph. 4:22ff., Col. 3:8, Rom. 6:12ff).

The reality of the power of sin being broken at the core of the believer’s spirit or heart by being a new creation in the Spirit accounts for the new *intention* of heart by the Spirit to obey God’s law or will from the heart (Jer. 31:31). However, we still sin and must *resist* the inclination to act against this new intention of the will by the Spirit – even though it may not be a surface conscious intention to disobey. This tendency or inclination of the heart still resides within the self as the pre-converted *residue* of the old domination of σαρξ or the “old man” (τον παλαιον ανθρωπον, Eph. 4:22). Although the believer enjoys being in a new sphere of existence in Christ and is slowly being made new in reality into the image of Christ by the Spirit, the old residue of the Fall is still at work in the *recesses* of the heart and, as such, is often hidden from the believer’s more conscious renewed intentions by the Spirit. *Interestingly, this new inclination of heart by the Spirit may even put sin more at a distance from conscious awareness, which makes it feel unnatural to uncover. That is, the emphasis on the believer’s consciousness is to be aware of the good or God’s will and pursue it and not necessarily focus on the bad.* This is particularly evident in the new convert’s sometimes exuberant though mistaken, if not absurd, belief that his long-time sins of the past have been entirely rooted out at conversion. (Just ask his wife on that question!)

All of this is even more *complicated* by the fact that part of the pre-converted sinful strategies of dealing with sin were, in fact, *to not be aware of sin*, to deceive others and even oneself about the true state of one’s heart. As we will discuss, the sinful strategies of deception and self-deception of the heart evident from the first sin and inherent in original sin come right into the Christian life as a habit that obfuscates what is really driving sin from the deep. This is born out by the fact that most believers know little of what really drives their sin, only the regret that they do sin.

The account of the Fall in Genesis 3 helps illustrate this fact that the human strategy of the corrupted nature in original sin is to obfuscate the truth of one’s evil deeds. Though the couple was naked and unashamed, with the first sin and the feeling of uncomfortable exposure, their inclination of nature was to seek to not be seen by covering themselves (Gen. 3:7). Furthermore, their first inclination of their fallen nature in response to God was to hide and blame due to the fear of His wrath in light of their guilt. In both cases, the human strategy in relation to self-awareness of sin and truth about the self is to conceal this from the self and others. From the very beginning, we find a penchant in distorted human nature towards deception and, particularly, self-deception. Sin and guilt are known but *not wanted to be known in present experience* and are, thus, repressed, becoming part of the deep or “hidden heart.”

This attempt to obfuscate or make unclear the truth of oneself to the self and others comes into the Christian experience in two ways. First, sometimes the believer does not want to know what is driving his heart and will *consciously* seek to deceive

himself and others from seeing the sin beneath. Second, even in those cases where the intention of the will is good as motivated by his renewed nature, *the pre-converted habit of obfuscation of motives of sin* carries on habitually or unconsciously and hinders the believer from having any inclination to look at the motives of sin beneath – and this is not due to any conscious sinister intention. Rather, the believer is intent on the good and, perhaps especially in his early stages of growth, content to ponder more his good intentions and *look at his sin only when he is forced to when it leaks out into his behavior*. This is born out by the fact that many believers do not know what really drives their sin; they know only the regret that results when they do sin. That is why they come to the pastor to help them figure out what is wrong when they act against their better intentions and do not know what to do about this. In their case, they do not know what is going on in their heart. It is the result of experience and even maturity to begin to wonder at what is going on below the surface and thoughtfully explore the hidden motives of the heart.

Of all the psychological terms used for the person in the Bible, perhaps the concept of the “heart” is most central for understanding the person.<sup>1</sup> The heart is used for the core of human personality and is the nexus of human will, affect and intellect (Prov. 27:19, 23:7-8). The heart is what really drives a person and dictates the direction of his life (Pr. 4:23, Ecc. 10:2). With the heart we think, feel, doubt, believe, remember and act. The goal is to love God with the whole heart (Mk. 12:29), to trust in God with all the heart (Pr. 3:5), to love from a pure heart (I Tim. 1:5). In particular, the man of God is to have a clean heart (Ps. 51:6) and a heart of integrity, speaking truth from the heart (Ps. 15:1-2). However, fallen human nature distorts the functions of the heart.

The fallen human heart can become hidden to itself, able to so deceive itself that it is no longer fathomable or transparent to itself. It becomes proud (Pr. 16:5) and fat or unresponsive to the Word (Ps. 119:70). As such, the heart can harden itself to God (Zech. 7:12) and become incurably deceived and deceiving (Jer. 17:9-10). This can include both the simple self-deception of repressing painful experiences into the hidden heart as well as the more sinister self-deception of deep motives of sin and hiding from guilt and shame. In the case of the former, we repress those things we know that we no longer want to be aware of continuously (“Even in laughter the heart may be in pain, And the end of joy may be grief. Pr. 14:13). In this case, the development of various levels in the heart is the result of an ability to repress parts of the unwanted memories into the recesses of the heart.

