

'Keeping the Heart': Lessons from Two Puritan Pastors

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Abstract

Andrew Gray and John Flavel served pastorates in Glasgow and Devon respectively in the turbulent times of the mid-seventeenth centuries. Their works continue to be valued today as models of Puritan spiritual counsel. The essay explores the sermons of Gray and a treatise of Flavel on Proverbs 4.23. Each Pastors explores the command and the warning implicit in the text, and show why this verse is of prime important for the Christian. They are highly suggestive works for our less self-reflective pulpits today, and would repay reading for the preacher seeking to improve his pastoral preaching.

1. Introduction

'Dive into thy own soul; anticipate and prevent thy own heart. Haunt thy heart with promises, threatenings, mercies, judgements, and commandments. Let meditation trace thy heart. Hale thy heart before God.'

William Fenner's call for the Christian's keeping of the heart may justly be said to be the true focus of all that is central to the Puritan project. Never the victors in their public conflicts, whether civil or ecclesiastical, the Puritans turned their energies to the mastery of the

human heart. If the world could not be reformed by the Gospel, the believer's heart certainly could. The heart became the focus of the energies of preaching, praying and private attention. It was into keeping the heart that the Puritans put all of their energies, and often here they excelled in understanding and promoting the work of God's grace.

The fruits of their labours have not been forgotten. Following the mid-twentieth century resurgence of interest in Puritan literature and spirituality, the Puritan emphasis of giving attention to the heart has been the focus not just of church historians but of men seeking to teach the Gospel to the current generation of Christians. Don Whitney, Paul Tripp, David Powlinson and Timothy Keller represent a host of contemporary pastors and teachers who are all explicit in their indebtedness to Puritan counsel-givers. As the Puritans and their spiritual descendants believed, biblical Christianity, as it finds its focus in the believer's relationship with God, is centrally concerned with keeping the heart.

Our purpose is to see how this call to keeping the heart is made in the writings of two pastors of the second half of the Seventeenth Century, John Flavel and Andrew Gray. Their works, a treatise and a collection of three sermons respectively, explore the text of Proverbs 4.23, 'Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life.' We will be studying how they handled their subject, and will note their works' different genres before giving closer attention to their method, substance and particular emphases. We will then be able to give some assessment to one chief objection to the Puritan endeavour, namely, that the emphasis on heart religion led inevitably to an introspective spirituality which was ultimately to rob the Puritan movement of its energy and to offer little to later generations of believers.

2. Approaching Flavel and Gray and their works on Proverbs 4.23

John Flavel and Andrew Gray served pastorates in Devon and Glasgow respectively in the second half of the Seventeenth Century. John Flavel (1627-1691) ministered for nearly all of his life in Devon, six years in Deptford followed by an almost continuous ministry in Dartmouth. After the Great Ejection of 1662 Flavel continued his

ministry in the surrounding area until his death. The dangerous times following the Ejection often meant that he did so at considerable personal risk, though the Revolution of 1688 brought some relief. Six volumes of his works remain, the best blending deep and clear Reformed Theology with a keen eye for the application of doctrine to the believer's condition. Contrast this long ministry with the startlingly brief but impacting life of Andrew Gray (1633-1656), with his twenty-seven month ministry in the Outer High Kirk in Glasgow (1653-6). Gray's sermons became the talk of a city already richly blessed with godly and able preachers. They bear the urgent and direct style of many young preachers, but found favour with all types of hearers.

Flavel's work to be considered is 'A Saint Indeed or, The great work of a Christian, opened and pressed, from Prov. 4.23'.¹ Flavel's Dedication for the work is dated October 7th, 1667. The work is a treatise on the verse, and unlike a number of Flavel's well-known works, gives no obvious evidence of having been a series of sermons. The 86 page work (less the Epistle Dedicatory) is composed of a brief setting forth of the text (2 ½ pages), followed by four divisions:

1. What keeping the heart is (5 pages)
2. Why Christians must make this their great work (8 pages)
3. Special seasons when this is the believer's special work (57 pages)
4. Application of all of the above (13 pages)

Some comments are pertinent here: we should note, by this division and relative apportioning of space, Flavel's purpose: he seeks to explain what the believer's duty is, why it is so important, and how is to be done (parts 1, 2 and 4). He gives himself ample space in order to explore this work of grace in different times in the Christian life (part 3). The reader is thus given directive, precept and application of the precept in different situations.

