



“You will know them by their fruits.” Mt. 7:16

Sanctification and The Self

by J. Sidlow Baxter

PERHAPS the subtlest of all errors concerning sanctification are those which concern “the *self*”; and they are just as common as they are subtle.

With most of us, at the time of our conversion, the uppermost concern of our minds is salvation from the guilt and penalty of our *sins*. The Cross of Christ suddenly becomes a mighty wonder to us. We see the Son of God there, making vicarious atonement; and with unutterable relief we appropriate through Him “the forgiveness of *sins*”. Later, a more persistent problem scourges us: the problem of innate *sin*. We still rejoice in sins forgiven, yet at the same time we are groaning in bondage to “sin that dwelleth in me”. Try as we will, we cannot master the long-entrenched foe, and we cry out with the “wretched man” of Romans 7, “Who shall deliver me?” Still later, even though we may have grasped the Scriptural way of dealing with “sin that dwelleth in me”, there is an even deeper and subtler problem: the problem of the *self*. That famous evangelist, D. L. Moody, said, “The man who has given me more trouble than any other is D. L. Moody”. His words twang an answering vibration in most of us.

Allurings outside me; responses within;
What subtle collusions betray me to sin!
Yet somehow involved in each fall, I descry
That innermost problem: the self that is “I”.

How are we to deal with that problematical “self”? A very common idea is that it must be “crucified”. According to not a few preachers and writers, sanctification consists in the eradication or at least the subjugation of the self. Indeed, one of the commonest ideas is that the way of rescue from the tyranny of sin is the ousting or crippling of the so-called “self-life”. For instance, a certain hymn tells us,

There is a foe whose hidden power
The Christian well may fear;
More subtle far than inbred sin,
And to the heart more dear:

It is the power of selfishness,
The proud and wilful “I”;
And ere my Lord can live in me
My very *SELF* must die.

Or take the following quotation: “Not till the “self” has been crucified with Christ and buried with Him can we rightly reckon ourselves to have been raised with Him in ‘the power of His resurrection’.” One of my best-loved devotional authors, the late F. B. Meyer, says, “The self-life is our greatest struggle. . . . It is the ego-bias which spoils the music of our lives. . . . But there is deliverance: our self-life has been nailed to’ the Saviour’s Cross.

We must regard ourselves as dead to sin and *self*.



Misleading Ambiguity

Now all such reference to the “self” is either misleadingly *ambiguous*, or else it is definitely *erroneous*. When I say that it is often “ambiguous”, I mean that again and again it is used (as in the foregoing quotations) as being synonymous with “the *flesh*”. When preachers and books on holiness insist that the “self” must die, in nine cases out of ten they mean that “the *flesh*” must be put to death. The difference between the “self” and the “flesh” is, that the “self” is the basic human *ego* or person, including both good and evil heredity, whereas the “flesh” is a Paulinism meaning distinctively the *animal and selfish* propensities inhering in us. Death of the “self” would be nothing less than the annihilation of the thinking human ego itself. Therefore the New Testament nowhere teaches such a contrariety as the crucifixion or death of the *self*; but it certainly does teach the crucifixion of the *flesh*—“They that are Christ’s have crucified the *flesh* [not the ‘self’] with the affections and lusts” (Gal. 5:24) and it also teaches that we are to “mortify” (or put to death) the “doings” of the *flesh* through the human *body* (Rom. 8:13)

We need to be wary and discriminating, therefore, whenever we see that word, “self”, used in connection with Christian sanctification. Either it should be replaced by Paul’s figurative expression, “the *flesh*”, or by some such word as “*selfism*”, or “selfishness”, or “self-centredness”. Its ambiguous use has brought false hope or misunderstanding to many. One of my favourite hymns begins,

My Saviour, Thou has offered rest;
Oh, give it then to me:
The rest of *ceasing from myself*,
To find my all in Thee.

But the Scripture nowhere promises any such fictitious rest as a cessation from my very self! To presume that it does only leads to self-delusion.

This cruel self, oh, how it strives,
And works within my breast,
To come between Thee and my soul,
And keep me back from rest!

But how *can* the self “come between” Christ and “my soul” when the self *is* the soul? All the way through such verses the author does not mean the basic human self at all, even

though he uses the *word*, “self”; he means those selfish and animal propensities within us which Paul collectively calls “the flesh”. So long as we understand the word, “self”, to mean the various movings of selfism, i.e. Self-ambition, self-wisdom, self-seeking, self-conceit, self-pity, and so on, such hymns, prayers, longings are truly spiritual and intelligent; but to mean by it one’s very “self” is to entertain an illusion.

