

Introspectionism

“Chuck Winters will be here tonight,” the lady confided, “and we are praying that he will get saved. He knows he is lost and has been trying to get saved a long time. Just think! Tonight might be the night!”

Chuck (a fictitious name) came, all right. He took an active part in the worship, joining heartily in the prayer and singing, giving diligent attention to each admonition of the word of God. As we talked later, his questions revealed a high degree of spiritual comprehension. Yet, he calmly affirmed that he was indeed yet lost. “It’s all in my head,” he would say, “I do not have enough Holy Spirit conviction.”

Later I received a call from a young man who seemed to be in a state of extreme distress. Could he come by and see me? He had already traveled considerable distance from a midwestern state, making numerous stops along the way to counsel with men of some spiritual repute. When he arrived, he told me he was lost and unable to get saved. Yes, he had repented the best he knew how, believed every word of the Bible as best he could, knew he was a hell-deserving sinner and had repeatedly cried out for God to save him. But he had no assurance that he had been received. I soon told him that I would be of no more help to him than those godly men, with whom he had already counseled, that I could not save him, had no special entrance into the presence of God that I could secure for anyone. He became very agitated and went into near hysterics, babbling that his problem was that he had not repented deeply enough because he could not see how wicked he was, that only God could reveal enough of his depravity to enable sufficient repentance, and that God would not do it! I watched in pity as he left in the same state he arrived, traveling further south in hopes that the next salvation guru could help.

Both these men were victims of a peculiar variation of qualificationism. Qualificationism teaches that one must qualify himself in some manner to be saved by grace through faith. It claims to believe in justification by faith, but effectively subverts the doctrine by throwing up unscriptural barriers between the sinner and Christ’s free offer of life. There are many ways in which various false doctrines qualify sinners for the grace of God, but this one is known by its intense subjectivism. The sinner is not permitted to believe he is saved until he has satisfied subjective criteria, which may be found by looking inwardly at his experience. It is not without good reason that this sort of thing began to flare up in evangelical Christianity about 30 years ago, coinciding with a revival of interest in Puritan literature, and a flood of republication of writings of the later English Puritans.

The doctrinal keystone of the Protestant Reformation was justification by faith. The immediate consequence of this truth was a nullification of all Roman Catholic qualificationism, to wit, a sort of merit the sinner achieved through good works and religious rites which qualified him for the grace of God. The writings of Luther and Calvin indicate that these men had, not only a good grasp of this truth, but understood its ramifications in respect to the gospel. Christ, not only gave Himself an effectual ransom for the elect, but His obedience was of infinite worth to justify every fallen sinner of Adam’s race. This gospel abolished all prerequisites of legal criteria for the seeking soul. He, coming to Christ an unworthy and undeserving, yet, trusting sinner, would be welcomed and justified by the righteousness of Christ alone.

The later English Puritans, however, began to be rightly concerned that the Reformation was not nearly so much a reformation as expected. Reformed churches were filled with members showing little, if any, more evidence of being regenerate than Roman Catholics. The real culprit for this was, of course, sacralism; a political expediency carried over from Catholicism requiring all members of a society or state to be members of the established church. Reformed churches, then as now, imposed this Old Covenant feature upon New Covenant churches by Covenant theology. Consequently, unconverted “covenant children” dominated church memberships. The loyal Puritan churchman, of course, could not touch this sacred cow, so he laid the blame to Antinomianism. He reasoned that by purging the door of grace of any legal requirements, sinners were being allowed to claim Christ without sufficient repentance. Defects in the Reformation, he thought, could be remedied by setting stiffer standards of Holy Spirit conviction and conversion. Seeking sinners were warned to engage in long and tedious soul-searching to make certain their experiences were not superficial and impermanent. A new qualificationism began to creep in. The old qualificationism kept the sinner away from Christ because he was not righteous enough. The new one bids him keep his distance until he is wicked enough.

The new one also provided welcome ammunition to fire at the rival church (Anabaptists and other successors of Donatism) who held to the scriptural doctrine of a regenerate church comprised of saints exhibiting piety and holiness. This is precisely why the “Wretched Man” concept of spirituality has gained such a stranglehold on Reformed sanctification. According to it, the more wretched and ungodly a man *feels*, the more corruption he can discover in his soul, the more noises he makes about his depravity and sinfulness, the more truly spiritual he is.