Gray's work is gathered in the volume of his works as 'Three sermons concerning the way how a Christian ought to keep his heart'.² The nineteenth century publishers reproduce an earlier publisher's explanation that the sermons are not Gray's own notes,

¹ John Flavel, *Works*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1968), V.417-509.

² Andrew Gray, *Works* (Aberdeen: George and Robert King, 1839), 257-284.

but are a compilation of the notes of those who audited the sermons. This is a helpful caution that we do not have Gray's *ipsissima verba*, but this admission does not materially change how the sermons should be studied.

The sermons are all of similar length (10, 7 and 11 ½ pages respectively), and have considerable overlap in tracing the one theme of keeping the heart, each following the same contours:

1. The great duty of keeping the heart
2. What it means to keep the heart
3. Know the times for particular keeping of the heart
4. The reasons for keeping the heart

Each sermon operates within this shape, though with differing allocations of material to each point. The first two sermons emphasise significantly the duty of keeping the heart. Incentives to do so are heaped up by means of direct encouragements and warnings. Here we're most clearly reminded that we're listening to the ministry of a preacher about whom it was said by his great friend and noted preacher James Durham that he 'could make men's hair stand on end'³ The third sermon differs in tone from the first two, giving more directives for keeping the heart, especially in temptations and difficult temptations.

3. Exploring the Texts

3.1 *The definition and essentiality of keeping the heart*

We can now explore the detail of Gray's and Flavel's work, and need to address firstly the question of how they understand 'the heart'. It's noticeable that neither gives any discussion to what 'the heart' is as they intend to discuss it. Quite possibly, the term caused less confusion than it does in today's church, where many are unable to distinguish talk of the heart from the exclusively emotional life of the believer. It is helpful to orientate ourselves with John Owen's definition of the heart. Writing historically midway between these two works, he says,

³ William G. Blaikie, *The Preachers of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2001), 135.

The heart in Scripture is variously used; sometimes for the mind and understanding, sometimes for the will, sometimes for the affections, sometimes for the conscience, sometimes for the whole soul. Generally, it denotes the whole soul of man and all the faculties of it, not absolutely, but as they are all one principle of moral operations, as they all concur in our doing good or evil. The mind, as it inquireth, discerneth, and judgeth what is to be done, what refused, the will, as it chooseth or refuseth and avoids; the affections, as they like or dislike, cleave to or have an aversation from, that which is proposed to them; the conscience, as it warns and determines – are all together called the heart.⁴

For Owen, then, mind, will, affections, conscience, soul and its faculties are all elements of ‘the heart’. If not explicitly cited as containing all of these parts, the treatments of Flavel and Gray certainly range across Owen’s categories, and even, as we’ll see, venture beyond them.

But the heart to be kept is the heart which is corrupted. The heart is deceitful, a reality of both the regenerate as well as the unregenerate heart. Hear Gray: ‘If we were all well searched, it is to be feared that many of us would be found two-hearted men.’⁵ ‘This is the great mystery of iniquity, that even our hearts will deceive our own hearts, and study to bring them to ruin.’⁶

Again, ‘There is as much wickedness in everyone’s heart who is here, as might be a quarrel to destroy a whole world, if God would contend with us in His just judgment.’⁷

Wicked though the believer’s heart is, it has nonetheless been transformed through regeneration from its lost state, a state in which ‘self is the poise of the unsanctified heart, which biases and moves it in all its designs and actions; and as long as it is so, it is impossible that any external means should keep it with God.’⁸ Both pastors address the unbeliever directly in their works, urging them to come to Christ to find the means of deliverance for their hearts, and many of their warnings are given in order to show the false professor his lack

⁴ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 24 vols. (London: Johnston & Hunter, 1850-55), VI.170.

⁵ Gray, *Works*, 257.

⁶ Gray, *Works*, 277.

⁷ Gray, *Works*, 266.

