

These articles came from the pen of Rev. J. S. Sinclair when he was Editor of the Free Presbyterian Magazine. When visiting the late Pastor J. H. Gosden in Maidstone, Kent, during the last war, he remarked to us that these articles made a profound impression upon him when he first read them and they never left his mind. They are certainly worthy of reproduction at the present time.

Rev. D. MacLean, Glasgow.

THE ABSENCE OF THE SENSE OF SIN IN PRESENT-DAY RELIGION

by

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Many are the fundamental defects of the popular religion of the present day. Some of these are to be seen in the outward practice of its professors; others, in the inner frame of mind which characterises them and which does not fail to show itself. One of the latter defects, which is patent to the eye of the spiritual observer, is the absence of the sense of sin. There are no "sinners" nowadays, in the felt sense of the word, among the general class of supposed Christians. The explanation is that a generation of people have arisen who are "pure in their own eyes and yet are not washed from their filthiness."

1. Let us observe, in the first place, that there is the greatest possible difference between the committal of sin and the sense of sin. Sin itself is of the creature, but the sense of it is of God. It is necessary to make plain this distinction. Many ignorant people are found who cannot discriminate in this matter. When some such happen to hear a sincere child of God confessing his sins in prayer, they are ready to conclude that he must surely be a greater transgressor than others, or that he has committed some specially heinous iniquities. They do not understand that the enlightened conscience has a keener sense of sin and guilt than others, and sees sin and guilt where others see none. Another fact that is overlooked is that indulgence in sin, instead of awakening the sense of it, has entirely the opposite effect. Criminal indulgence has the direct tendency to stupefy and deaden the conscience. The conscience is rendered inactive and insensate. Thus it frequently happens that hardened sinners are in their own opinion the most innocent people in the world. All the miseries they bring upon themselves they attribute to the ill intentions of other people. On the other hand, where the true sense of sin is, there is a sense of its constant presence in thought and action, its evil and its guilt, and there is the disposition to hate it and forsake it. Let it be clearly marked then, that sin is of man and the devil, but the sense of it is the work of God in the soul.

2. It is to be noted more fully that the sense of sin is produced by the Holy Spirit in conversion, and is sustained by the same Spirit in sanctification. This is clearly the teaching of the Holy Scriptures on the subject.

As to the sense of sin in **conversion**, Christ Himself speaks in the sixteenth chapter of John, when He intimates that after He departs He will send forth the Spirit of truth who “will reprove the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment: of sin, because they believe not on Me.” And this is illustrated by frequent examples in the Acts of the Apostles. Witness the thousands on the day of Pentecost, Saul of Tarsus, and the Philippian jailer. Similar has been the experience of Christians in subsequent times. Take the eminent examples of Augustine, Luther, John Bunyan, Owen, Halyburton and others. True, cases can be found where the first stroke of the Spirit’s power was the manifestation of love—the love of God—but the stroke left a sense of sin behind it. It is a sense of sin and unworthiness that makes the love of God in Christ so inexpressibly wonderful and precious in the eyes of the soul. The one is the complement of the other in saving experience, though in cases where the sense of love far exceeded the sense of sin, the latter was swallowed up in the former, and, to the soul’s consciousness, hardly seemed there at all. It is usually, however, the cry of the publican—“God be merciful to me, a sinner”—that is the first experience of God’s people under the Spirit’s work in conversion.

As to the sense of sin in **sanctification**, the Psalmist in the Old Testament and the Apostle Paul in the New, are outstanding inspired witnesses. The psalms bear striking testimony to the sense of sin in the process of sanctification. David and the other heaven-taught writers are constantly sensible of being still sinners in heart and life. They confess their shortcomings and provocations with plaintive sorrow, and they seek with persevering earnestness that will not take denial, the forgiveness of their iniquities and the light of God’s favourable countenance. The Apostle Paul in the seventh chapter of the Epistle to the Romans describes his own experience at and after conversion, and his testimony clearly is that the living soul finds evil present with him. “I delight in the law of God after the inward man (a thing no unconverted or merely awakened sinner can say); but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.” Under an overwhelming sense of indwelling corruption he cries: “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” And yet in the same breath he adds: “I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Some modern interpreters who stand high in Presbyterian Churches, hold that the Apostle is here describing his first convictions of sin only prior to conversion—a great mistake and delusion. It is the man of faith and hope who says, “I thank God through Jesus Christ,” that bemoans at the same time the weight of “the body of this death”. Again, the Apostle describes the case of his brethren in Christ in Galatians 5. 17, “For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary the one to the other; so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.” Here an inward conflict is

described which undoubtedly involves a sense of indwelling sin.

