

Saint or Sinner

Two men went into their closets to pray, one a Calvinist, the other an Arminian. The Calvinist knelt and prayed thusly according to his theology: "I thank You, Almighty God, that I am not as some Christians, holy, moral, righteous, exemplary in conduct, certainly not like pious Arminians. I despise Your law, desire nothing to do with it. I steal the tithe and use it for my own pleasure. I go about my work, pleasure and business on the seventh day as any other. I smoke, drink swear, hate, lie, steal, lust and fornicate to Your glory. I am vile, rotten to the core, unable to perform one good thing. I constantly mourn over my wretchedness, am totally unable to rise above the level of a worm. In fact, my lifestyle is marked by no difference whatsoever from lost sinners, the only difference between us being that they do not grieve over their sins as I do mine. I do thus glorify the grace of God in salvation."

The Arminian knelt and lifted his heart and voice in praise and adoration to God thusly: "Thank You, holy Father, for delivering me from the power of darkness and translating me into the kingdom of Your dear Son (Col. 1:13), for crucifying my old man with Christ on the cross, putting him out of sight in His burial and raising me up in the newness of life by His resurrection (Rom. 6:3-6). Thank you for making me a new person, created in righteousness and true holiness (Eph. 4:24), writing Your holy law in my heart as well as my Bible (Heb. 8:10), so that obedience to it is a natural to me as breathing. Thank You for quickening my mortal body by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:11) that it might be made a vehicle of spiritual life, exercising good works (Eph. 2:10), bringing forth fruit unto God (Romans 7:4)."

I say unto you that this Arminian has a better view and witness of the sovereign grace of God in salvation than this Calvinist.

If one should think the above parody of Luke 18:10-14 is too far fetched, then he is not aware of what is being preached by a good number of "Sovereign Grace" preachers today. Total depravity, the utter ruin and moral helplessness of unregenerate man has so captured their fancies that they carry this concept of man's wickedness and worthlessness over into the new man in Christ Jesus. They are so anxious to refute the popular Pelagian myth of man's potential for good, and to cry out against legalistic moralizers that they deny the Christian's personal righteousness, and his real performance of foreordained good works.

Now, not all Calvinists are guilty of this sort of thing. Not by a long shot. Nor do all Arminians grasp the truth of the New Man created in righteousness and true holiness. But when we find the "wretched man" idea being set forth, it will not be by an Arminian, but a Calvinist. Arminians may commit worse sins, but they will not be guilty of that one. And that is the weed we wish to uproot now.

Many of these Gehazis, greedy to fatten their dignities and egos with the silver of the Reformers, have unwittingly contracted their leprosy. Their own ignorance would be tragedy enough, but they seem to be bent on spreading this plague throughout evangelical Christendom. Since they will not listen to scripture (applying their own accommodating hermeneutic), perhaps they could be helped by history.

Aurelius Augustine, one of the greatest minds of Christian history, was assigned the task of forging an ecclesiology that would justify the Constantinian merger of State and Church. The already fallen Church, eager to have the protection, profits and comforts of the State, and the State, desirous of the religious loyalty of the Church, wished to have some sort of rationale for asserting that all the members of the political entity were also members of the religious entity, the Church. They already had the method for doing that (infant baptism and the threat of the sword), but they needed an apologetic for it. It is a tribute to Augustine's powers of imagination, contrivance, and inventive genius that he accomplished such a monumental task, for which the Church bestowed him with sainthood.

Augustine, who well knew that the Bible taught a church of regenerate believers only, found a way of solving his task by inventing the idea of a church within the Church. The inner church of true believers hidden inside the outer Church which comprised all the members of society. This inner true church he called the *invisible* church, the outer thing, the *visible* Church. It was absolutely essential, he knew, to keep this invisible concept intact. Otherwise, everyone's attention would be drawn to the inner church, and the outward thing would be ignored. This is exactly opposite to what was desired. The Emperor and the Churchmen wanted to pass off the counterfeit for the real thing.

The frustrating fact that stood in the way of asserting true believers to be unidentifiable is the New Testament's claim of a *distinguishing lifestyle* for all Christians, easily visible to the human eye. "Ye shall know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:16). "In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil" (1 John 3:10).

