

Reformation
& Revival



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We have now come to the fourth of five forgotten doctrines which are related to reformation and revival: The nature of saving faith as opposed to empty faith. It is my contention that the way in which we have preached a half gospel and the careless way we have received people into our churches have contributed to the need of revival perhaps as much as any other thing. Only a wide-scale reformation of thinking can abate this excessive accessing of unsaved persons into our churches. We have made a large and comfortable portal into our churches and “many there be that enter thereby.” Even true revival, particularly following Finney, has not always dealt as decisively with this issue as might be imagined. Certainly “revivalism” has not significantly altered the pattern. Genuine revival, on the tracks of a reformation of thinking, offers the best solution.

Unregenerate Church Membership

Perhaps the Great Awakening offers to us the better model when it comes to understanding adequately the nature of faith. In Joseph Tracey's *The Great Awakening*, the new birth as change was given to be the core consideration of the Awakening:

The history of religious opinions and practices shows that the most important practical idea which then received increased prominence and power, and has held its place ever since, was the idea of the “new birth,” as held by the Orthodox Congregationalists of New England, and others who harmonize with them; the doctrine, that in order to be saved, a man must undergo a change in his principles of moral action, which will be either accompanied or succeeded by exercises of which he is conscious, and can give an account; so that those who have been thus changed, may ordinarily be distinguished from those who have not; from which it follows that all who exhibit no evidence of such a

change ought to be considered and treated as unregenerate and in the road to perdition, and therefore not admitted to the communion of the churches. This doctrine of the “new birth,” as an ascertainable change, was not generally prevalent in any communion when the revival commenced; it was urged as of fundamental importance by the leading promoters of the revival; it took strong hold of those whom the revival affected; it naturally led to such questions as the revival brought up and caused to be discussed; its perversions naturally grew into, or associated with, such errors as the revival promoted; it was adapted to provoke such opposition, and in such quarters, as the revival provoked; and its caricatures would furnish such pictures of the revival, as opposers drew. This was evidently the right key; for it fitted all the wards of the complicated lock (p.ix, Banner of Truth Trust, reprinted 1989).

We see then that the issue of a changed life was the leading edge of the Great Awakening. That meant, first, that those who were to be considered Christians would experience the change which the word *conversion* expresses in a more or less immediate sense, and second, that the testing of whether or not an individual was regenerate was to be seen in the differences of behavior and affection in the believer’s ongoing. I find it interesting that we are dealing with nearly the same issues in our present lordship salvation controversy, which is likely the most far-reaching practical theological issue of our era.

Gilbert Tennent, the early leader of the Great Awakening, was himself often prone to preach on the nature of true conversion as that which can be seen through behavior. He exposed the false professor of Christianity in such a way that evoked the approbation by Whitefield that people “were either converted or enraged” through his preaching. This searching examination of individual faith was denoted

in the writings of Prince as recorded in the introduction of Gillies’s *Historical Collections of Accounts of Revival* (p. xii, Banner of Truth Trust, reprinted, 1981):

Such were the convictions wrought in many hundreds in this town by Mr. Tennent’s searching ministry; and such was the case of those many scores of several other congregations as well as mine, who came to me and others for direction under them. And indeed by all their converse I found, it was not so much the terror as the searching nature of his ministry, that was the principal means of their conviction. It was not merely, nor so much, his laying open the terrors of the law and wrath of God, or damnation of hell (for this they could pretty well bear, as long as they hoped these belonged not to them, or they could easily avoid them), as his laying open their many vain and secret shifts and refuges, counterfeit resemblances of grace, delusive and damning hopes, their utter impotence, and impending danger of destruction; whereby they found all their hopes and refuges of lies to fail them, and themselves exposed to eternal ruin, unable to help themselves, and in a lost condition. This searching preaching was both the suitable and principal means of their conviction.

As we will soon see, it is possible to exercise something one might call faith and yet be far from the kingdom. Determining the existence of “saving faith” was the issue of prominence in the Awakening. It might seem remarkable to some that the strongest note of the Revival was not the Spirit-filled life, nor spiritual signs and wonders, nor the exercise of gifts, nor church growth, but “the new birth as an ascertainable change.” The carefulness by which the reforming preachers dealt with souls and examined faith can be seen in the fact that other ministers would often be invited to the scene of a movement of God to see whether

the fruit was genuine. For other ministers to examine the fruit of most evangelistic endeavors today would be considered an insult to say the least. Why? Amid all the statistics, the fruit can often not be found.

