

CHAPTER VI THE ATONEMENT AND A SINNING RELIGION

How few of our celebrated pulpits are there, where more has not been said at times for sin than against it? -JOHN FLETCHER.

In their attitude on sin in the life of the regenerate, Calvinists divide into a number of groups; therefore we should approach the subject of this chapter cautiously. It would be unfair to assume that all believe in a low standard of Christian living. Some Calvinistic preachers are sound and strict in their faithful presentation of repentance. Some teach that it is the Christian's privilege to be an overcomer rather than a shortcomer, and are very far from any attempt to excuse looseness or continual defeat.

But beneath this high standard range many shades of teaching not nearly so commendable. There are altogether too many who are very silent on Bible repentance and cry, Believe! Believe! The vast majority still insist that a Christian cannot live without sin, and though they use more modern phraseology perhaps, nevertheless make it quite clear that a Christian sins "in thought, word, and deed" every day. And since even the group having the highest standard believe in the doctrine of eternal security, they are compelled to consider the backslider as still a Christian, even though a disgraceful one. They are forced to shut their eyes, swallow hard, and speak of the erring ones as "sinning saints." (Since the Greek word translated "saint" means a "holy person," one wonders how they survive the palpable contradiction of calling a man an "unholy holy one.")

And to make matters still more confusing, many modern Calvinists quite logically accept the doctrine of "finished salvation," which destroys the necessity of repentance. As we noted in the previous chapter, the Calvinistic doctrine of "finished salvation" (which is the natural complement of "unconditional election" and the "satisfaction theory" of the atonement) says that Calvary procured not only the possibility of pardon but the actual bestowment of pardon, and that for all sins of the elect, past, present, and future. But obviously, if the sins of the future are already pardoned, why should one repent of them when they are committed, or even attempt to avoid committing them? It becomes quite apparent that the doctrine of "finished salvation" makes repentance an entirely unnecessary and foolish waste of time. Then why do many preachers who believe the doctrine yet preach on repentance? Because their inner spiritual sense (which often rises above one's doctrines) demands it, because they see it clearly in the Word, and because they see the necessity of it in practical human experience. But futile are the attempts to harmonize theologically the doctrine of repentance with the doctrine of "finished salvation."

Therefore, what must we conclude? This: that although the most spiritual Calvinists deplore a sinning religion and would never admit it to be the normal, even they are compelled by the doctrines of imputed righteousness and eternal security to admit that sinning Christians do exist. For this reason we are justified in asserting that Calvinism both allows and implies a "sinning religion." In opposition to such a system we will seek to show the true scriptural position. There are abundant passages which state clearly that the purpose of Christ's work was to separate sin from man and man from sin. Repentance is more than an expedient; it is a necessity.

1. Mark 2:17, Luke 5:32, Acts 5:31, Acts 17:30-32, all express the same thought as Matt. 9:13, "For I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Defining repentance as a complete confessing and forsaking of sin (I John 1:9, Isa. 55: 7), we have here the separation of sinners from their sinning stated as the purpose of Christ's coming and call. And anything that could scripturally be called the purpose of so great an advent of so great a person must certainly be considered very fundamental and essential.

2. "And thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1: 21). "I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil" (John 17:15).

"Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness" (Rom. 6: 18). "Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities" (Acts 3:26). "But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the

end everlasting life” (Rom. 6:22). Also included in the list are Gal. 1: 4, Heb. 9: 14, and I Peter 4: 1, 2. Other verses which express the same thought, although they do not use the word “from” are: John 1:29, Eph. 1:4, Eph. 5:15-17, Titus 2:22, Heb. 9: 14, Heb. 9:28, I Peter 1: 15, I Peter 2:20-24, I John 3:4-10. Thus the purpose of Christ’s coming and work was to save man from sin. The objective, then, of his call was for man to separate himself from sin and the purpose of his work was to carry sin away from man, or to make man’s separation possible and acceptable. Also, we see in his call and work the mutual responsibility resting upon Christ and the individual for the actual consummation of salvation. The first set of verses describe man’s part and the second describe God’s part.