Since there was indeed a marked difference in the moral behaviour of true converts and those who were not, and the vast majority of this State Established Church were unconverted, some satisfactory explanation had to be given. Incredibly, Augustine reversed the scriptural test and made righteous living a mark of a heretic! This, of course, could not have stood if the people had been permitted to have a Bible. And it did not stand among those who had access to the scriptures. He managed, however, to tie this absurd lie to the phenomenon of the Donatists. Donatists had split with the Roman church over sacramentalism. They insisted on separation of church and state. They also insisted on a regenerate church membership with the evidence of renewal by a radically changed lifestyle. But they also held to some doctrinal error such as baptismal regeneration. Augustine tied their superior moral behaviour to their doctrinal error with the phrase *quasi laudabilis conversatio* (make-believe praiseworthy deportment). It was a master stroke. The slander with its paraphrases immediately became the standard means of identifying holy living with heresy. It survives today as "holiness sects", "external legalism" or Arminian "lawkeeping" or "Pharasaical hypocrites".

If the Reformation had been genuine and complete, this reversal of the marks of the regenerate would have been blotted out. But the Reformers soon found that they, too, must tie the Church with the State if they were to survive, and, in order to do that, they were compelled to include the whole population of the State within the Church. Luther was especially culpable in this matter. His idea of “justified and sinner at one and the same time” is a well-worded statement of his position. His often quoted formula of pure doctrine, *Isola fidei* (by faith alone), is thought to mean “faith unassisted” (by good works), but his over emphasis on salvation as forgiveness and justification, and the expense of salvation as transformation and renewal, gives grave grounds to suspect that he meant “salvation unaccompanied” (by good works). His hatred for the book of James is no secret. He even declared that some day he was going to “heat the kitchen stove with that old Jakie”.

Henry Bullinger, friend and successor to Zwingli, railed against the Anabaptists thusly: “Those who unite with them will by their ministers be received into their church by rebaptism and repentance and newness of life. They henceforth lead their lives under a semblance of quiet spiritual conduct. They denounce covetousness, pride, profanity, the lewd conversation and immorality of the world, the drinking and the gluttony. In fine, their hypocrisy is great and manifold.

Implicit in this sort of reasoning is the assumption that there is no such thing as genuine Christian piety, therefore any display of a moral deportment peculiar to Christians is hypocrisy and to be immediately identified with heresy and doctrinal unsoundness. Leonard Verduin writes in The Reformers and Their Stepchildren:

When certain people were being investigate for suspected Anabaptist leanings, this testimony was offered: “Because their children are being so carefully and devoutly reared, and because they do not have the practice of cursing and swearing, therefore they are suspected of being Anabaptist.” Similarly at the hearing of Hans Jeger, under similar suspicion, it was said: “Now because he does not swear and because he leads an unoffensive life, therefore men suspect him of Anabaptism . . . He has for a long time passed for such, because he did not swear, nor quarrel, nor did other such-like things.”

Conversely, we read of people cleared of Anabaptist charges by their bad deportment. Of Casper Zachers it was testified in court: “He is not commonly by the rank and file thought to be an Anabaptist, because he is a churlish fellow who can’t get along with others, starts fights and discord, swears and curses, disturbs the peace and carries weapons on his person.”

So much was an unusually good deportment a mark of Restitutionist heresy that as early as 1531 it was already said of the Protestants in general: “So far has their idea of Christian liberty carried them that any person who talks about God and the Christian way of life or who is seriously exercised concerning his own moral improvement passes with them for an arch-anabaptist.” *

Thus the Reformers followed faithfully in the footsteps of Augustinian ecclesiology in condemning the righteous for righteousness. One Roman inquisitor relates the story of a virtuous young woman who became suspect of heresy because she resisted the amorous advances of a priest, and who was ultimately burned. So far as justifying the wicked and condemning the righteous was concerned, the “Reformers” were *conformers*.

Let us now consider some of the mischief done by modern day preachers still hacking away with this tool of the devil bequeaths to us by Constantinian sacralism, this contrived lie lifted out of Augustine’s ecclesiology.