The writings of the later Puritans began to reflect an unscriptural and unhealthy introspection. Sinners were urged and warned to look inwardly and search their hearts to determine whether they had qualified repentance. While soundly denouncing the Roman brand of qualificationism through merit, they were laying the foundation for a far worse Reformed brand. For while the Roman species only puffed up the self-righteous with an unscriptural false hope, the Reformed brand condemned the true seeker and denied him the hope freely offered by the Lord.

To be sure, not all the later English puritans were guilty of this. But a legalistic bent left by a failure to make a clean break with an abolished Old Covenant, coupled with a desire to demonize the righteousness and godliness of Anabaptists, tainted most Puritans with various shades of unscriptural introspection.

With the introduction of this genre of Puritan literature into the theologically starved Christian community of the '50s and '60s, together with a misplaced near-infallibility imputed to the Puritans, the stage was set for a new 20th century introspectionism. This was augmented by a generation of evangelists having a hard time producing enough conversions to keep their reputations up. It was discovered that a vast field of lost church members might produce a bountiful harvest. After the initial flush of conversions among truly lost church members, however, the pickings got slim again, and many were casting about to find ways to make others doubt their experience in grace. So a variation of Calvinistic preaching emerges which sets forth salvation by grace according to the sovereign mercy of God, but which burdens its credibility and assurance with unscriptural criteria. Here are some of its characteristics:

1) It insists that everyone must "get saved" through a great emotional experience. Exactly what this experience is like is never spelled out. Yet people are constantly warned of counterfeits. It is absolutely essential that one be able to give the exact time and place when a person unquestionably passed from death to life. If he is uncertain about that, then he doesn't have the real thing.

2) This salvation experience must be preceded by a lengthy period of proper mourning, grieving over sins. One must be diligent to discern whether or not his repentance is the proper kind. It could, like Esau's be just a worldly sorrow unto death, rather than a godly sorrow unto life. One should beware lest he hope too soon before he has sorrowed enough.

3) Victims of this introspection either know they are lost, and are trying earnestly to get saved, or they are perpetually wallowing in doubt. Even though many of them diligently devour the word, hate sin and have their hearts set on serving the Lord, yet they cannot be considered saved because they have doubts. This sort of thing goes on for years. Many have undergone multiple professions of faith and water baptisms, but are still vulnerable to the next fellow who has a new wrinkle on how to *really* get saved.

4) The tormentors of these souls are principally occupied with trying to determine in marginal cases who is lost and who is saved. It is an obsession. Nothing delights them more than succeeding in causing someone to doubt his salvation. To them this signals the discovery of a lost church member, and is tantamount to a gold-strike. All their preaching and witnessing is directed to this end.

5) 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 in the Bible is lost and who is saved, and exactly when they got saved. Warnings against apostasy coupled with exhortations to believe and hold fast faith, such as comprise most of the book of Hebrews, are perverted and reversed to make people doubt their acceptance in Christ and throw away their hope.

The Error

1) The Scriptures declare that Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, that sinners must be born from above, repent and believe, that the justified shall be made new creatures in Christ. The Bible, however, nowhere commands us to "get saved" or to seek a salvation experience, let alone define what that salvation experience is. 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 an experience, but by the newness of life in which they live. It is right to tell people they must repent and believe. But to tell them that they must seek a certain "valid" experience while no one, not even the Holy Scriptures, can tell them what that experience is, will be 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 by 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. But this evil system refuses comfort to those who are genuine sensitive children of God, earnestly seeking to serve the Lord, yet plagued by doubts and demonic accusations. At the same time it gives false hope to those who suppose themselves to have had a sufficiently great salvation experience, but who evidence no grace of God in their lives as true Christians.

2) On the matter of deep repentance accompanying saving faith there can be no question. The Scriptures are clear that saving faith is inseparable from repentance. It is expedient that we preach repentance toward God, a thorough turning from all that is opposed to absolute submission to the Lordship of Christ, all dependence upon self and vain religious exercises. Naught but Jesus Christ must be left as our object of faith.

But to prescribe exact emotions, stresses, grievings and groanings is to add to the Scriptures. In fact such exercises revive in Protestant form the Roman Penance system. Introspectionism 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 of acceptance. If not he must wait until God reveals more wickedness to repent of.