In the second group of verses we can very properly emphasize the word “from,” which implies a very real separation. Since some of the verses refer to actual sins, others to the inner sin tendency, and another to the evil in the world, we see that this personal separation is from all forms of sin. Now note some observations:

1. There is no suggestion in these verses that man is to be saved in his sins, (even Christians) or in spite of his sins, but from them.
2. These passages do not state that man’s sins or sin-fulness are to be separated from the notice and condemnation of God by the intervening righteousness of God’s Son, as a curtain hung in front of a bad picture, or a blanket of snow hiding a dump pile; rather, man’s sins are to be separated from man himself. This makes Christ not a curtain but a purifier; not a blanket of snow but a flaming fire (Mal. 3: 3, 4).
3. There is no hint here that the effectiveness of the atonement lay in changing the nature of sin, but rather in delivering from sin. Nor are any of the results of sin mentioned as the objects of salvation. This contradicts the theory of those who would have us believe that we are saved from the penalty of sin without deliverance from either the commission or being of sin.

Perhaps the Scripture which, as much as any other, actually deals the death blow to all the various doctrinal refuges of a “sinning religion” theology is Gal. 2:17, 18: “But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is therefore Christ the minister of sin? God forbid. For if I build again the things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor.” This is a direct thrust at the effort to allow a little sin in the Christian’s life, to separate standing and state, and the Calvinistic interpretation of imputed righteousness. Such teachings, which imply the justification of our life and our adoption without the necessity of personal freedom from sin, amount to nothing less than an attempt to make Christ the minister of sin; that is, a mediator who through misuse of his own office, purchases justification for wilful sin and secures the benefits of righteousness to those who are unrighteous. For Christ to be our advocate, our mediator, our intercessor, our high priest, does not mean that through the power of his office and the merits of his righteousness he can obtain eternal life for us while we remain sinful in nature and even, perchance, sinners in practice. To all this Paul cries, God forbid!

To “seek to be justified by Christ” involves, (1) recognition of need, (2) faith in the sufficiency of Christ’s atonement, and (3) acceptance of Christ as Saviour. Now the world is full of those who would tell us that these three attitudes constitute the sole conditions of salvation. Accordingly, when one recognizes his need, believes in Christ, and accepts Christ (formally), he is saved. Confirmation, public confession of Christ, and such practices of many churches involve these three attitudes, as far as the intellect of the candidate is concerned, and millions are trusting such forms, even though continuing to live in sin. But this verse makes plain the insufficiency, yes, even the impossibility if sincere, of these attitudes alone. If we ourselves are found sinners, then our recognition of our need, mental faith in the blood, and theoretical acceptance of Christ as Saviour, is all in vain. Thus we see that deeply underlying these three attitudes is the necessity of repentance. If we do not completely forsake all known sin, then we can seek to be justified by Christ ever so earnestly, but all to no avail. The writer has seen many seek even with strong crying and tears—all of which may be merely surface emotion; but they did not find peace, because, as they afterward confessed, they were unwilling to give up some cherished idol or sin.

Far wiser than his instructor was a Scotchman in Glasgow this very point. Desiring earnestly to help, the personal worker asked the following questions: Do you believe the Bible is God’s word?”

Certainly. Every good Scotchman believes that.”

“Do you believe that Christ, the Son of God, died for you, and that only through His blood you can be saved?”
“Indeed I do.”

“And do you believe the promise, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved’?”

Again the answer was emphatically in the affirmative.

“But do you believe that included you?”

“I do.”

“Then,” said the advisor with an impressive tone of finality, “you are saved.”

“Oh, no I am not,” the other retorted. “The same Bible that contains all that you have mentioned also says, ‘Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts,’ and it happens that there are some sins I am not yet ready to forsake.”