As a matter of preciseness, the term, “self”, is not even good English. It is a truncated form of the noun, “selfishness”, and is of only late appearance. It is not Biblical. Nowhere in Scripture do we find such statements as are now common in conferences on the deeper Christian life—for instance, “the self-life must be slain”; “the self-life is the flesh”; “the self is the old nature”; “in the self is nothing but sin”. The Bible is misrepresented by such clichés; for it everywhere recognises that in the basic human self there is both *good* and bad. It carefully *distinguishes* between the self and “the flesh”, e.g. In Romans 7:18, where Paul says, “For I know that in me, that is, in my *flesh*, dwelleth no good thing ... but with the *mind* [the true self] I serve the law of God”. Let it be settled once for all in our minds: the “self” is not identical with the “flesh”. The “flesh” is only one *aspect* of the self. Sanctification consists, not in a supposed eradication or subjugation of the self, but in the *sublimation* of it through a renewing immersion in the Holy Spirit. Extinction of the self is nowhere taught in our New Testament; but the “transformation” of it (Greek: *metamorphosis*) is: see Romans 12: 2; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 4:23.



An Extravaganza of Mysticism

But wrapped up in this problem of the so-called “self” there are other and more peculiar errors which stem from a hyper-introspective type of spirituality. Whenever we become “spiritual” beyond what Scripture teaches, faith degenerates into presumption; our theory of sanctification lifts us away from solid footing, and has us treading clouds of lofty imagination, until sooner or later we suddenly find ourselves let down into the bogs of disillusionment. Many seekers after holiness have been impeded, even tortured, by the teaching that *self is sin*. They and their teachers have committed the fallacy of making the disease and the patient identical. They have assumed that because the patient *has* a disease, the patient *is* the disease! But what Gospel can save me if my very ego is itself *sin*? If I am such a being, the only way to save me is to deprive me of *being*. Nirvana is the goal!

Self must be slain by self-annihilation,
The nearer nothing, so much more divine.

Thank God, the New Testament teaches no such Christianized Buddhism! Yet in subtle disguise, that is just what various forms of Christian mysticism have taught—often with all too wide an acceptance. True Christianity is essentially spiritually-minded, but that does not make all *forms* of spiritual-mindedness truly Christian. There can be a spirituality, an inwardness, which is self-occupied, introversive, and contemplative for its own sake rather than for outgoing good to others. Far too much of that is found in *mysticism*. Indeed, therein lies its appeal. In days past, to many a heart in quest of holiness, mysticism has seemed a healthy protest of true Protestantism against the sacerdotalism of the Roman Catholic Church; and in more recent days it has seemed a

true reaction against the formalism and showy externalism which have considerably disfigured some Protestant denominations.

For instance, the famous Quietist, Madame Guyon, who is widely extolled as one of the spiritually elite to be emulated, has little in common with *evangelical* Protestantism beyond her devout emphasis on the *inwardness* of the Christian religion. To us evangelical believers the New Testament clearly teaches that salvation is by faith; not by works. Madame Guyon also *seems* to oppose faith to works, but it is only faith as against outward observances such as Rome teaches. To us evangelical believers, holiness is a *result* of communion with God, whereas with Madame Guyon holiness is a *prerequisite* to communion with God. As Professor Thomas Upham, one of her admirers, says, she suspended “acceptance with God”, on “inward disposition”. That wonderful keystone in the arch of Gospel truth—salvation by faith alone, in the finished work of Calvary, was unknown to her. Along with other Quietists, to her the soul that is filled with God is the soul that is emptied of *itself*. The great thing is to “nought” oneself. That is not peculiar to the Quietists; it is a main characteristic of all mysticism. Eckhart voices it when he says, “A man shall become as truly poor and as free from his creature will as he was when he was born. . . . He alone hath true spiritual poverty who wills nothing, knows nothing, desires nothing.” It is this complete voiding of the soul, of the *self*, which (supposedly) perfects communion with God.

Some of the morbid inanities seriously indulged by various mystics, in their pathetic passion to be freed from self and lost in God, are grimly comical to many of us who are less “spiritual”. Swester Katrei (Sister Katherine) of Strasbourg has it that “not even the desire for heaven” should be allowed to disturb the utter passivity of the soul. We are told that “on one occasion she became cataleptic, and was being carried to burial for dead. Her confessor, just in time, discovered that it was a trance instead of death, and awoke her. Katherine exclaimed, ‘Now I am satisfied, for I have been dead all through.’” Another “Friend of God” who (supposedly) so fully attained the coveted utter indifference that “through the power of love” he “became without (i.e. *Free* from) love”, heard a voice say to him, “Permit Me, my beloved child, to share in thee, and with thee, all the riches of My divinity; all the passionate love of My humanity; all the joys of the Holy Spirit”; to which the “friend of God” replied, “Yes, Lord, I permit Thee, on condition that Thou alone shalt enjoy it, and not I”!