Further, we remark that it stands to Christian common-sense, in meditating upon these things of God and the soul, that the case should be as it really is. Regeneration is not perfect sanctification. Regeneration is the creation of a new man—"a new heart and a right spirit"—but it is not the complete casting out of "the old man". "The old man" is cast down but not cast out. He is still alive and active, and though dethroned, seeks to regain the ascendancy that he has lost. All this underlines the manifold exhortations and warnings that the Apostle Paul and the other Apostles address to "the faithful in Christ Jesus", in relation to dangers from sin—and sin clearly and unmistakably in their own breasts—lasciviousness, malice, wrath, unbelief, and such like. Where the new creation reigns, there must, of necessity, be a sense of the sin that remains, a consciousness of its depravity and guilt, a conflict with its workings, and intense longings for deliverance from it, root and branch. How conspicuous by its absence is such a sense of sin in the popular religion of the times in which we live! Weighed in the balance of the sanctuary, that religion is found entirely wanting.

It is manifest, therefore, that the absence of this sense implies the absence of the Spirit, which is necessary to salvation. Many, indeed, are the evil results of the absence of the Spirit's work in His convincing and enlightening operations. The sinner who has religious convictions of a kind, and is not humbled before God by a sense of his sins, is beset with grave spiritual dangers. In fact, it has been remarked by thoughtful students of the things of the kingdom of God, that no great error in doctrine or departure from the Scriptures has ever taken place, but an insufficient sense of the sinfulness of sin lay at the bottom of it. A deep conviction of our own sinfulness and liability to err, will keep us submissive to the wisdom of God as expressed in His word, and dependent on the teaching of the Spirit of truth, who cannot lie. We now proceed to observe:—

3. Some all-important departments of religion from which the sense of sin is absent at the present day.

It is conspicuous by its absence from the general **preaching** of the time. Let it be noticed that the theology that is popular in the larger religious denominations takes little account of the fact of sin. The inspired account of the Fall is treated, by many, more as myth or poetry than as simple truth, while the doctrine of the total depravity of the race in relation to anything spiritually good is practically, often emphatically, denied. Divinity students who have never been savingly taught of God themselves, and who imbibe seriously defective views of sin and salvation at theological Halls, will necessarily give expression to these views in the pulpit when they become ordained and responsible ministers of the Gospel. Thus it has come to pass that the average preacher of the day is a man who does not seem to have any sense of sin himself, and makes no effort to impress his hearers with the necessity of having it. He was never convinced in his own soul that he was a fallen, lost sinner before God, or that he possesses a heart that is "deceitful above

all things, and desperately wicked” (Jer. 17:9), and so these solemn realities have no place in his thoughts or his preaching. He stands up with the aspect of a just and good man who never thought or did anything particularly wrong or sinful in his life, and addresses his hearers as if they were very much like himself in this respect. They need, no doubt, to be instructed or corrected on some minor points, or consoled in view of troubles and disappointments they have experienced in their daily life, and he administers the supposed instruction or comfort required. Further than this he seldom, if ever, goes. Sin, if it is handled at all, is chiefly treated in its bearing on one’s neighbour or fellow-creature. Moral evil, as between man and man, is at times largely descanted on and strongly denounced, but sin, as committed against God and incurring His holy displeasure and righteous curse, is not discussed or proclaimed. Many preachers regard the Bible doctrines of sin and its consequent punishment—hell—as the gloomy notions of an unenlightened past, in no wise fit for the ears of the cultured people of today. We have surely fallen upon evil times when the unerring truth of God’s Word cannot be spoken or listened to in the professing Church of Christ, and when blind leaders of the blind so largely occupy the Christian pulpit. We do not touch the various consequences of this popular preaching meantime: we simply note the fact that the sense of sin, both as a doctrine and an experience, is absent from it to a fatal degree.