The main body of New Testament writings is to Christians, and its principal burden is that they will rise, in their personal experiential walk, to the level of holiness to which they have been created.

When we preach to assembled churches, we preach, for the most part, to converted people. When we write articles, papers and books for publications we can be sure that they will be received and read mostly by Christians. We ought, therefore, have some bread for the children. The sheep ought to be fed, encouraged, built up, not berated, deprecated and beat down. They ought to be given truth that will equip them to lay hold upon the issues of life and godliness, fight the good fight of faith and overcome the world, the flesh and the devil. We will not be doing much toward this if all they hear is how bad, wretched and sorry they are.

It is quite true that the sinner needs to be warned, and the deceived professor routed out of his false hope. Therefore the moral ruin of natural man must be preached. But it must be made clear that such moral ruin applies to the unregenerate alone, not true believers in Christ.

It may be said that even the true believer is nothing apart from Christ, that considered alone in his Adamic nature, he is no better than he ever was, just as wicked and incapable of any good as any sinner on earth. But this sort of talk is unrealizable hypothetical supposition and utter foolishness! If a person is converted, he is *not* without Christ and never will be. He is forever united to the Son of righteousness in vital union. His life is in Christ and nowhere else. (Romans 6:3-11, 7:4, Galatians 2:20, Col. 3:3). He *has* no Adamic nature. The old man is dead, crucified with Christ and buried. He has only one nature, only one viable life, and that is the new man, the Christ-life, and the only natural things for him to do are righteous things. He does indeed do unrighteous things, but it is as unnatural and contrary to his true nature to do those things as it is for an unregenerate person to live righteously.

To hammer away at believers with this “wretched man syndrome” that demand that we view ourselves in our true regenerate self as yet indescribably polluted and utterly incapable of thinking or performing anything but sin is a grievous slander to the New Birth, and a crippling handicap to the Christian’s growth in grace. If a person is constantly told he is a sinner, that it is his true nature to sin, and that he can do nothing but sin, he will attempt to drag his life down to that level. It will confuse him, make him feel guilty for not feeling guilty, make him ashamed of his piety, try to hide it and to deny it. It will make him strive to feel immoral and see his deeds in their worst imaginable light. And it will demand that he join in the chorus critical of others who live the normal righteous Christian life.

*The Reformers and Their Stepchildren, by Leonard Verduin. Published by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan. Used by permission.

See also The Anatomy of An Hybrid by the same author and publisher.

Calvinistic preaching is offensive enough to the unconverted without adding this unneeded stumbling block. When a man becomes awakened by the Holy Spirit, and sin becomes exceedingly sinful to him, he desires a salvation that will deliver him from his bondage, wash his filth away, make him clean, purge his conscience and satisfy his hunger and longing for righteousness. If a justified person is the same sinner as the unjustified one – he wants no part of it. The “New Birth” becomes a fraud. Why should he desire the religion of a man who is no different from him, one who is constantly mourning, sighing and grieving over his utter immorality and has no power to break with it? Sovereign grace preachers would do well to take a closer look at the validity of the gospel they preach before congratulating themselves for “turning people off” with it.

This teaching has no Biblical support whatever. The wretched man pictured in Romans seven is not a sketch of a Christian living in a high state of grace, and having an awful struggle living a Christian life. It shows us a man who is in a state of total failure. He is not losing some battles; he is losing them all. He is utterly unable to do one right thing and equally unable to restrain himself from any evil deed. This man is certainly spiritually awakened since he hates sin and loves righteousness, but he is as yet unenlightened. He has not yet seen and appropriated Christ as the power of a righteous life. Nor is the wretched man’s cry left unanswered. The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus sets him free from the law of sin and death. To make this freedom justification only is to do great violence to the context. The whole matter in question is not forgiveness but practical, righteous living, the power to break with sinful actions and to actually do righteous deeds, “That the righteousness *of the law* might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit (Romans 8:4)