Such mysticism, just as truly as Pantheism, destroys all sense of separate personality. As B. B. Warfield puts it, what seem to be human individualities are “mere momentary wavelets on the bosom of the deep of being”. And underneath *all* such mysticism is the fundamental error that human nature is itself *sin*. The mystic’s idea of salvation is not that the human self must be saved from *sin*, so much as that man must be saved from *himself*, thus to be lifted to a higher purity and oneness with God than man possessed even in his original purity. Human nature may climb *above itself* into absorption with the Divine. This is the lure of the hyper-spiritual. It seems to open up heights of possibility which exalt human nature, but in reality it irreverently dishonours it by teaching that human nature has to be saved from the ugliness which is *itself*.

Under the influence of such Mysticism the merely natural has been equated with degradation. Human hearts have sighed, groaned, fasted, prayed, and exhausted themselves in intense vigils to be saved from their very *selves* as the only way to be saved from sin. The quest has been, not merely a purified nature, but a *superior* nature, which has led to the mystic’s characteristic contempt for our common humanhood. To the Quietists and others the only sanctification is the extinction of the self. We must die to

everything which we love for self-sake, even the desire for salvation or virtue, or anything, until, like a river reaching the ocean, the soul loses its own powers and capacities in an immensity beyond itself. Or, in the words of Catherine of Genoa, “God was made man that He might make men God”. Madame Guyon herself says, “The soul is not merely hidden in God, but has in God become God”. Or again, much nearer to our own time, Upham says, “Perhaps the most decisive mark of the truly crucified man is, that he is crucified to holiness itself”.

Now in all this—and far more of it persists today than many think—there is an ironic cheating the soul of the very blessing which it most achingly covets, namely, *fellowship with God*. What is sought in mysticism, is not just likeness to God, but *coalescence* with Him; not just conformity to Him, but *identity* with Him. Yet unless we retain separate individuality of soul, God and we lose that loveliest of all purposes for which He created us, that is, *divine fellowship with other beings*. The Scripture teaches no such mystical self-inhibition to the point of personal nihilism. It does not even go so far as to teach (as some of our hymns do) that the Christian’s *will* is to be “lost” in God’s: it teaches that the heart and will are to become *one* with God’s in the sense of our *voluntarily* desiring and willing only what our benign Creator-Father Himself desires and wills for us.

However painfully we are plagued by the obstinate puzzle of the so-called “self”, let none of us be drawn into the spider’s web of mysticism! Holiness, other than being the abolition of self, is the *assertion* of it in its purest and highest expression of the divine image. It was when the prodigal “*came to himself*” (Luke 15: 17) that he did the right thing: he came back to the Father. Up to that point he had listened to “the *flesh*”, which eventually led him down to the husks; but when he listened to his true *self* he learned the first step to restored sonship and fellowship with the Father. Nowhere in the Bible do we find prayers for annihilation or for absorption into God. Jeremiah prayed, “O Lord, correct me, but with judgment; not in Thine anger, lest Thou bring me to *nothing*”. Paul becomes similarly significant when he says, *not* “By the grace of God I am now *nothing*”, but, “By the grace of God I am what *I am*” (1 Cor. 15:10). Let us learn it firmly and finally: the sanctification to which our New Testament calls us is neither the cancellation of the self through crucifixion nor its gradual vaporization into infinite divinity, but its individual *renewal* by the Holy Spirit into *inwrought* personal holiness.



A “Higher Life” Fallacy

Coming “nearer home” to many of us, however, this mystical “spirituality” finds common expression today in a certain way of teaching that “*Christ is our life*” (Col. 3: 4). It is focalized in the chorus of a well-known hymn:

Oh, to be saved from *myself*, dear Lord!
Oh, to be *lost in Thee*!
Oh, that it may be *no more “I”*,
But Christ who lives in me!

The teaching is, that the believer’s self is *replaced* by Christ. Years ago, as a young Christian, I came under the influence of persuasive pamphlets giving this teaching. Let me

quote:

"The simple fact is, that whenever a life which trusts Christ as Saviour is completely surrendered to Christ as Master, Christ is ready then to take complete control of that life, and at once to fill it with Himself. . . . When we surrender and trust completely, we die to self; and Christ can and does literally replace our self with Himself. Thus it is no longer we that live, but Christ . . . literally fills our whole being with Himself in actual, personal presence; and He does this not as a figure of speech, but just as literally as that we fill our clothes with ourselves."