⁸ Flavel, *Works*, V.525.

of saving knowledge of Christ, and thus of heart renewal. The wicked heart must be brought to Christ for renewal, and only then can the work of keeping the heart begin.

It is the reality of indwelling sin which brings its own incentive for keeping the heart, and which serves to frame the definition of heart-care for Flavel: keeping the heart is 'nothing else but the constant care and diligence of such a renewed man, to preserve his soul in that holy frame to which grace hath reduced it, and daily strives to hold it.'⁹ 'To keep the heart is carefully to preserve it from sin, which disorders it; and maintain that spiritual and gracious frame, which fits it for a life of communion with God.'¹⁰ In defining heart-keeping, Gray says, 'It imports this, that a Christian should observe the motions of his heart, and should not let his heart nor thoughts go astray, but should have a register of all their motions.'¹¹ He then cites Luke 21.34, and it is obvious from this definition as well as from his use of Christ's words, that keeping the heart is a functional shorthand for the Christian's attention to every aspect of his inner life. Owen's definition referred to above, then, is entirely in keeping with both Flavel's and Gray's objectives, of leading believers to reckon with the work of the Spirit in each area of the inner life.

The only way to keep the heart is to know the heart. Gray says that we need to study the books of God and of our hearts; we should 'study to know the unspeakable goodness of the one, and the unspeakable wickedness of the other.'¹² This would make us renounce our self-righteousness and pride. This is a lifelong pursuit, and only with knowledge of the heart can it be kept. Flavel insists that the keeping of the heart 'is the most important business of a Christian's life.'¹³ 'It is the great work of a Christian, in which the very soul and life of religion consists, and without which all other duties are of no value with God.'¹⁴ '*Hic labor, hoc opus est.*'¹⁵

⁹ Flavel, *Works*, V.426.

¹⁰ Flavel, *Works*, V.426.

¹¹ Gray, *Works*, 258.

¹² Gray, *Works*, 266.

¹³ Flavel, *Works*, V.429.

¹⁴ Flavel, *Works*, V.494.

¹⁵ Flavel, *Works*, V.424.

3.2 *Motives*

Why should the believer commit himself to this intensive, arduous and unceasing work? Neither pastor makes any attempt to soften the demands of the life dedicated to heart-keeping, but each labours to give clear and compelling motives as to why this work should be done. Commenting upon the phrase in Prov.4.23 'for out of it are the issues of life', in his first sermon Gray shows that our eternal state hangs on our success or failure in keeping this command.¹⁶ The professor, if he is to make sure of his eternal safety and joy, must hear the text and obey its teaching. In the following sermon Gray sets out four motives to heart-keeping based upon the very nature of the heart itself:

- a. The heart is deceitful; wicked; idol-loving; mad; divided; whorish; dull and ignorant.
- b. It is a very difficult duty – so we should really apply ourselves to it.
- c. '[T]he heart is the mother and original of all evil...you must never at any time trust your hearts; for either one time or other they will turn enemies unto you.'¹⁷
- d. The commendation offered in Prov.16.32 is real, and highly desirable; dare we neglect our hearts and miss out on it?

When comparing Flavel's treatment of the motives for keeping the heart, different emphases are apparent. It might be helpful to reflect on the different genres of writing. Gray's words are in sermon form, when his aim was to be striking and direct, and especially to apply his text to a mixed congregation of Christian and non-Christian hearers. Gray's ministry aroused great interest in Glasgow and was attended by many sorts of people; their preacher certainly did not want to let any evangelistic opportunity go untaken. Add to this observation the fact that this was a young man with necessarily limited life-experience (though undoubtedly an expert in understanding the soul) and we perhaps have some reasons for understanding why he selected the above-mentioned motives as he urged obedience to his

¹⁶ Gray, *Works*, 264-6.

¹⁷ Gray, *Works*, 269.

text.

Contrast Flavel's age and life-experience, as well as genre of writing. A man of forty years of age who had experienced and suffered from the major upheavals of the national church at first hand (including the Ejection), his treatise is surely tempered by what he has gone through. No less direct in places than Gray's preaching, 'Saint Indeed' does exhibit a more sensitive and encouraging tone. Flavel's intended readership would have most likely included many who, like him, had been compelled to embrace Dissent and who knew its sufferings. The motives to heart keeping which such readers needed to hear are skilfully presented.