The sense of sin is also conspicuously absent from the exercise of **public** prayer. The Lord Jesus, as the Head of the Church, taught his disciples to pray: “Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone that is indebted to us” (Luke 11:4). And the Apostle John, as an inspired teacher, addressing the children of God, declares, “If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8, 9). These infallible testimonies clearly prove both that a sense of sin is an important element in Christian experience, and that sin should be a matter of confession and supplication unto God on the part of those who walk in the light. Now, we find that this feature is very seldom to be observed in the general ministerial prayers of the present day. There is no confession of sin, or entreaty for forgiveness. The cry of the broken spirit, which is in God’s sight a pleasing sacrifice, is not to be heard from professional lips—a sure indication of the reign of spiritual death. What is generally to be heard is a series of thanksgivings for blessings received—“We thank Thee; we thank Thee; we thank Thee”—a manner of address too suggestive of the Pharisee’s prayer in the temple: “I thank Thee that I am not as other men are.” The supplication of the Publican—“God be merciful to me a sinner,”—is far away. Let us not, however, be understood for a moment as decrying the spirit of true thankfulness to the Most High for His goodness, or the appropriate expression of it. This is admirable and necessary in its own place, but it comes to this, that when no sense of sin or need is expressed, the discerning hearer is apt to call in question whether the leader in prayer has ever received any of the saving blessings of the Gospel, and, as a result, whether he is capable of rendering spiritual thankfulness to God for anything whatsoever. The most highly-favoured of God’s servants feel their own sins and short-comings most, and the need of constant application to the throne of grace

for forgiveness and cleansing, and for quickening, renewing, comforting and strengthening influences. They count not themselves to have apprehended, but “press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14). The absence of the sense of sin from the devotional utterances of those who ought to be an example to others will have an injurious effect upon the views of the people who listen to them. The tendency will be to choke the sense of sin and need, even where it is to be found. Unconverted ministers are bound to destroy much good and to do incalculable harm to their fellow-sinners.

The sense of sin is, further, absent from the general religious life of our time. We use the word life in a modified sense. The life that is so much talked of is for most part only a form of death. Spiritual death has its activities as well as spiritual life, and these activities betray themselves, for they do not run in the channel of God’s Word. Let it be noticed, then, that the sense of sin is absent from many supposed conversions. This important change is now generally reduced to one category, decision for Christ. All that the convert is expected to say is that he believes in and intends to follow Christ. There is no word of conviction of sin, and ruin, and helplessness. A lost sinner, crying to the Lord for mercy and pardon and faith through Jesus Christ, and not ceasing till he is helped and saved from above, is not the newer Christian at his beginnings. He believes and decides by his own native ability with hardly a pang of conscience, and this is what is called conversion. True it is that a decision to follow Christ is part of a true conversion to God, but it is not the whole. It belongs to the fruit rather than the root of the matter. None can truly obey the Redeemer but one who has been saved by Him from sin in its guilt and dominion, and this implies an inward change of soul—a new birth—that is generally attended with many inward struggles and agonies on account of sin.

We further observe that the sense of sin, which always accompanies vital godliness, is conspicuous by its absence from the supposed spiritual life of the modern class of Christians. The absence of this consciousness of sin is clearly connected in the present day with the lack of those gracious dispositions which evidence the “new creation”, as may be seen from the following particulars:—

(1) There is an absence of “the fear of the Lord” from modern religious life. The fear of the Lord is an essential feature of true piety, whether under the Old Testament or the New. The children of God, under the old economy, are very frequently described as those that fear the Lord, and it is written of the early Christians in the Acts of the Apostles that “they walked in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost.” The “perfect love” of the Gospel casts out slavish fear—the fear which proceeds from a sense of guilt—the fear in which there is nothing but fear—but it does not cast out filial fear, which consists in the love and reverence of the living and accepted child. Where this gracious fear is, there is a view of the infinite majesty and holiness of God, as seen both on Mount Sinai and Mount Calvary, and not less on the latter—a view which fills the soul with a sense of its inexpressible vileness and unworthiness. “This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of

whom I am chief.” Now, this godly fear, accompanied with a deep sense of sin, is conspicuously absent from the newer religion. “The Lost Fear of God” was the title of an article in a popular religious paper some time ago. Unhallowed familiarity and presumptuous boldness have taken the place of “reverence and godly fear.”

