

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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LIFE IN THE SPIRIT (Part II)

We hear a lot about discipleship in Evangelicalism today. It is a very important subject and one that every Christian should take a lively interest in. But I am afraid that much that is being said about discipleship is misguided. How so? Biblical discipleship is rooted in the Gospel, and a distorted understanding of the Gospel message will lead to an equally defective view of discipleship. It should not go unnoticed that before the Apostle Paul took up the subject of living the Christian life, he first set forth the true nature and importance of justification by faith alone. If we would have a truly Biblical grasp of Christian discipleship, we must first grasp the meaning and significance of the Gospel, because the Gospel message has a direct impact on how we live the Christian life. In order to understand more fully how the Gospel saves us and changes our lives, we must learn to recognize the counterfeit spiritual remedies that have gained wide acceptance in many Evangelical circles. There are three that are particularly prominent.

- I. **THE NOMINALIST APPROACH.** I am using the word “nominalist” to describe this approach, although few if any of its advocates would be the least bit aware that they are nominalists. Nominalism was a philosophical school of thought that developed in the early Middle-Ages. It taught that all universal or abstract terms merely reflect necessities of thought or were simply conveniences of language and, as such, exist as names only and therefore have no corresponding reality. “Nominalism,” writes Colin Brown, “removed religion almost entirely from the area of reason and made it a matter of faith beyond the comprehension of reason.”¹ How would this affect how one views the Christian life?
 - A. **Spiritual Growth is Optional.** Since we are only human, we shouldn’t be troubled (or have guilt) about such things as spiritual growth. After all, we are under grace, not law! Terms like *grace* and *unconditional love* are abused and made to imply that it really doesn’t matter how we live. The Bible, however, clearly teaches that prolonged involvement with sin (a deliberate indifference to the need for repentance) should alert us to the very real possibility that our Christian profession is not genuine. “True Christians don’t surrender; they . . . *press on toward the mark*” (Philippians 3:14).² W. G. T. Shedd was a noted Presbyterian theologian of the 19th century and a great preacher. He once observed, “There are some advantages, and there are also some disadvantages, in looking upon sin as consisting in disobeying particular commandments; in not keeping this or that separate precept; in swearing, or lying, or stealing. We must begin with this, but we must not end with it. If we stop at this point, we run the hazard of becoming self-righteous. We are in danger of presuming that because we do not lie, or swear, or steal, we are morally perfect. In the beginning of the Christian life, the eye is naturally and properly fixed upon we can put our finger – that more external part of our sinfulness which it is our first and easiest duty to put away. But we soon learn, if we are progressive, that all these particular transgressions are but different modes in which the great the primitive sin of human nature manifests itself; are only varied exhibitions of that disinclination and aversion to glorify God, and extol him in the heart, which is the ultimate and original sin of man. He, therefore, who does not, after putting away swearing, lying, and stealing, look down a little lower into his heart, and detect the yet subtler ramifications of his

corruption, will be likely to degenerate into a mere moralist, instead of becoming one of those spiritually-minded Christians who become more lowly, and humble, and broken-hearted, as they become more and more upright and obedient in their external conduct. The biographies of men like Leighton and Edwards must ever be a mystery, and a self-contradiction, to those who do not see that the very essence and inmost quality of sin consists in the lack of a heart to magnify the Lord, and to exalt his holy name. Read the diaries of such men, and witness their moaning in secret over the vileness of their hearts; hear the outbursting expression that *the sin is infinite upon infinite*; and then think of the pure and saintly course of their lives, when those lives are tried by the tests of external and single commandments, and does it not seem strange and paradoxical? These men were not hypocrites. No one can suspect them of this. But were they not self-deceived and mistaken? So some critics say, who judge of human character by the more superficial and outward criteria.”³

- B. ***Moral Accommodation.*** This is the inevitable by-product of inculturation, which in turn has a direct and negative effect on theology (and ethics). Theology becomes man-centered. God exists primarily to meet our needs. Traditional words like *awesome* and *sovereign*, which were historically used to describe the character and attributes of God (especially as they relate to God’s decree of election), are now used to speak of God like He was a Steven Spielberg special effect. We are told repeatedly that this or that is a *sovereign* move of God, and all that is really meant is simply this: “don’t criticize any aspect of what we are doing because God is behind it,” when, in fact, the sovereignty of God is being called upon to support something that is merely popular. In other words, the appeal to God’s sovereignty is used to give credence to our own particular agenda. “When theology becomes anthropology, it becomes captive to the world, which is to say, worldly.”⁴ What does “worldly” mean? James Davison Hunter has observed that “many of the distinctions separating Christian conduct from *worldly conduct* have been challenged if not altogether undermined. Even the words *worldly* and *worldliness* have lost most of their traditional meaning.”⁵
- C. ***Eudaemonism.*** This awkward sounding word is of Greek origin and refers to a sense of happiness. In Aristotle’s philosophy, happiness was derived from a life of reasoned activity, but in its later development it came to imply that the moral value of any act is judged by its ability to produce personal happiness. A growing segment of Evangelicalism is preoccupied with the pursuit of happiness and tends in many ways to subordinate everything else to this goal. “Men grow weary of serving the Lord,” wrote Warfield. “They do not wish to fight to win the prize; they prefer to be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease.”⁶

