

The Cruel Doctrine of Sheltonism

“Chuck Winters will be here tonight,” the lady confided, “and we are praying that he will get saved. He’s lost and knows it, and has been trying to get saved for a long time. Just think, tonight may be the night.”

Chuck came, alright. He took an active part in the worship, joining heartily in the singing, prayer, and gave diligent attention to the preaching of the word. I observed that week as he searched the scripture, gave careful attention to obey each admonition of the word of God. I answered his questions which revealed a high degree of comprehension of spiritual truth. Yet he affirmed that he was yet lost. “It’s all in my head,” he would say. “God has not yet revealed to me what a sinner I am, and therefore I have not repented enough.”

This man (whose name is not really Chuck Winters) is a victim of Sheltonism. Sheltonism is a word I have coined to designate a previously unnamed error which has plagued Evangelical Christianity for decades. It is taken from L. R. Shelton, the late pastor of the Metropolitan Baptist Church of New Orleans, Louisiana. Mr. Shelton was an able preacher of the Gospel, and exerted a tremendous influence by means of the radio, printed periodicals and sermon booklets. These latter were distributed by “colporters” located in cities all over the country. He distrusted anyone else’s ministry, and encouraged his followers in other cities to forsake their churches and listen to his tapes instead of a local pastor. Naturally, these followers became hard, critical, pharasaical, and obsessed with an illusion of super spirituality, that they were the only ones with the truth.

Sheltonism did not originate with L. R. Shelton. (No modern heresy is modern: they all have primitive ancestors.) It antedates him, was contemporary with him in the ministry of others, and vigorously survives him now in the ministry of prominent evangelists, radio preachers, and Shelton’s tapes and booklets, which are still widely distributed by the Metropolitan Baptist Church. The movement deserves to be named after Shelton, because he has been probably its most influential and far reaching propagator. Other men (who now bitterly denounce Shelton) have gathered his followers, and are doing a booming business in this pernicious perversion of the gospel and exploitation of the souls of men.

I will now attempt to define Sheltonism in terms of its doctrine and characteristics. It is basically a corruption of Calvinism, with a dominating element of Subjectivism. It preaches a salvation by grace according to the sovereign mercy of God, but insists that this salvation is evidenced by a narrowly defined subjective experience. This subjectivism does not come from scriptural exegesis, but from an erroneous interpretation of the workings of God in true historic Revivals and in what is supposed to be true experience in grace.

- 1) It insists that everyone must “get saved” through a great emotional experience. Just exactly what this experience is like is never spelled out. Yet people are constantly warned of counterfeits. Shelton himself gives testimony of many counterfeit experiences before he got really saved. This experience, whatever it is, can always be recounted in detail, giving the exact time and date when a person passed from death to life.
- 2) This salvation experience must be preceded by months of proper mourning, grieving over sins, and striving to get saved. Once must be diligent to discern whether or not his repentance is the proper kind. It could be just a “worldly sorrow,” like Esau’s, unto death, rather than a godly sorrow unto life. Warning is given to seekers lest they hope too soon before they have sorrowed enough.
- 3) Many know they are lost, and are trying earnestly to get saved. Multitudes of these love the Lord, the truth, diligently devour the word, hate and abhor sin, and their hearts are set on serving the Lord. Yet they are not saved because they have not yet repented enough. This sort of thing goes on for years.
- 4) Attempt is made to interpret all scripture in this light. Great pains are taken to reveal and spell out clearly what the Holy Spirit in divine inspiration neglected to do: namely, who is saved and who is lost. Writings such as most of Hebrews, which are intended to be warnings and instructions to God’s people, are twisted and strained to “clearly indicate” that such and such were lost professors and other were genuinely saved.

Why This is Error

I now want to demonstrate the truth and the heresy in this doctrine. Not only will we see its error, but we will see what a terrible bondage it puts on the people of God, what a stumbling block it is, and what a false hope it offers to the unconverted.

- 1) The Scriptures declare that we must be born from above, that we must repent of our sins and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, that we must become new creatures in Christ, and that Jesus Christ came to seek and to save that which was lost. The Scriptures, however, never command us to “get saved” or to seek a salvation experience, let alone define what that salvation experience is. Therefore it is right and true to tell sinners that they must be born again. They themselves cannot do this. It is God the Holy Spirit Who regenerates them. They will not know it by the experience but by the newness of life in which they live. It is right to tell men that they must repent and believe. But to tell them that they must seek a certain “valid” experience, and yet no one, not even the Scriptures can tell them what that “valid” experience is, is to put them into an unspeakably cruel bondage. They will be continually seeking something, ever fearful lest it be counterfeit, yet having absolutely nothing whereby to distinguish the false from the true. Salvation in the Scriptures is never represented in an experience. It is a work of God in eternity into which the

believer is brought in time, is lived out in his lifetime, and is consummated in eternity. For more detail in this, see my book, Salvation . . . When? While this system refuses comfort to those who are genuine, sensitive children of God, it gives false hope to those who suppose themselves to have had a sufficiently great salvation experience but evidence no grace of God in their lives as true Christians.