That man was wise enough to know that “no man is justified by faith whose faith does not make him just.” And not only initial repentance, but continued renunciation of and freedom from sin is a condition of continued salvation. For the passage says, “If I build again the things which I destroyed I make myself a transgressor.” And when we again become a willing transgressor (a sinner) then we are no longer justified by Christ, for He WILL NOT BE THE MINISTER OF SIN. Repentance is to our salvation what the alphabet is to our education. We start our education by learning the alphabet, and after that every advance in every field of learning is built upon it. We never discard it. Without it we could not read one page or write one line. Not that we learn the alphabet over again each day; neither do we mean that we sin and repent each day. But just as the alphabet is a cornerstone of our educational structure, so hatred and renunciation of sin is a cornerstone of our spiritual house, and its removal will precipitate collapse and eternal ruin.

It, may be advisable to digress long enough to remark that in reality we cannot separate true faith from repentance. Faith and obedience are so interrelated that one cannot exist without the other. “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:20). In the above paragraphs the writer has used the term “faith” as referring to that mental assent to the truth which is so common today. All so-called faith which simply “accepts” without a godly sorrow for and forsaking of sin is of this variety. True saving faith, however, which springs from the heart in glad appropriation of a living experience in Christ, can grow only in the rich soil of deep and thorough repentance. The wise words of S. A. Keen in “Faith Papers” are well worth noting: “There are states of heart which render faith impossible. An impenitent heart, a willful heart, or an unconsecrated heart, is incapable of believing unto salvation. To say to a soul in the heyday of sin, or to an unawakened heart, or to a child of God who refuses to give himself wholly to the Lord, ‘Believe, and thou shalt be saved,’ is to expect him to do what he cannot do.” This is not only scripturally, but psychologically true. Godly sorrow and strong desire for deliverance, hesitating not at the cost, is the only emotional state which can enable the whole being to lay hold on Christ and make Him gloriously, efficaciously real. True saving faith is born of desperation, not of contemplation. Let us remember that Jesus promised comfort only to those who mourn (Matt. 5:4), and experience teaches that the sweetness of the comfort will be in direct proportion to the genuineness of the mourning. “To whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little” (Luke 7:47). There will never be that joyous, personal sense of salvation until there has been the grip-ping sense of lostness; never the exultant sense of release without a keen consciousness of bondage. Though the surface emotions may not always be greatly affected, the inner man, the real man, must be profoundly and radically moved (II Cor. 7: 10).

To be superficial in our conception of faith will lead to much superficiality in practical Christian work. Indeed, there is a direct connection between the loose theology we have been discussing and many modern methods of evangelism. Those methods of getting converts which we condemn as inexcusably shallow are but the natural consequences of those insufficient ideas of God’s method of dealing with sin in the individual heart. Because many preachers do not realize the importance of the great, supernatural work wrought by God within and upon the nature they of course do not emphasize a thorough repentance, earnest seeking, or make any mention of the witness of the Spirit as being a universal privilege and necessity. Thus their regeneration is an anemic variety, consisting only of that change within the person which makes him willing to become religious; and their conception of conversion becomes a mere matter of acceptance.

The chief change which takes place is one’s standing before God. The cry is, “Believe! Believe! Your sins were forgiven away back there on the cross; the work is all done, all you need to do is accept it.” This is a practical application of the doctrine of “finished salvation,” mentioned at the beginning of the chapter.

In the light of such a theology their methods of getting people “saved” become at once understandable and consistent. Signing a card, being confirmed, answering some questions before the minister, being publicly baptized, or whatever methods they use for “taking their stand for Christ,” are sufficient conditions of becoming a Christian. The candidate has publicly accepted Christ, the Father accepts him and in Christ his standing is now complete; could anything more be necessary? The writer saw a fond father bring his two daughters to the altar one night. He wanted them to “take their stand.” But that stand was not to create a scene by tearfully confessing their sins to God, although it was plain they wanted to. He desired that they be asked a few questions, whereas the minister longed to urge them to pray. That night had been planned by that family as the night of “decision” and would be considered the rest of their lives as the time the girls were saved. Had not their father been converted that way? Here we have a quotation which represents another group, with somewhat different ideas, but in the same general school of thought: “If you wait for some miracle to be performed in you, you will wait forever, and will go to hell. But if you will be baptized and join the church, you will be all right.” In such manner do they overlook the radical change of nature, inwrought by the Holy Ghost, which is God’s method of dealing with the sin problem.