Flavel titles his section on motives 'Why Christians must make this their great work'.¹⁸ His motives are:

1. The Glory of God is much concerned therein. God is particularly enraged by our heart-sins.

2. Our profession is only sincere as we keep our hearts (giving examples of Jehu and Simon Magus as false professors).

3. Without a right spirit there is no right living. 'What else can be the reason why the discourses and duties of many Christians are become so frothy and unprofitable, their communion both with God and one another, becomes as a dry stalk, but because their hearts are neglected?'¹⁹

4. The comforts of our souls depend much on our keeping our hearts. Here Flavel treats the nature of assurance. It is the Spirit's great work to witness our assurance to us; 'the Spirit and His graces in us are all one,'²⁰ and we discern Him by searching our hearts; 'a neglected heart is confused and dark;'²¹ 'God does not usually indulge lazy and negligent souls with the comforts of assurance.'²²

5. The improvement of graces depends upon keeping the heart. Christ is '*origo originans*'; grace, '*origo originata*.'²³ If the heart is neglected then the fruit of grace will wither and die.

6. The stability of our souls in temptation depends upon our

¹⁸ Flavel, *Works*, V.429-37.

¹⁹ Flavel, *Works*, V.433.

²⁰ Flavel, *Works*, V.434.

²¹ Flavel, *Works*, V.434.

²² Flavel, *Works*, V.434.

²³ Flavel, *Works*, V.435.

keeping our hearts. 'How easy a conquest is a neglected heart?'²⁴ Flavel asks.

3.3 Seasons

So when is the heart to be given particular attention? Approximately two-thirds of Flavel's treatise is given over to the 'special seasons when this is the believer's special work.' Fourteen seasons are offered, ranging from prosperity through adversity, danger, 'straits and outward pinching wants', spiritual darkness and doubts, persecution and illness. Here Flavel draws on all of his considerable skills in soul-directing in order to take the reader through these times of life, with their temptations, difficulties and opportunities. In order to explore these various circumstances, and to help him press his arguments home, Flavel studies a number of these seasons in a series of 'helps' (brief pastoral directives), giving prosperity seven helps, and adversity nine helps. Likewise, times of danger and public distraction [unrest] is treated with fourteen directions, the season 'of receiving injuries and abuses from men' has eight remedies, and the season of sickness has seven arguments. A 'case' accompanies each season, in which Flavel explores a particular trial the believer may experience. Here Flavel excels in his pastoral method, bringing sometimes warning but more often pastoral encouragement through a series of observations, reasoning and direction all closely aligned to the case under consideration. Here the treatise takes on the distinct flavour of the works on conscience from the likes of Fenner, Perkins and Shepard.

Two lead themes can be distinguished as Flavel helps the Christian to understand and keep his heart through life's various stages, the consideration of Providence, and an appropriate mistrust of the self. Without reflecting on Providence sufficiently the believer may well despair of God's grace at work in his life; with too naive a view of his heart, he will be carried away by his heart, either to false assurance or to despair. Either false path will frustrate the Spirit's operations in forming Christ in him. These two themes of reading Providence and of self-watch are particularly evident when Flavel considers the tenth

²⁴ Flavel, *Works*, V.436.

season, that of spiritual darkness and doubting.²⁵ Flavel counsels the reader that it is God's perceived behaviour towards us, and ours towards God, which are the main heads of our doubt.²⁶ We look at our troubles and seemingly unanswered prayers and conclude that God is absent, or opposed to us. We then turn to our cold hearts and assume that we have no saving interest in Christ. But Flavel applies his counsel, and leads the reader back to God's purposes in His dealings with believers, hard though they often are to trace: 'do you not know that the sun still keeps on his course in the heavens, even in dull and close weather, when you cannot see it? And may it not be so with the love of God?'²⁷ Then when the believer despairs of his salvation because of his sin Flavel urges a careful consideration of God's covenant love. 'Every breach of peace with God is not a breach of covenant with God.'²⁸ God's covenant faithfulness is the sure ground of our hope in times of darkness, when our hearts, and our imperfect reading of Providence, cannot be trusted.