- 2) On the matter of deep repentance as a prerequisite to saving faith there can be no question. The Scriptures are clear that saving faith is impossible without repentance. It is right and expedient that we preach repentance toward God, a thorough turning from all that is opposed to absolute submission to the Lordship of Christ, and an utter renunciation of dependence upon self and vain religious exercises. Nothing but the person of Christ must be left as the object of our faith.

But to prescribe exact emotions, stresses, grievings and groanings is to add to the Scripture. To make mandatory a prescribed length of time for such exercises is to revive in a Protestant form the Penance system of the Roman Church. Sheltonism has its seekers looking, not at Christ as their hope, but their repentance. Thus repentance itself becomes a fetish. If one has repented enough he has hope in Christ. If not, then he must wait until God reveals more of his wickedness so that he may repent more.

There is a subtle slander of God in this system. The sinner knows he is lost and wants to get saved. He cannot get saved because he has not repented enough. He cannot repent enough because God will not show him his wickedness. Therefore God is to blame for his lost condition. The sinner is willing, but God is not! How utterly false!

- 3) It is quite true that there are multitudes of religiously active people who go about good works with a zeal and fervor who are yet unconverted. But these people do not know themselves to be lost. They imagine themselves to be Christians and are in no wise seeking salvation. They believe themselves to be secure. These must surely be warned who hope in other than Christ. There is ever that danger of clinging to a false hope and going out into eternity damned. The solid scriptural grounds of assurance must be set forth: and it is in order to admonish those who profess to make sure they possess.

But we are not talking about people who are lost and do not know it. We are talking about people who have been made to believe they are lost and cannot get saved. These lack nothing of evidence in Christian fruit. They want nothing more than to serve the Lord faithfully. Yet they are denied assurance because their experience seems faulty or they have been made to doubt. They try to be saved, to repent and yet cannot.

The whole picture is ridiculous in the sight of the Scripture. Only one thing separates us from God. Sin! Isaiah 59:1. If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. I John 1:9. God requires us to repent of that which we know, not that which we do not know. To say that He withholds His fellowship because we have not repented and that He will not show us what we should repent of, is to slander the character of God and deny the Scriptures.

It is impossible for a person to know he is lost, want to be saved, sick of sins, hungry for God and remain lost. Either he is lying about his repentance, his desire to be an obedient child of God, or he has been deceived by Sheltonism into looking for something that the Scriptures do not promise in salvation.

After observing Chuck Winters for a few days in a Bible Conference, a minister friend of mine told me he thought God had already done something for him. "Yes," I replied, "I am confident that if he keeps serving the Lord and seeking to know Him more the way he now is, that he will get to heaven whether he ever 'gets saved' or not."

- 4) Preaching the gospel effectively is not conditioned on an infallible knowledge of who is saved and who is lost. Some people are obviously lost. Others are manifestly saints of God. But there are multitudes of marginal cases in which it is impossible for mortal men to discern or detect what their state is grace is outside of special divine revelation. If a person is obviously a child of the devil he ought to be treated and witnessed to as such. When a person is an obvious child of God, he ought to be received as a brother. When we have no definite proof either way, we are to receive one who professes to be a brother as one, until he gives reason to suspect otherwise. And then we are not bound to make conclusions but to warn him to forsake the error of his way and to give diligence to make his calling and election sure.

Sheltonites seem to be more obsessed with discovering false professors than strengthening weak brethren. They had, it seems, rather it be the former case than the latter. Show them a crack and they will drive a wedge into it until it becomes a chasm. If they can make the victim doubt his salvation they feel they have scored a major triumph, for doubt to them is an admission of lostness. They affirm that if a person doubts, he is surely lost. Once he really gets saved, as they did, he will never doubt.

Do not Christians sometimes act like lost people? Who would have considered Lot saved in Sodom? Who would have counted David a man of God, consorting with Bathsheba and then having her husband murdered? Does Peter look like a Christian, cursing and denying the Lord? One is manifestly lost when the whole tenor and direction of his life is sinful, but other cases are not so clear. Do not the devil's children sometimes behave like God's people? Who ever suspected Judas before he betrayed the Lord, other than Christ Himself?