Subtle Deceptions

Various kinds of faith experience can be counterfeit. The false must be laid out on the table so as to help our congregations know the true. Consider kinds of faith which do not correspond to the saving work of God (see my booklet *Wasted Faith*, 1989, for more detail):

1. Faith Without the Spirit

By this I mean that there may be faith which is not engendered by God—mere human faith. We must consider that faith which is just human decision alone is not genuinely saving. Have we not said what matters is not the size of the faith but its object? Yet more than that is necessary to make a closer examination of faith. The problem is not just to clarify that believing is the linkage to Christ, its object, but whether or not the individual has that kind of faith which is of God. Faith, after all, is “a gift of God” (Eph. 2:8-9; John 3:8; John 6:44-47; etc.). We certainly can all recount the stories of scores of people who have put *some* kind of faith in Christ, but who now show no evidences of true Christianity. They had mere human faith, even though what they did have was properly directed.

2. Faith Without Christ

I am saying by this that there is a type of faith that is not a wedding with Christ. It is conversant with the name, history, and passion of Christ, but is not a “knowing” of Christ. To not “know” Christ, vis-a-vis His revealing of Himself, is to have a futile faith (Matt. 11:25-27; John 10:14; 17:3; Heb. 8:11; etc.).

3. Faith Without Reason

Faith, no matter how sincere and emotional, has no reality if it is not based on unnegotiable facts, not the least of which is the bodily resurrection of Christ (1 Cor. 15:1-4, 17-19). Faith cannot be entirely mystical.

4. Faith Without Repentance

There may be a faith without repentance (John 2:23-25 where many believe, but Christ does not entrust Himself to them because He knows their hearts). Any conversion without repentance falls short of God’s command for all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17: 30). When the Philippian jailer cried out, “What must I do to be saved?,” he was revealing a hatred for life in sin without Christ (true repentance), and a necessity of deliverance (*saved* means *delivered*). He then demonstrated several characteristics of Christian behavior, which leads us to consider:

5. Faith Without Fruit

Here I mean the fruit of Christ, or the obedience and holiness characteristic of the one enjoined for salvation. This, by far, is the most significant test of salvation given in Scripture and the one most often mentioned. We will take a great deal of space discussing this matter in this article. James certainly was explicit about the potential of a kind of spurious faith when he wrote about faith sans corresponding works. “Can such faith save him?” he asked. He did not deny a “faith” experience of some sort, but categorically denied the reasonableness of any kind of faith that does not produce a change in behavior.

The dispensationalist Harry Ironside saw the dangers of a gospel without the test of works:

Shallow preaching that does not grapple with the terrible fact of man’s sinfulness and guilt, calling on “all men

everywhere to repent," results in shallow conversions; and so we have myriads of glib-tongued professors today who give no evidence of regeneration whatever. Prating of salvation by grace, they manifest no grace in their lives. Loudly declaring they are justified by faith alone, they fail to remember that "faith without works is dead;" and that justification by works before men is not to be ignored as though it were in contradiction to justification by faith before God (H. A. Ironside, *Except Ye Repent*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1937, p.7).

6. Faith Without Perseverance

This is an extension of the above. Faith and its corresponding works continue until death. We will have more to say about the sin of the Christian related to perseverance, yet we cannot doubt that the Bible teaches the perseverance of faith of each believer. God preserves the believer, and he does so by sustaining the grace of faith in the believer until the end (Matt. 24:13; Luke 8:15; etc.).

Holliness and Faith

Let us concentrate now on this startlingly clear outbirth of true faith—its fruit. J. C. Ryle wrote of the preaching of the Great Awakening in his book printed in 1885 titled *Christian Leaders of the 18th Century*. In his explanation of their sermon content he stressed just what we have been saying all along:

Furthermore, the reformers of the last century taught constantly the inseparable *connection between true faith and personal holiness*. They never allowed for a moment that any church membership or religious profession was the least proof of a man being a true Christian if he lived an ungodly life. A true Christian, they maintained, must always be known by his fruits; and these fruits must be plainly manifest

and unmistakable in all the relations of life. "No fruit, no grace," was the unvarying tenor of their preaching (p. 28, Banner of Truth Trust, reprint, 1978).