That Gray should give less detailed attention to various seasons for heart-keeping is inevitable due to the sermon form of his work. He does, though, urge his hearers to 'know the times when a Christian should specially keep his heart.'²⁹ These are the six times of enjoyments, desertion, facing subtle temptations, when the believer must be diligent in duties, when in a secure frame, and when temptations are likely to grow strong. Over two manuscript pages he counsels believers to be constantly vigilant as to their situations and to the assaults they face, from the time of enjoyment, when 'the devil condescends to dandle us upon his knees'³⁰ to the season when temptation increases. Gray also explores seasons of discouragement,³¹ including counsel against the wrong reading of Providence.

3.4 Warnings

Both pastors frame their call to heart-keeping with encouragements

²⁵ Flavel, *Works*, V.480-87.

²⁶ Flavel, *Works*, V.480.

²⁷ Flavel, *Works*, V.483.

²⁸ Flavel, *Works*, V.481.

²⁹ Gray, *Works*, 261.

³⁰ Gray, *Works*, 261.

³¹ Gray, *Works*, 280-1.

and warnings. For each man, there is simply too much at stake to be neglectful in caring for one's heart. 'A neglected heart is so confused and dark, that the little grace which is in it is not ordinarily discernible.'³² One casualty of such a heart is assurance: 'God doth not usually indulge lazy and negligent hearts with the comforts of assurance; He will not so much as seem to patronize sloth and carelessness.'³³ This heart soon becomes fruitless and weak if unnourished and uncared for. 'Heart-neglect is a leak in the bottom, no heavenly influences, how rich soever, abide in that soul.'³⁴

Vulnerability to temptation is a theme explored by Flavel and Gray. Each explores the 'heart as city' metaphor (as in Prov. 25.28), and warns of the Tempter's activity against it: 'the careless heart is an easy prey to Satan in the hour of temptation, his main batteries are raised against that fort-royal, the heart...how easy a conquest is a neglected heart?'³⁵ In his second sermon Gray says of the careless man, 'the devil will not need to use many arguments for the gaining of that person's heart.'³⁶ He concludes his warning, 'if ye would consider and look what a thing the heart of man is, O! ye would guard more than ye do: for it is always besieged with the lusts which the devil sets before your eyes.'³⁷

The work of the ministry involves both assuring the believing Christian that he has received the saving grace of God, and also showing the person who doesn't have saving grace the reality and gravity of his situation. Gray addresses his congregation with seven 'marks and evidences' of whether the heart is kept,³⁸ which itself is the only sure sign of the believer: if you keep your heart 'you will endeavour to crucify vain thoughts.'³⁹ If you don't, you will not even notice temptation; you'll commit sin 'with much deliberation;⁴⁰ you

³² Flavel, *Works*, V.434.

³³ Flavel, *Works*, V.435.

³⁴ Flavel, *Works*, V.436.

³⁵ Flavel, *Works*, V.436.

³⁶ Gray, *Works*, 269.

³⁷ Gray, *Works*, 269.

³⁸ Gray, *Works*, 269-71.

³⁹ Gray, *Works*, 269.

⁴⁰ Gray, *Works*, 270.

'will sin with much willingness and pleasure;'⁴¹ you won't take opportunities for communion with God; you won't take up the motions of God towards your heart; lastly, you won't discern a decline of the work of grace in you. Gray concludes the sermon with serious exhortations to his listeners to search their hearts to see if their faith is true, or is just hypocrisy, which will only condemn them on the Last Day.

3.5 Encouragements and Comforts

How, then, is the Christian to be encouraged and comforted in the discipleship of the heart? Heart-keeping is 'hard work indeed' as Flavel says.⁴² Faced with the difficulties of life the Christian may just feel that it's all too demanding to guard the heart, especially in times of hardship. Here, though, Flavel excels in bringing theologically-informed and sensitive counsel for the believer's encouragement. In the context of directions for heart keeping in different seasons, Flavel gives nine helps when he considers the season of adversity.⁴³ In essence, his encouragement comes down to the Sovereignty of God and His outworking of His purposes of sanctification in the hearts of believers. Thus he counsels his readers, 'God is faithfully pursuing the great design of electing love upon the souls of His people, and orders all these afflictions as means sanctified to that end.'⁴⁴ Flavel sees nothing in the experience of adversity which should give the believer reason to neglect his heart through discouragement – though that is the great temptation – but marshals his arguments so as to encourage the struggling Christian to a confident discipleship in the midst of trials. The seventh help declares 'it may stay the heart if thou consider that in these troubles God is about that work, which if thou didst see the design of, thy soul would rejoice.'⁴⁵ Again, Providence, painful though it often is in the believer's experience, can be fully trusted in. 'Providence is like a curious piece of arras, made up of a