Warnings found in such passages of Scripture, as in Hebrews 2:1, 3:12, 4:1, 4:16, 6:1-9, 10:23, and 12:1, 25, are not given to urge men to "get saved," but to make their calling and election sure, i.e. listen to what God says, give diligent attention to obedience, forsake every sinful pursuit and cleave to Christ. These are accompanied by urgings to believe, not to doubt, as the Sheltonites would have it. Consider Hebrews 6:17-18, and 10:35-39. We are told to not cast away our confidence, to hold fast our profession and to come boldly to the throne of grace. We are not of them that draw back unto perdition, but believe unto the saving of the soul.

Such troublers of the soul fall handily into being useful tools for the accuser of the brethren. They would have had a dandy time with John Bunyan. He was constantly plagued with doubts and never attained a consistent assurance of salvation. John Wesley, eight weeks after his Aldersgate experience, in deep misery and torment of soul, wrote in his diary "That I am not a Christian, I know as surely as I know that Jesus is the Son of God." Yet no further experience preceded the beginning of his great ministry.

It is not our job to tell people that they are God's children. But neither is it our concern to tell them that they are not, when there is reason to believe that they are. Both of these tasks belong to the Holy Spirit. He is the Spirit of sonship in the believer, and He convicts of sin and of righteousness and judgment. We are not to war against Him, but to declare the holy law of God, press upon men the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ, and urge them to put their trust and hope in Him. God will sort out the results when He divides the sheep from the goats. God has multitudes of weak, stumbling sheep who need help, encouragement and edification. It behooves us to feed them. If we can find a smoking flax, the least evidence of fire, let us fan and encourage it until it flames. Be the reed ever so bruised, let us not tear it asunder, but nurture and heal it until it becomes strong and sturdy.

5) The Holy Spirit had deliberate design in not spelling out in the Scriptures when anyone "got saved." Why, then, should we act as if it were a defect, an oversight by God, and attempt to correct it by attempting to define when Job was lost and when he got saved, or at exactly what point, if ever, Saul was converted? It serves no profitable purpose to speculate upon whether such and such a passage was written to lost people or saved people. It is sufficient to say that the entirety of Scriptures is written to people who have reason to believe that they are God's people. When it is otherwise, it is plainly stated. Such speculations serve only one end: Support for a pet doctrine which cannot be supported by sound Biblical exegesis.

Sheltonism is not always preached and practiced in this extreme sense. Sometimes the sovereign grace element is left completely out, and a pure Arminian approach is made, demanding that the victim do such and such in order to get saved. Sometimes it is only a constant hammering away at church members to beware of deception until every person with any serious intent to follow God at all wants to get saved again. Many have already been baptized a number of times and are still uncertain. Sheltonites will not permit them to rest in Christ.

How Men Come to Believe This

Up to this point we have been somewhat harsh with Sheltonites, but we want to be careful now to make clear that many of them are precious and holy people of God. They have been ensnared in this error by our subtle adversary. There are powerfully convincing causes for their being in the Shelton camp. We hope by this article to help to liberate some of them.

Most people who believe and teach this line of theology spent years as a deceived church member. Their conversion, when it finally came, was a powerful and dramatic one, leaving an indelible impression in their memory. (Such pronounced emotional experiences which accompany conversion are generally the result of the release from demonic powers that had the sinner bound for years. There is no necessary physical sensation in conversion, but there is in demonic deliverance. The greater the bondage, generally speaking, the greater the deliverance experience.) Many times this conversion came only after considerable time in torment and struggle in mind, body and spirit.

Conviction that this is the only valid way to be genuinely converted is then generally fortified by reading biographies of notable men who underwent similar struggles and experienced similar conversions. David Brainerd, for instance, who labored for seven years before he found lasting peace in Christ.

The common error is then made (which everyone knows better) of formulating a theology based on a subjective experience without scriptural support. Who in the Bible ever gave a testimony of his conversion experience, other than the Apostle Paul? And when he gave it, he gave it, not to convince someone that he was a Christian, but that he was a good Jew and had no evil or lawless designs against the Jewish faith. He was simply making an apology for the transformation in his life; a transformation which he in no way planned or promoted.

If the Bible, then, is so devoid of remarkable conversion experiences, if it is so silent on who, when and how people were saved, do we not well to likewise leave those matters in the hands of God, and get on about the business of preaching the gospel and edifying the saints? I think so. In due time the word of truth faithfully and urgently declared will bring forth fruit unto life in believers, and will winnow the chaff from among the wheat.

- C. M.