That statement could be made for Christ and the writers of the New Testament just as well as the leaders of the eighteenth-century Awakening. These preachers only spoke what their Master had made clear earlier. They not only mimicked the Master, as will be abundantly seen, but the Puritan influences of their forebears colored their thinking. "Say not that thou hast royal blood in thy veins and art born of God," said Puritan William Gurnall, "unless thou canst prove thy pedigree by daring to be holy."

"Pursue . . . holiness, without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). Sanctification, as described here, is both progressive and necessary. And it is as necessary as it is progressive. The word *pursue* is a vigorous word indicating a relentless effort at reaching the goal, like a fox straining himself to the physical maximum in order to catch his prey. Are you pursuing holiness in that way? This holiness cannot be mistakenly construed as "positional" or the static righteousness which is declared to be ours in justification. Whatever can be pursued must be known as progressive. It is that righteousness which is lived out. In this we often feel intensely that struggle between flesh and spirit (Gal. 5:16-17).

But this sanctification, which is actual life experience, is essential. Without it you will not see the Lord. In fact, without holiness *no one* has yet seen the Lord. It is an awful thing to die as an unholy professor of Christ, for then there is the double consequence of hell itself augmented by the additional punishment due those who sin against light (Luke 12:47-48).

Is Holiness Guaranteed?

A question should be asked at this point, given our regular struggles and failures with sin: Can holiness be so certain a thing in the professing believer that the absence of it means eternal damnation? Does God guarantee holiness in the life of the Christian? The answer to that question is “Yes!” Let me clarify this statement by laying out four reasons for certainty:

1. We can be sure that we will exhibit holiness because God decreed it from eternity past.

“For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29).

It could not be more plainly expressed than this. God has from all eternity determined that each believer (*each* because the pronoun is *whom*) would be conformed to the image of Christ. We cannot fail to live what we are predestined for. God is One who does all that He purposes (Mal. 3:6). In fact, even each good work done is preordained: “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph.2:10).

2. We can be sure we will be holy in our experience because he has invaded us by His Holy Spirit.

It would be a vain thing for God to trust man to be holy. What had been the lesson of the old covenant, that is, the inability of man to do what God said must be done, would not be true of the new. He has now enacted in the better covenant the proviso: “I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts” (Heb. 8:10). God did not trust you to produce what He predetermined to come from you; He trusted Himself. Holiness is true fruit. By this God does not mean to imply that you have no responsibility to exert

yourself in holy living. Perhaps the finest statement on the proper relationship between the responsibility of man and the responsibility of God in sanctification is seen in Philippians 2:12-13:

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed, not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you both to will and to act according to His good purpose.

Here Jonathan Edwards’s insight is the best. He said, “God produces all, and we act all. For that is what God produces: our own acts.” (*Works*, 2:557). I cannot get over the profundity of that statement and its way of capturing the essence of the passage and the doctrine. All is of God, for He produces even our acts; we exert ourselves, for this is what God has produced.

3. We can be assured of holiness because Christ prays for us.

Has there ever been a prayer of Christ which was unanswered? We do see the struggle of the garden experience, but His prayer was entirely submissive to the Father, and He got what He prayed—His Father’s will, the cup of suffering. It is impossible for God not to hear and answer the prayer of God Himself. Now Christ is at the right hand of the Father as High Priest. Before He left us here on earth, we got a glimpse into the kind of priestly requests Christ brings to the Father in these words found in the *real* Lord’s Prayer: “Sanctify them by the truth; Your word is truth” (John 17:17-19).

Now, if Christ is God and God hears and answers the prayers of God, we can be sure that this prayer is being answered.

4. We can be certain of holiness in the behavior of Christians because God disciplines those who stray.

Christians sin (1 John 1:8), but Christians do not sin without parental involvement, that is, without God's corrective.

And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons:

My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when He rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those He loves, and He punishes everyone He accepts as a son. Endure hardship as a discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our Spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness (Heb. 12:5-10).

And so we are cordoned off to holiness. It is not to say that God does not let the believer sin, but that sin cannot be allowed to finally take the believer out of lifestyle holiness. Discipline will come into play, and the believer will be brought back, so "that we may share in His holiness."

You see, then, that the true believer has a guarantee of holiness, though not without "pursuing" it. God has predetermined it, put His Spirit within you to accomplish it, prayed effectually for it, and stops you in variance from it. Holiness is guaranteed. "May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The One who calls you is faithful and He will do it" (1 Thess. 5:23-24).

