

SOMETHING TO CHEW ON

Some years ago, in a little town, a pastor was attempting to raise up a Christian church. He met a backslidden member, a Mr. Brown, who posed to him some doctrinal problems which have also been problems in the minds of many church members. These problems and questions arose out of his own experience. He found the members of the church had not reached perfection. The pastor visited him in the hope of reinstating him in the church, but when he arrived he found the man very argumentative.

"Pastor," he began, "I see you have your Bible in your hand. Tell me, when does conversion take place? Are all members of the church converted? Is conversion a dying to sin and the old man of sin? If so, why is it that so many Christians then continue on in sin? According to the teaching of the church, people are supposed to be dead to sin when they are buried with Christ, and this burial should take place at the time of baptism. In fact, I wish you would turn to Romans and read the sixth chapter, verses one to four and verse seven."

And so the pastor read: "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." For he that is dead is freed from sin." "You see what I mean?" he said in all earnestness. "People are supposed to be dead after baptism. The text says that men are freed from sin at that time. For many years I was a member of the church," he continued, "and I looked for those people who were dead to sin, but I've never found one. In fact, as I look into my own heart, I find that I sin and do things I really don't want to do, and thus keep telling myself that I am not converted."

The pastor confessed that in all his theology in school, somehow his teachers had not taught him just exactly how to answer this question. He groped in the dark for words. He could even look back in his own Christian experience and see numerous members who faltered, slipped, and fell away. He watched members of the church. He saw that they had faults. He looked at his fellow ministers, and saw that the grace of Christ had not completely changed their hearts and lives either. He saw jealousy. He sometimes saw slight dishonesty and other sins creeping into the lives of the members as well as the preachers. He began to study very earnestly and to pray about this matter, searching his own life to see whether or not the new birth had actually taken possession of his soul. And here is what he discovered.

What we need to know is what actually happens when the new birth takes place. Does the old man of sin die, or is he still alive? Is the old man of sin crucified, or is he just wounded? The pastor asked many a Christian whether, after being baptized, he was able to overcome all sin, or whether he knew that he was still a sinner. He never found one Christian to say that he lived above sin. What, then, is the matter? If the old man of sin dies, then his ways, his desires, and his shortcomings should surely die with him.

The pastor came to this understanding after a more careful study:

First of all, a poor sinner must look into the mirror of life and realize that he is guilty of transgressing the law of God. As he trudges along the sinner's path realizing that he has transgressed the commandments of God, his soul loathes his very existence. But then, suddenly, he looks beyond the dark background and discovers a crimson cross, a bursting tomb, and a glowing sky. He hears the Saviour's forgiving cry on Calvary as he lifts his voice to his heavenly Father: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

Slowly the heart of the sinner is drawn to such wonderful love, such sacrifice to save a fallen race. Soon he is hearing "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Arising from this spirit and act of surrender, the sinner is determined to walk a new road that leads to glory.

What has happened? Did the old man in that instant die? No, he did not die. He was only put in a state of subjection, in a state of crucifixion. "Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:11). The old man of sin with his old nature, evil desires, and wrong ambitions did not die. The apostle says, "Let us reckon him dead." We must treat him as though he were dead, but he does not actually die. "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof." It is a matter of who is reigning. When conversion takes place, we let Christ through his Spirit become the King in our

bodies and lives, rather than allowing the old desires to have their way. But the old man is constantly crying out for recognition even in the new life, and from here we receive our great temptations. The experience of the new birth does not destroy the old nature. It is brought into subjection, and is placed under control of the Spirit, but it is not eradicated. To the truthfulness of this fact every Christian can testify. Immediately to destroy all the evil propensities of our natures would be to remove the new convert from all possibility of temptation. There could be no testing and trying, no growing in grace, no trusting in the keeping power of Christ to prevent from falling, no further mortifying of the flesh, and no watchings unto prayer. The surrender of the soul to the control of the Spirit is tantamount to a declaration of war between the Spirit and the flesh. Hitherto the flesh has had full sway, and the general tendency of the life has been downward. Now the flesh is placed in a state of 'crucifixion,' but not of actual death.

What about Romans 6:7, then? "For he that is dead is freed from sin." A better translation of this text would be, "For he that is dead is justified from sin." When we accept Christ and his pardon, we stand justified before the Father; at that moment no sin is credited to our ledger, because it is confessed and forgiven. When we realize that the old man of sin does not die at conversion, we can better understand why even Christians fall. The ideal is not to fall, but sometimes we do give way to the pleadings and longings of the old man of sin, and others can see our up-and-down experience. Even Paul had these, for he says, "I cannot understand my own actions; I do not act as I desire to act; on the contrary, I do what I detest" Romans 7:15.

So the Christian life is a constant dying to sin, a constant surrender of self with its old ways and habits, and dying daily. John presents to us the ideal when he says, "My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not." There is no need of our committing these sins over and over again, if we will only keep surrendered. But if we do sin, and if we do let the old man with his old ways and evil nature take possession of our lives, does God forsake us? The text continues, "And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1).

God takes each of us where we are, when we surrender to him, and from there He leads us in "crooked paths and dark places." The Christian must "follow on to know the Lord." This following process is one which polishes off the rough edges and scrapes off the dark spots, and prepares us for His work and for the kingdom. If during the polishing process the paths of two people cross and the rough edges irritate a bit, we must not declare emphatically that a person has never experienced conversion. Rather, we see in that one a potential candidate for the kingdom. He is merely going through the polishing process, and it may be that his coming in contact with us may have helped.

Let us remember then, that we must always be on guard, lest the old man of sin arise to take over the life and live as the reigning king. "For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would" (Galatians 5:7).

"I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).