(2) There is the presence of a great deal of confidence in the flesh. The Apostle Paul describes true believers as those who “rejoice in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh”. Fleshly confidence is an outstanding feature of present-day religion—a fitting accompaniment of the lack of the sense of sin. When the eyes of people are not opened to see their fallen and lost condition as sinners before God, and when there is no perception of the sin that cleaves to every thought, word and action, there must necessarily be a great deal of esteem for the energies and works of the creature, self-complacency and self-confidence hold the field, and men walk on from day to day well-contented with themselves, their doings, and their attainments. They secretly, if not openly, resent the idea of man’s total depravity by nature, and inability to do anything pleasing to God, and they do their best to flatter their own souls, and the souls of many of their fellows, that all are objects of God’s favour and shall stand well at last. Flattery of the creature and his accomplishments is one of the most conspicuous symptoms of the absence of spiritual health in the religious life of today. If men knew in reality the deceitfulness and wickedness of their own hearts, they would act differently in this matter from what they do. This confidence in the flesh also disposes them, in the religious sphere, to multiply a great variety of organisations with a view, as they think, to benefit spiritually their fellow creatures. They set aside Gospel simplicity, and launch on a course of inventing new methods of worship and service, whereby they imagine they will draw men to Christ—at least to the Christ of their own fancy. Here they betray their ignorance of themselves and of God. He will say to them. “Who hath required this at your hands?” “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord”—especially those sacrifices which he has never prescribed. Many of them, as vain displays of human art, cannot be anything else than loathsome in His sight.

(3) There is the absence of a real life of faith upon the Son of God as the Divine Saviour and Mediator of the new covenant. Many suppose that it is quite enough to be born within the pale of the visible Church, to be baptised in the name of the Triune God, to go from the Sabbath School to the Bible Class, from the latter to the young Communicants’ Class, and thence to the Lord’s Table, in order to be sound Christians. They have no sense of sin or soul dependence upon Christ for salvation. Completely dead, they are in a mere profession; and if they have an orthodox creed, their sleep is intensified. Others, again, have had some slight religious turn in their lives. They were impressed with some sermon they heard, or some event in Providence; they became anxious for a season; and then they heard some word that they felt comforting, and so they passed on to be members in full communion and workers in the congregation. And yet, for all this, there is no real life of God in their souls; they rest in a natural faith, and are not needy sinners en-

tirely dependent upon the Lord Jesus Christ for righteousness, strength and all covenant blessings. Where there is the genuine faith, there is a constant realisation of soul need, and a daily seeking the face of the Lord—an inability to live without some communion at a throne of grace with the Father, through the Son and by the Holy Ghost. If this access is denied in experience, such Christians are sorrowful and downcast, but they persevere in watching and waiting for the rise of the Sun of righteousness upon their souls. They cling by a faith of adherence to the word of promise when everything is dark to sense and feeling, and light arises to such upright ones in due time. What a lack of this vital godliness is to be seen in a generation who are pure in their own eyes!

(4) The fourth and last general point that we shall presently notice is the serious results of the want of the sense of sin in the modern pulpit, and their bearing upon the pew. Some of these results are that the preacher makes little or no distinction in his sermons between nature and grace, between a state of condemnation and a state of salvation, between the broad way that leadeth to destruction and the narrow way that leadeth to eternal life. Unconverted sinners are not warned of their sin and guilt and danger, or directed to the way of escape through Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Nominal professors are allowed to sleep on in their self-complacency and carnal security, while, if there be one child of God in the congregation, he is starved and stupefied until he hardly knows light from darkness. The way of salvation that is generally presented to the hearers, is a new but thinly veiled edition of salvation by works—salvation by character, as the word is nowadays. The perfect example of the Lord Jesus is held up to view as the chief object of attention to the sinful worshipper—as if he could so follow that spotless example by his natural religious efforts as to win eternal life for himself. Christ is only a partial Redeemer: the sinner shares largely with Him the glory of his redemption. In fact, the chief part of the work is ascribed to the sinner; Christ's merit and power to save are thrust into the background. Can anything more delusive or soul-destroying be imagined? How many must pass into eternity with a lie in their right hand!

Such are the manifold evil results of a ministry where the professed ambassador for Christ is a man ignorant of his own heart, ignorant of God, and ignorant of the scheme of redemption. And perhaps there are some who may not be destitute of saving grace who need another day of power in their experience, when superficial sentimentality shall be swept away, and when they shall declare the whole counsel of God in a discriminating and searching manner which they know very little of now. It is a dreadful thing to be lulling sinners asleep in the arms of a false peace on the brink of a lost eternity. The message that is frequently needed is not "All is well, and be happy", but "Escape for thy life; look not behind thee; neither stay thou in all the plain; escape to the mountain (of God's mercy in Christ) lest thou be consumed." (Gen. 19:17).