Implications

If we are forced to say that holiness is guaranteed in the believer, we have a sound basis upon which to evaluate our own state. Bold scriptural declarations are made on the basis of such a guarantee. See the following. I have made brief but important comments. Please read them carefully. Note especially that the idea of deception is found in each text.

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards, nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:19-21).

Note in the above that the larger context includes the awareness of sin in the life of believers, and the battle plan for combating it (see whole chapter). But even with that clear recognition, these declarations are made. It is obvious that Paul is not saying a Christian has no potential ever to do such things, but that a life of practicing these sins cannot be mistaken for what it is. So a man or woman in your church may have all the right things to say about God and live consistently in hatred and jealousy or selfish ambition and be in danger of hell.

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that sinful nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers (Gal. 6:7-10).

There can be no mistaking that the means of receiving salvation from God is by faith and grace if the whole book of Galatians is read. What he is saying here is not that our works save, but that the life of a true believer is one of sowing to the Spirit and the life of the non-believer is the opposite. The one reaps heaven, the other eternal corruption. We are not to be confused about this. The fact that one has professed Christ publicly does not mean much. It has been my observation that the majority of those making “decisions for Christ” through sincere and fervent evangelism wash out before long. They all prayed a prayer, walked an aisle, had a feeling, etc. As far as I can tell, the Bible never calls us to examine our initial conversion to determine whether we are regenerate; rather, we are to look at our lives *now*. To what are you sowing?

For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God’s wrath comes on those who are disobedient (Eph. 5:5-6).

What is particularly important about the Ephesians passage is its emphasis on greed or covetousness. If a man in your church has the means of being financially responsible in his giving, professing to be a genuine believer, yet for 20

years has only tipped God with a few dollars from time to time, what should be said? Is he not a greedy man? Does he not love his money more than his God? Has not his money *become* his god?

Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as He is righteous. He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother (1 John 3:7-10).

John said, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). You have to ask: “What things?” The very things we just quoted in the above passage, along with all the other tests of true faith in the Epistle. We are to compare our lives with the biblical picture of a true believer. If we are like what the Bible says, then we have strong assurance. God has changed us, made us different from what we were before. You may be convicted that the wall in your room is straight, and I may say it is not straight. Our conviction about our position really has no power to affect the facts. Only a plumbline will tell the truth. The Bible is that plumbline, and our assurance should come not solely, but primarily from the evidence of a changed life.

What About Sin?

What about sin? Well, Christians do, that is certain. They may, in fact, commit the worst sorts of sins. Think about

those of Noah, David, Solomon, Peter. “If the passages you just gave us are interpreted as you have expressed them,” you say, “how can you say that a true Christian sins?” For help I want to borrow from *Morning Exercises At Cripplegate*, and the sermon, “What Relapses Are Inconsistent with Grace,” by John Sheffield. He uses the Old Testament practice of examining leprosy to help us see the difference between sins of the reprobate and sins of the regenerate when the determination is more difficult to make. Though hard to read, follow his logic closely.

There is also another kind of fall, of a mixed or middle nature: and to which side of the two (*godly or reprobate*) should cast it, is not so easy to determine. [It is] a reiterated fall into some foul act or course of sin: and herein I must proceed as warily as the priest of old in a doubtful case of leprosy, whether to pronounce *clean* or *unclean*; and by his rule I shall go. He was to shut him up seven days, and look upon him better ere he could give his definitive sentence (Lev. 13:4-59.). If therefore,

1. I see the sore be but skin deep (Lev. 13:4, 34), and have not corrupted the blood;
2. If it stand at a stay and spread not further (Lev. 13: 5, 6; so also vv. 23, 28, 34, 37);
3. If all become white by repentance and mortification: I shall pronounce him *clean*. It is a scab, it is but a scab, or a scall (Lev. 13: 6, 34). It is no deadly leprosy.

But, on the other side,

1. If it be deeper than the skin, having taken the heart with the love and liking of it (Lev. 13:20, 25, 30);
2. If it spread further and further, by renewed acts (vv. 8, 27, 36);
3. If there be proud raw flesh in the rising (vv. 10, 14, 15), and the man presumptuously live in it, and plead for it: I shall

pronounce him *unclean*. “It is an old leprosy” (v.11). It is “not the spot of God’s children” (Deut. 32:5) (Vol.1, p.77, Richard Owen Roberts Publishers, 1981).