There is a subtle slander of God in this system. The sinner knows he is lost and wants to be 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 continuing 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 going about doing good works with zeal a fervor who are, nevertheless, unconverted. But these are not persons who know themselves to be lost. On the contrary, they imagine themselves Christians, and are in no wise seeking salvation. They think themselves secure and should be warned. There is ever that danger of clinging to a false hope and going out into eternity damned. It is right to admonish those who profess to make certain they possess. But we are not here 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 who cannot get saved. Even though some of them lack no evidence in Christian fruit, they are denied assurance because their experience seems faulty to the introspectionists. Accepting the condemnation of their tormentors, they try to repent more and to get saved...and get absolutely nowhere!

The whole picture is ridiculous in the light of Scripture. Only one thing separates us from God. Sin! (Isaiah 59:2). 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 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 into looking for something the Scriptures do not promise in salvation.

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 man to discern or detect what their state in grace may be outside of special divine revelation. When 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 Christian as one until he gives reason to believe 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.

Introspectionists seem to be more obsessed with discovering invalid professions 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 to them doubt is an admission of lostness. They affirm that if a person doubts, he is surely lost, that when he really gets saved (as they did) then he will never have the slightest doubt.

Do not Christians sometimes behave like lost people? Who would have considered Lot justified 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 believer cursing and denying the Lord? One is manifestly lost when the whole tenor and direction of his life is sinful, but in other cases it is 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 Heb. 2:1; 3:12; 4:1, 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 introspectionists would have it. Consider Hebrews 6:17-18 and 10:35-39. We are told to not cast away our confidence (hope), to hold fast our profession and to come boldly to the throne of grace. We are not of them that draw back into 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 only rarely had comforting 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". In response to his complaint of lack of faith, Peter Boehler wisely advised him, "Preach it until you have it". No further experience preceded the beginning of his great ministry.

It is no more our job to tell people they are not God's children when there is reason to believe that they are, than it is to give them assurance. Both of these tasks belong to the Holy Spirit. Only He can effectively *convince* of sin and make us know we are sons of God. When we intrude into those realms we will find ourselves warring against Him. We are to declare the holy law of God, press upon men the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ, urge them to put their trust and hope in Him and leave it there. God will sort out the results when He divides the sheep from the goats. The Lord has a multitude of weak, stumbling lambs who need help, encouragement and edification. It behooves us to feed them. If we find a smoking flax, the least evidence of divine 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 determining when Job was lost and at what point he was justified; if Saul was converted, or if Adam was lost or saved? 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 know that the entirety of Scriptures is written to people who have some reason to believe 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.

Introspectionism is certainly not peculiar to grace preaching. Sometimes a purely Arminian approach is made, demanding the prospect do such and such in order to get saved. Sometimes it is only a constant hammering away at church members to beware of deception and counterfeits until every soul with any serious intent to follow Christ is trying to get saved again. Introspection will not permit them to rest in Christ.

How Some Come to Believe This

Many who believe and practice this type of evangelism spent years as a deluded church member. Their conversion, when it finally came, was a powerful and dramatic one, leaving an indelible impression in their memories. (Such pronounced subjective experiences, which accompany conversion, are usually the result of the release from deeply entrenched demonic powers that had held 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 fortified by reading biographies of notable men who underwent similar struggles and experienced similar conversions. David Brainerd, for example, labored seven years before he found lasting peace in Christ. The common error is then made of formulating a doctrine based on 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 did, he gave it not to prove that he was saved, but rather that he was a good Jew,

and that he had no evil or lawless designs against the Jewish faith. He was simply making an apology for the transformation in his life, an event that 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 these matters in the hands of God, and get on about the business of preaching the gospel and edifying the saints? In due time the word of truth faithfully and earnestly declared will bring forth fruit unto life in true believers, and will winnow the chaff from among the wheat. Let us exhort the seeker to cease from looking inward into his own soul for assurance of salvation. Nothing will be found there to help him. Our gaze must be torn from ourselves.

Troubled soul! Will you not now hear this? Cease to exist in your thoughts! Let consciousness of yourself be no more! Refuse equally both condemnation and comfort that may arise from thoughts of unworthiness or illusions of merit. *They are nothing!* *Christ is everything!* He, alone, is our perfection and acceptance before God. In Him, and nowhere else you will absolutely find rest for your soul.

- C. M.