The term “saved sinner” is not in the Bible. Christians are never addressed as the “justified sinners” in such and such a place. They are called saints, holy brethren, holy persons, royal priests, trees of righteousness. A single exception is thought to be found in 1 Timothy 1:15: This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.” We are told that this statement of the Apostle Paul must be taken at literal face value. Since “I am” is in the present tense Paul is asserting that he is presently, in his renewed state, the worst sinner living. Then we are told that this was how Paul *viewed* himself, that this is a position of humility . . . considering oneself the worst of all sinners, because one knows the corruption of his own heart as he knows no one else’s. But that will not do, for we have then departed from the literal, straightforward interpretation. He did not say, “I *see* myself as the chiefest of sinners”, but, I *am*. We must, therefore, go all the way with the literal present tense interpretation and concur that the Apostle was at that time literally the worst scoundrel on earth, barring none, or we must abandon that view. Tenses, no more than any other grammatical construction may be allowed to have the last word in Biblical interpretation, especially in a case such as this, where a doctrine is made to rest upon a single verse. Consider the tenses in John 3:13, Romans 8:30, and James 5:1-3. The context must be taken into account as well as the entire analogy of faith. That Paul as “the chiefest of sinners” has reference to his persecution of the church in his unregenerate state, there can be no doubt. Verse 15, “Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious:”, and verse 16, “Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting”. The point made is that Jesus Christ saves sinners and demonstrates it in the salvation of Paul, the chief among them. He is not, by any stretch of imagination, confessing himself to still be what he was before.

See also 1 Corinthians 15:9: “For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” Although he knew himself to be justified, renewed and cleansed, his past crimes against God could not let him forget his personal unworthiness. But it did not allow him to discount what Christ had now made of him. 2 Corinthians 12:11, “For in nothing am I behind the very chiefest apostles, though I be nothing.”

Is there anyone brash enough to affirm that Christians are ungodly and do not one whit of good works? Yet Romans 4:5 tells us (in the present tense), “But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.” That might fit Luther’s theology, but it will not bear the weight of scripture. And one would have to burn more than the book of James to make it hold up. No this can only mean that God justifies men who are at the point of their justification, yet ungodly and without one good work to assist them.

Although the Bible word for justified believers is saints, not sinners, it cannot be denied that saints not only sin, but struggle against sin. There is indeed a spiritual warfare being waged in the believer’s mind and body; “the flesh strives against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh” (Galatians 5:17). This antagonism cannot be explained by the “two nature” theory, the idea that the believer has both a flesh nature and a spiritual nature. The scriptures clearly rule that out. “Ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you” (Romans 8:9). No living creature is “naturally” two opposites at the same time. It is only one thing by nature. And the Christian, the regenerated and converted believer, is a righteous and holy person by nature. Whatever behaviour, or inclinations to behaviour, he may experience in his body contrary to that, is *not* his nature.

How, then, are we to explain this warfare, this antagonism going on in the believer? According to the scripture the antagonist to spiritual life is not another nature but unmortified sin in the body (Romans 8:13). The Apostle Paul takes up the problem of continuing sin in the believer’s life subsequent to his conversion in Romans 6, 7 and 8. And he thoroughly refutes any notion of sin belonging to the true nature of the renewed man. He is careful to confine the realm of corruption to the “body of sin” (Romans 6:6), “your mortal body” (Romans 6:12), “your members” (Romans 6:13), “the deeds of the body” (Romans 8:13). While not absolving the Christian from responsibility for sins, he boldly asserts that such sins do not arise from the believer himself but “sin that dwelleth in me” (Romans 7:17, 20). That “wretched man’s” cry of despair is not left unanswered. He who loved God’s law, who willed to obey that law, who delighted in righteousness but found himself, nevertheless, impotent to resist the law of sin in his members, found the

spiritual resources in “the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:2) to set him free from the law of sin and death in his members. Our Lord Jesus Christ came to save us from our sins, not just to justify us and leave us in bondage to them. Nothing less could constitute a credible salvation. But thanks be to God for a Saviour Who wrought on His cross a deliverance from the power of sin as well as its penalty, and who will some day deliver us from its very presence. That is a gospel we can preach and witness with power and confidence.

- C. M.