But all this is not New Testament regeneration; nor will it produce anything but a spurious and helpless church. For in the first place, as we have already noted, the faith it presents as the sole condition of salvation is not true saving faith. Secondly, woven through its very foundation is the false notion of “finished salvation.” It assumes that the work of redemption was completed at Calvary in the sense that nothing more or new needs to be done for each individual. This is a confusion of atonement and pardon. The fact is, the atonement did not actually accomplish the forgiveness of sins of a single individual, but simply made possible and justifiable such forgiveness. We were provisionally saved at Calvary, but not actually and personally. The death of Christ was “an expiation for all men, but an acquittal for none” (FIELD). When each applicant comes for salvation, something must be done which has never been done before: God, by a free act of His mercy and grace, on the merits of the blood, must pardon that person, accomplish his adoption, to which the Holy Spirit bears witness, and effect by the Spirit the instantaneous change of nature (heart) known as regeneration. And regardless of any amount of intellectual acceptance, the person is not saved until this is done. Now we see the necessity of coming directly to God in prayer, instead of merely to the minister or baptismal font. We see that conversion is not merely a matter of “acceptance” but often may be a matter of earnest seeking. It is not only “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved,” but also “Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” It is a “broken and contrite heart” that will not be despised. With this understanding of things it is easy to see the importance of thorough repentance, for we are seeking the favor of the God who said, “Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts,” and who promised, “If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins” and who said also, “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper, but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall obtain mercy.” It also becomes clear why we must emphasize the witness of the Spirit as the privilege of every seeker, for without it how will he know with joyful assurance that God has heard his cry and granted him the desire of his heart? It is true we are saved by believing the Word of God, but a proper claiming of His promises will always bring the witness. No one, therefore, should ever rest content until his repentance is so complete, his seeking so definite and earnest, and his faith so deep from the heart that it brings to him the witness of the Spirit that his sins are forgiven and he has been made a new creature in Christ Jesus.

If it be argued that this type of experience is too subjective, that it detracts the attention away from Christ and centers it upon one’s own feelings, we answer that the objection shows a very imperfect understanding of the real nature of regeneration. Exactly the opposite is true.

The attention is released from self, and like a spring with heavy pressure removed, leaps to its normal position, focused upon Christ. Pure and natural affection to the Lord is not a question of mental concentration but of heart condition. One may have an intellectual knowledge without a saving knowledge of Christ. It cannot be attained by any amount of contemplation of him, either of his deity, his atonement for us, or any of the other doctrines concerning him. Rather, the longer the natural man thinks of Christ the more miserable he becomes, because such contemplation will only reveal to him his own sinfulness and guilt. Before he can emerge from this “slough of despond” he must indeed turn his attention inward. He must repent and pray until the guilt is gone and the chains are severed. Then his heart beats in unison with his Lord’s and he thrills with a love he never could have known before. The gratitude felt for Christ’s work for humanity becomes boundless joy for what Christ has done for him. He is not just the world’s Redeemer in a vague, impersonal way; he is his Saviour. The genius of regeneration is

that it makes one's life and affection Christ-conscious and Christ-centered. There fills one's soul an overwhelming desire to pray to this Christ, to read about him, to sing of him, to praise him, to tell of him, and bring others to saving knowledge of his love. These are the natural, joyous impulses in the heart of the truly regenerate. Such marvelous fruits you will not find on a dead tree.