⁴¹ Gray, *Works*, 270.

⁴² Flavel, *Works*, V.428.

⁴³ Flavel, *Works*, V.421-50.

⁴⁴ Flavel, *Works*, V.441.

⁴⁵ Flavel, *Works*, V.444.

thousand shreds, which single we know not what to make of, but put together, and stitched up orderly, they represent a beautiful history to the eye.⁴⁶

So far from fearing troubles, and neglecting the heart because of them, according to Flavel, the Christian is to recognise their infinite value in compelling him towards godliness: 'the power of godliness did never better thrive than in affliction, and never ran lower than in times of greatest prosperity: when 'we are left a poor, and an afflicted people, then we learn to 'trust in the name of the Lord,' Zeph, 3.12. What say ye sirs? Is it indeed for the saint's advantage to be weaned from the love of, and delight in ensnaring worldly vanities!'⁴⁷ It is this emphasis on God's active involvement in every detail of life which shapes Flavel's counsel in his 'fourteen rules for keeping the heart from slavish fear.'⁴⁸

Gray's pulpit ministry does not dwell at length on the comforts for the believer in guarding his heart. Incentives are held out, though, in five considerations 'that may provoke you to give your hearts to Christ.'⁴⁹ These comforts, as Gray acknowledges, arise not specifically from the heart-watch of the disciple, but from the whole business of giving one's heart to Christ in repentance and faith. Reckon with His majesty and infinite condescension, and reflect on eternal misery as well as blessedness which are both His to give, and the soul must come to Christ. This is urging, focused evangelistic preaching, and these exhortations come naturally from Gray's stated intent, to show how 'the issues of life' are bound up in the choices of the heart.

3.6 The Root of the Matter

After this survey of the substance of the text of the two men's works, what can be said about the essence of heart-keeping for each? This is very much the burden of Gray's third sermon. Heart-keeping is the believer's great, consuming business. Gray shapes his sermon around five parts of the task, and leaves the hearer with the conviction that,

⁴⁶ Flavel, *Works*, V.444.

⁴⁷ Flavel, *Works*, V.448.

⁴⁸ Flavel, *Works*, V.451-7.

⁴⁹ Gray, *Works*, 282.

far from being an optional responsibility, the guarding of one's heart *is* the Christian life. The first directive, that the believer must wage war on the idols of the heart, is a *tour de force* in its appeal to the believer to identify and renounce heart-idols for the sake of Christ. Gray cites the rich young ruler, who went away sorrowful from Christ: 'Cursed be that person that goeth away sorrowful, when Christ and an idol are put in the balance together, and whose heart consents rather to take the idol, than Christ.'⁵⁰ If the heart is not kept, then the Christian life is hopelessly compromised; more than that, the soul will be eternally lost.

In the 'Third Use, for Direction',⁵¹ Flavel charges his readers to take very specific actions in the keeping of the heart. It is here that he shows the most acute awareness of the idolatrous nature of the heart, even in a regenerate state. Of the Christian's need to withstand the pressures of everyday life in order to prioritise the heart, Flavel says 'Though the world be in your hands, let it not justle Christ out of your hearts.'⁵² Again, 'take heed, Christian, lest thy shop steal away thy heart from thy closet.'⁵³ The greatest work needs the great single-mindedness, and nothing must be allowed to stand in the way of it.

The world with its demands, though, is not the problem; rather, the heart is: 'The heart is a hungry and restless thing; it will have something to feed upon; if it enjoy nothing from God, it will hunt for something among the creatures, and there it often loses itself, as well as its end...that which we delight in we are never weary of...'⁵⁴ This is Flavel at his most penetrating and challenging, urging the believer to hear the very serious call to heart-care, both in the light of the heart's corruptions and in view of all of the privileges of living by grace.

