

Three Levels of Cognizance – Emotional, Intellectual, Spiritual

Emotions can be stirred and produce short-term reactions where we can get excited and do things such as applauding a great artistic performance, cheering for an athletic team, or even participating in the actions of a mob. There may be some physical impacts associated with such emotional “events” such as adrenalin increases which might affect heart rate, blood pressure, and rapid breathing.

Intellectual responses are associated with a shift into a “logic mode” in which we factor in prior information and considerations of such questions as

“why are we doing this?” or

“what will be the likely outcome of our actions?” or

“what am I supposed to do in such situations?”

This level of cognition will set decisive action responses and can even be influential in the habits we acquire. Emerging from the “thinking” mode are such things as cultural norms, etiquette practices, healthy living and healthy eating choices, career paths, considerations of whether certain actions help or hinder reaching objectives, etc.

Spiritual cognizance is much more difficult to understand but it is the foundation or background upon which our lives are built. It forms the corner stone as well as the capstone for our lives. Some people maintain that this is simply our thoughts; however, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament makes a clear distinction between the “thoughts and intents of the heart.” We see this in a metaphor related to the “word of God” (logos) as being a sharp two-edged sword that can divide the thoughts from the intents of the heart and to distinguish the soulish from the spiritual (Heb. 4:12). It is likely that these two outcomes are just two ways of saying the same thing which is typical of Hebrew parallelism used in their writings. This would mean (or at least imply) that “thoughts are activities in the realm of the soul (mind) and “intents” are associated with the spiritual part of our being.

The difference in a person who is “saved” and one who is “lost” is the spirit of the person. The “new birth” to which Jesus referred in His conversation with Nicodemus is a spiritual birth in which the “dead” spirit of “fallen humanity” associated with Adam’s race is replaced with a quickened spirit which has as its life source the “uncreated life of God” which can never die.

The spirit of man prior to the new birth is flawed (essentially dead) and therefore, the “intentions” coming from this “dead” spirit tend toward death and away from life which comes from God. After the new birth, the born-from-above spirit in man has its life source from God and is capable of Godly intentions. It is by the “spirit” that we commune with God. At the same time, the quickened spirit of the believer is exposed to other “intentions” that come from temptations associated with the evil one. A familiar example is the wilderness experience of Jesus following His baptism and the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Him as He began his active public ministry. Such temptations which encouraged Him to make a fundamental change to the intents of His heart were recognized by Jesus for what they were and were soundly rejected. As a result of rejecting the tempting alternatives, His life was one of alignment of the “thoughts” and “intents” of His heart.

It is possible (maybe even likely) that we, when exposed to temptations, will embrace a temptation and (at the same time) realize that such an idea is not in keeping with Godly character. That “erroneous intent” can be suppressed but may not always be totally and absolutely rejected. When that happens, then our daily living (with our interactions with ourselves, with God, with other people and even the world around us) will be influenced by this suppressed and often latent intent. For example, as we take actions, we (in our “thoughts”) may rationalize what we are doing so that we think that the good deeds we have done for another person were because of unselfish love and generous compassion when the real intent was (or could be) to “engender favorable influence” so that we might exercise control over that person. This is clearly a misalignment of the “thoughts and intents of the heart.” The influence of the “intent” can be so subtle that we don’t even realize what is actually happening.

Sticking with the same example of taking action which can be beneficial to others, those with the questionable “intent” would likely carry out the good deeds in such a way that others would be aware that he or she was the one who was helping. If the questionable “intent” were not present and not having influence, then the good deeds would be carried out so that no one would know the source – let not your left hand know what your right hand is doing.

The erroneous intents that we allow to intrude into our spirits are like hidden contaminants in the “gold” of our spiritual lives. We know that God is at work in us to refine our gold and to conform us to the image of Christ. In his first epistle, Peter compared the testing (assaying) of our faith to refining gold in which the dross or slag that is not the pure gold can be seen and removed. The assaying process can be in the form of troubles, suffering and persecution which help to strip away much of the facade (the rationalized thinking) that all of us erect around ourselves to hide the real person.

When we are in the midst of being refined, we must be careful to interpret what is happening in light of the God’s word which is said to be the sword of the Spirit. The word of God is to be used as a sharp two-edged sword that can divide the thoughts from the intents of the heart and to separate the soulish from the spiritual (Heb. 4:12) In this context the “sword” is primarily intended to be used on ourselves to bring to light the motive behind our actions. The soul and the spirit of man are distinct and separate in the sight of God. If we confuse the two, then we will likely wind up nourishing the soul and neglecting the spirit.

Why should we care about such distinctions? In our humanity we tend to “care” what people say or think about us and what we do. We can define our role and communicate it to others; however, the assessment of how well we carry out that role is left up to God. His is the only opinion that really matters. Even we cannot adequately judge our own performance. We may think that we are doing very well but that does not mean we are. Others tend to judge us on the basis of outward appearance and we tend to judge ourselves on the basis of what we think others are thinking about us. On the other hand, God judges on the basis of the intent of the heart. If we want to be able to judge ourselves before the “appointed time,” then we must be able to distinguish between the “thought and intents of the heart.” The Word of God is sharper than a two-edged sword and is able to separate these.