II. ***THE PASSIVIST APPROACH.*** This is best summed up under the all too familiar slogan: “Let go and let God.” In reality it is a form of quietistic mysticism, but it has certain salient features.

- A. ***Sanctification is Divorced from Justification.*** These are said to be two distinct experiences, requiring two distinct acts of faith.
- B. ***Everything is Conditioned by Our Wills.*** The Christian, although passive, is the one who has to hit the switch. God can do nothing *unless* we let him! In fact, our faith is not really placed in God but in our own ability to trust God, and if we are to depend on our own trust, it ceases to be trust.⁷

III. ***THE MORALIST APPROACH.*** The motto here is “just try harder!” This may even have a familiar biblical ring to it, e.g., pray more, witness more, etc. “We can hear only so many motivating pep talks before we find ourselves lapsing into either a lifestyle of spiritual denial or despair over the glaring lack of inward reality in our lives.”⁸

CONCLUSION: It would be true to say that Paul wrote Romans and Galatians for no other purpose than to assert and demonstrate that justification and sanctification are indissolubly bound together, and that we cannot have the one without the other. Whenever this is done, the Church history bears this out, the tendency has been to emphasize the subjective experience at the expense of the objective truth. If we would

enter into the experience of what it means to row in grace, we must at all times have before us the gospel message of justification by faith alone in Christ alone through grace alone. Michael Horton, who will be our 2027 Lloyd Jackson speaker, and who has written extensively on the subject of justification, says, “Because of our justification, the law no longer can condemn us before God’s throne. Yet far from leading to moral anarchy, this justification is precisely the basis on which the deepest intent of the law – love of God and neighbor – is written on our hearts by the finger of God. We are liberated now to seek God’s moral will for our lives without fear. We are free to struggle earnestly against sin and temptation, to love and serve our neighbors, and to obey the calls to active discipleship because we know that in spite of the corruption still clinging to our best motives and works, we are no longer under the law’s condemnation. Furthermore, we have been given the Spirit of God, who renews us day by day, conforming us to the image of Christ. The law remains the *standard* for righteousness, but no more in sanctification than in justification does our obedience to the law become the *basis* for our righteousness before God. Otherwise, we would place ourselves under a covenant of works again, proposing to fulfill the conditions of justification, instead of the covenant of grace, with Christ as the fulfiller of all righteousness for us. We must always bear in mind throughout our Christian pilgrimage that the Christ who commands is already also the one who has taken care of the guilt not only for past failures but for present and future ones – and even for our failure to do anything as fully and faithfully as we ought.”⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ C. Brown, *Christianity & Western Thought I* (IVP, 1990), p. 107.

² Steven L. Childers, “The Transforming Power of the Gospel,” *Reformed: The RTS Quarterly* (Fall, 1995), p. 6. I am grateful to Steven, one of my friends from seminary days, for stimulating my thinking on this subject.

³ W. G. T. Shedd, *Sermons To The Spiritual Man* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1972), p. 47.

⁴ R. Kent Hughes, *Are Evangelicals Born Again? The Character Traits of Truth Faith* (Crossway, 1995), p. 13.

⁵ J. D. Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (University of Chicago, 1987), p. 63..

⁶ B. B. Warfield, *Perfectionism II* (rpt. Baker, 1981), p. 491.

⁷ The most infamous example of this is the Word of Faith guru, Kenneth Hagin, who has actually written a book entitled *Having Faith in Your Faith* (Faith Library, 1980). The Word of Faith teachers, which include the likes of Kenneth Copeland, Jerry Savelle and Paul Crouch, are outside the boundaries of orthodox Christianity. Cf. *The agony of Deceit*, ed. M. S. Horton (Moody, 1988); Hank Hanegraaff, *Christianity in Crisis* (Harvest House, 1993), and D. R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel: A Historical and Biblical Analysis of the Modern Faith Movement* (Hendrickson, 1988).

⁸ Childers, op. cit.

⁹ M. S. Horton, *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrines For Christian Disciples* (Zondervan, 2011), p. 307.