God gave us the sin of that great believer David in vivid detail. Why? “Those falls are not set as landmarks to *guide* you, but as seamarks to *warn* you,” said Sheffield. First, we must see David not just as a sinner, but as a repentant sinner. When Nathan’s finger flew in his face and he heard the words “Thou art the man!,” David melted. All true believers are lifelong repenters. When put to rebuke, they must capitulate. This is the reason church discipline is so necessary in purifying the church. When it is all said and done, the erring church member is to be treated as a “heathen and a tax collector.” This is loving and not evil, for it helps him see what must be so—he is still without Christ. Without eventual repentance under rebuke, David would have been known forever as an unregenerate man, as King Saul before him. We must also be reminded that David got by with nothing. The sting of the discipline he felt in the loss of his child along with several other major chastisements, even though he was repentant, left him sorry he had ever thought about adultery. The story provides us a good lesson on the magnitude of a believer’s sin and the way by which we may discern whether that sin indicates an unconverted state or, as Sheffield says, “is consistent with grace.”

What Shall We Do?

The wine of evangelicalism has been diluted to half strength by the admixture of unregenerate church members. What are we to do?

First, we must no longer blur the distinction between the regenerate and the unregenerate in the minds of the people. We must say more often that the difference between the

righteous and the unrighteous is just that—righteousness and unrighteousness.

Second, we must give a distinct gospel call. The idea of just “inviting Christ into your heart” must be replaced by the clarion call of repentance and faith. We must promote the biblical idea of a non-rebellious heart subdued by conviction as a prerequisite to conversion.

Third, we must no longer misapply the doctrine of assurance. We have not done well with the business of giving assurance ourselves as if we were the Holy Spirit. The assurance a believer is to have should not be based upon what the evangelist said, or even the sincerity of the decision, but on the change in the life. “Has God made me a new creation?” would be the question most worth answering for the supposed believer.

Fourth, we must do a better job in the area of childhood conversion. How many have come through our churches and have gone through some kind of “rite of passage” (confirmation, walking an aisle, etc.), yet have shown no signs of true conversion. Though we will always have the unregenerate with us, can we go on contributing to the problem by the little time and effort invested in our children, and the pathetic way we deal with them?

Fifth, we must stop promoting an incorrect view of carnality. It is true that every Christian sins, but to say that a believer can live in a state of sin more or less permanently is contrary to Scripture. Most of those whom evangelicalism designates as “carnal Christians” are really “hypocritical professors.” First Corinthians chapter 3 was not meant to say what we have made it out to say.

Sixth, we must beware of the dangers of invitationism. I cannot dictate to you what you should or should not do about altar calls, but I will say that a closer look should be given as to its fruits and whether or not there is a basis for it in Scripture. To remove the giving of assurance from the

altar call, though, would make a world of difference in itself.

Seventh, related to this, we must no longer blame our poor results on the lack of good follow-up. After a recent major crusade in our area one church received ten names of converts who had walked the aisle during the invitation. After following up “by the book,” the pastor told me that the ten not only did not want to talk to the workers, “they ran from us!” What often happens is that those responding see no changes in their lives and are either disillusioned (making further evangelism difficult), deceived into believing they are actually converted, or truly converted. A careful study of the results will yield many disappointments. A better view would be to place the responsibility on the fact that many are just not converted. This is not to say that we should shirk our responsibility to follow up new converts, but to emphasize that when a heart is changed, it is really changed.

Eighth, we must discipline erring church members. As has before been mentioned, the failure to discipline has removed from our hands one of the main ways of helping unconverted church members to see their state. This is a great church sin in our day.

Have You Heard This Story?

A child becomes a convert at an early age. But what you thought was a convert to Christ eventually turns out to be a teenager. All hell breaks loose. When she goes off to college, or into the work world, more hell breaks loose. At one point she confronts her parents and says, “I am not interested in church. In fact, I don’t think I’m even a Christian.” “Oh, no,” the parent says. “You are a Christian. Why, I was there when you prayed the prayer. You were so sincere. Big tears came from your eyes. I know you were converted.” Through this process the parent seals the child in deception, making her twice as much a child of hell as she was before.

When the child gets older she marries a church goer and, depending on her natural pliability, begins to attend church again. The parents breathe a sigh of relief saying, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" (a misinterpretation of Prov.22:6). From then on until the day the woman dies, she occupies a place on a certain pew without any love for holiness, love for the Word, desire to commune with God, or heart affection for God and the church. When she dies, she will be agonizing under her sins in hell while the pastor is eulogizing over her casket in the church.

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless, of course, you fail the test (2 Cor. 13:5).

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