4. Assessment

Keeping the heart means living the Christian life. Without it there is no Christian faith and life, and certainly no final salvation. As we

⁵⁰ Gray, *Works*, 275.

⁵¹ Flavel, *Works*, V.504-7.

⁵² Flavel, *Works*, V.505.

⁵³ Flavel, *Works*, V.505.

⁵⁴ Flavel, *Works*, V.506.

have seen, Gray and Flavel differed significantly in respect of the contexts and natures of their treatment of Proverbs 4.23. Preaching to a city-centre, spiritually mixed congregation is significantly different from writing a treatise written in the midst of Gospel persecution largely for fellow believers. Gray seeks to incentivise the Christian to the keeping of the heart, rather than to explore the keeping of the heart, though his third sermon is more directive. Flavel's work shows the heart in all of its labyrinthine complexity, and brings the light of the Gospel to shine into all the areas of the heart. It is interesting to consider whether that is, in part, an inevitable difference between a younger and an older teacher, especially as the latter has endured suffering, and writes to others who were facing similar trials.

What is striking, though, is that, despite these disparities, there is considerable overlap in structures employed by each in treating the verse, as well as in the manner and tone in which they address their respective audiences. Each man sees the verse's charge as the *sine qua non* of the Christian life, each emphasises that eternal happiness rests upon its reception or rejection, and each is fully aware of the difficulties attending to keeping the heart, as well as of the enabling of God's necessary grace.

Do the works we've surveyed overemphasise the subjective? Obviously, the text of Proverbs 4.23 both Pastors were working with is subjective in nature! Fair treatment of it demanded close attention to the workings of the Christian's inner life and the vicissitudes of spiritual experience. Both works show Puritan pastoral method in its two-fold emphasis: the heart is brought under close scrutiny, its lusts and sins laid bare; at the same time, the heart is charged with the duties of faith and obedience to God's revealed Word, and the responsibility is laid before the believer of making the inner life fruitful.

We might ask, though, whether sufficient attention is given to the work of Christ and to the covenant of grace as the objective grounds of the professor's confidence in his own salvation. Gray concludes his exhortations: 'the sum of all is, if ye would keep your hearts, ye must give them to Christ to keep, for that is the best way to keep them well; it is only to Christ ye must commit the keeping of your hearts.'⁵⁵ This,

⁵⁵ Gray, *Works*, 282.

though, is part of his evangelistic strategy in the climax of his final sermon; it is not worked through into his method of encouraging believers to rest in Christ's finished work.

Flavel, as has been noted above, calls professors to take confidence in God's covenant love, a love which is strong in the face of the weakness of ungodliness and certain when doubts rob faith of its confidence. Effective in pastoral encouragement as Flavel's treatise is, the reader is given more help in trying to be at peace with what is often a 'frowning Providence' than he is given real assurance of salvation due to the blood-bought certainties of the Covenant of Grace. Writing on the inner life of the believer in the same period, the New England pastor Thomas Shepard urges the reader to be confident that no sin whatever can break covenant with God for all who are in the Covenant of Grace. 'This, truly understood, is the foundation of a Christian's joy, and peace, and glory every day.'⁵⁶ It is that objective peace with God which might have been given clearer accent in Flavel's work.

Flavel's and Gray's works certainly bring theology to bear in their treatment of the text, and are clearly not liable to any charge of encouraging a pietism which is introspective or devoid of doctrine. Both show that the watch of the heart can only be conducted with an understanding of the fundamental themes of sin and redeeming grace, and with a radical submission to the authority of Scripture. Pastoral theology might justifiably said to be the real genius of the Puritan movement. Flavel and Gray example that theology, and through preached and written work show its ongoing value. Given their commitment to handling Proverbs 4.23 as central to the godly life, their treatment of it, far from leading to Christian inertia or introspection, was a charge to action, of faith expressing itself in vital life.

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⁵⁶ Thomas Shepard, *Works*, 2 vols (New York, NY: AMS Press, 1967). I. 310.