However, more serious is the conscious intention since the Fall to not want to experience the truth of one’s own sinfulness and guilt. Though God designed the heart to have a certain integrity in being transparent in truth, He also gave it the unusual capability in the Fall to be able to deceive itself, to become opaque to know the truth of its own state and other realities that are painful and too revealing. The extent of the self-deception can be so extreme, according to Jeremiah, so that there is part of it that

---

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to years of team-teaching with Dr. Robert Saucy a course on “Theology of Human Nature” in which we have together discussed the nature of the heart and, particularly, the hidden heart. I am indebted to his biblical insight on these matters.

cannot even be known by the self, only by God (Jer. 17:9-10). Even the believer does not always know what is going on in the deep and knows that the Lord can see into the deep motives better than himself (Pr. 16:2). Similarly, the psalmist asks God to “Examine me, O Lord, and try me, test my mind and my heart,” (Ps. 26:3), to search and try the heart (Ps. 139:23-24). This resulting “hidden heart” becomes the repository of a host of scattered false beliefs and sinful desires which become part of the memory and character of a person of which one may be more or less aware.

Though the pre-converted conscious sins of the heart may no longer be reflected in the conscious beliefs and desire of the believer, nevertheless, these sins of the heart with their deep beliefs and desires *remain implicit in the very fabric of the dynamics of the habituated vices of the heart*. This is in spite of the presence of true beliefs and good desires that have developed since conversion and are to the contrary. These deep “fleshy” beliefs and desires, if they are strong enough in habits, can continue to drive the person against their will. For example, I may believe consciously that I am not to worry over finances because God is good and cares for me. Nevertheless, worry “leaks” out as the result of irrational deep beliefs, for instance, that no one really cares about my problems, that God is not really good so that I must take life into my own hand and deal with my problems on my own. This may be coupled with sinful desires that I must have life on my terms, that I should have no troubles or hardships. These are not my conscious desires or beliefs. And no quick rational correction of these beliefs will suffice to change the deep beliefs and desires of the heart. Instead, they lie buried, implicit in the flesh-residue habits of the heart that remain hidden from superficial awareness. And this scenario could be multiplied over again with each vice of the heart. Although this raises questions about the believer’s role in unearthing or “putting off” these deep beliefs with the Lord for the sake of growth, ultimately, He alone at the judgment will “bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motive of men’s hearts” (I Cor. 4:5).

Given this discussion of the sins of the believer’s hidden heart, I conclude with a laundry list of implications and hints that might provide some of the contours for a theory of sin and the process of growth. These require full analysis and argument for another occasion. I offer them for your comment and assistance to determine their value and truth content in understanding the process of spiritual formation.

1. Most believers do not intend to sin; rather, they “leak” or respond to situations out of the more or less strength of the vice habits of the heart that seek to enslave the heart and behavior.
2. These sins or vices of the heart are reflected in the Bible’s view of the “hidden heart” in which deep sinful beliefs and desires are embedded within the habituated vice dynamics of the heart-body connection which are capable of controlling the believer’s behavior to act against their intentions.
3. These sins of the heart and their corresponding deep beliefs and desires in the hidden heart have an etiology most fundamentally in original sin (the “flesh” residue in the life of the believer) that provides the deep structure of these sins

which, subsequently, receive their particular directionality in our relational histories, particularly in childhood.

4. These vice habits of heart do not entirely enslave the believer insofar as the Spirit's empowering the heart by love and truth results in new second-order desires on the part of the believer to love God more and not be dominated by sin despite the fact that he still act against these better intentions.
5. Thus, the believer "leaks" in the sense that these sins are no longer under his total control insofar as these deep desires and beliefs of the heart lie hidden and undisturbed in the heart, ready to control the believer against their intentions resulting in regret.
6. This leaking of sins of the heart does not excuse the believer from responsibility, for one is as responsible for his character as much as intended actions, despite the complex etiology of how character is derived (cf. the ancient Greek-Medieval-Reformed concept of the "voluntary").
7. No amount of (a) surface correcting of deep sinful beliefs (or overlaying the beliefs by the truth alone), (b) behavioral change or (c) human love will resolve the deep beliefs and desire behind the sins of the heart (II Cor. 3:4ff). These are fueled by a sinful attachment of the self in autonomy to meet some perceived need. Thus, Aristotle, Freud and all the Pagan moralists cannot experience the radical change of heart spoken of in the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31, Ez. 36:25ff.).
8. Self awareness of one's sin through the means of the Word, truth, prayer, or counseling, and the panoply of the spiritual disciplines is a required beginning for the transformation of the heart and is part of what it is to "put off the old man" but is insufficient on its own for salvation or sanctification.
9. The process of conversion and transformation of the sins of the heart is complex and ultimately requires a power strong enough to penetrate into the heart and resolve the self's fleshy deep attachment to those sins (deep beliefs and desires) to meet some perceived need. This power can mirrored by the love of the believer in the truth but ultimately can only be met in the ministry of the Holy Spirit loving and speaking His Word into the heart, for this alone is capable of convincing the self that its needs are met in love. This is both for conversion and ongoing transformation of the hidden heart.
10. Thus, the process of spiritual formation involves the panoply of the spiritual disciplines (such as meditation on the Word, prayer, obedience, receiving counsel etc.) as legitimate means of grace, (a) insufficient on their own but (b) capable of opening the heart to (c) the ministry of the Spirit in truth, who alone is the agent of change in the heart of the believer (I Pet. 1:2, I Thess. 2:13, Gal. 5:22ff., cf. also I Thess. 5:23, Heb. 9:20ff.).