We are "to enter upon the very life of God; to be 'as He is' even in this world" (1 John 4:17). Instead of fighting temptation, we "simply let Christ dispose of it, while we stand by like onlookers". Giving his own testimony, the above-quoted author says in another pamphlet:

"At last I realized that Jesus Christ was actually and literally within me; and even more than that: that He had constituted Himself my very being . . . my body, mind, soul, and spirit. . . . My body was His, my mind His, my Spirit His; and not merely His, but literally a part of Him. . . . Jesus Christ had constituted Himself my life—not as a figure of speech, remember, but as a literal, actual fact, as literal as the fact that a certain tree has been made into this desk on which my hand rests."

Such teaching, fantastic though it is, has allured thousands (and still does) by its seemingly penetrating spirituality. It has made almost mesmeric appeal to spiritually minded believers longing to know the secret of inward holiness and victory over self. Through facile pens and persuasive lips, it has had wide acceptance. It has brought thousands together in widely advertised conventions. It has also engendered in too many of its disciples a spiritual superiority-complex which is the very opposite of the truly Christlike life. Its well-meaning original spokesmen, Charles G. Trumbull, Hannah Whitall Smith, W. E. Boardman, and others, are no longer with us, but their "victorious life" and "higher life" vagaries still are. Out they come, again and again, in many an address today at Conferences for the promotion of Christian holiness, punctuated by the usual clichés: we must "die to the self"; "the self in us must be slain"; "the self-life and the Christ-life cannot dwell together"; we must be "emptied of self if we are to be filled with Christ".

Whether some of the present sponsors of this plausible teaching are alive to the logical implications of their phraseology I rather doubt; but if there is one subject more than another on which our terminology needs to be accurate and free from exaggeration it is this sacred, sensitive matter of personal holiness. Look back over those pamphlet quotations which we have just submitted: they are not only a fevered overstraining of Scripture; they teach nothing less than an *extinction* of our individual personality. "When we surrender and trust completely", the first says, "we die to self; and Christ can and does literally *replace* our self with Himself". So apparently not even the *suffusion* of the self by Christ is enough; there is a *substitution* of the self by Christ!

A widely influential tract, *The Christ Life*, says, "God seemed to speak to me so sweetly, saying, 'Never mind, my child, *you* have nothing: but I *am* perfect Power, I am perfect Love, I am Faith, I am your Life, I am the preparation for the blessing, and then I am the Blessing too. I am all, within and without, and all forever.'" The author adds: "It is just having 'the faith of God' (Mark 11:22 margin)," by which he turns the Greek objective genitive round to mean that the faith which (supposedly) *God* has takes the place of *my* faith in God. That such is his meaning is at once confirmed by his treating the objective genitive in Galatians 2:20 in just the same way ("The life which I now live, I live by the faith of the Son of God"). He next says, "It is not *your* faith. You have no faith in you, any

more than you have life or anything else in you. . . . You have to take His faith as well as His life and healing, and have simply to say, 'I live by the faith of the Son of God'. . . . it is simply Christ alone."

I go back to Trumbull's assertion: "I realized that Jesus Christ had constituted Himself my very being." Amazingly enough, he immediately tacks on to that the parenthetical note ("save only my power to resist Him"). But if Christ has "constituted Himself my very being. . . my body, mind, soul, and spirit", what can there be *left* to "resist" Him? Any resistance must be Christ resisting Himself! In reality, that parenthesis means that Christ replaces everything *except* my free will—which in turn means that Christ has not replaced me at all!

The teaching is just as self-contradicting as it is hyper-spiritual and exegetically untenable. We will not linger longer over it, except to add a final word of warning against it. As a sample of the way in which it has been put over to the Christian public, I quote from an article by Trumbull in a back number of *The Sunday School Times*. "Christ is living the victorious life today; and Christ is your life. Therefore stop trying. Let Him do it all. Your effort or trying had nothing to do with the salvation which you have in Christ: in exactly the same way your effort and trying can have nothing to do with the complete victory which Christ alone has achieved for you and can steadily achieve in you."

How attractive and Christ-honouring this "let *Him* do it *all*" Gospel sounds! But there are three facts which utterly disqualify it. (1) It is not truly Scriptural; (2) It simply does not work out in experience; (3) Mr. Trumbull himself says, "God can save no man unless that man does his part toward salvation". Man's part (he says) is to "receive", and that is true, but it is far from the whole truth. There is to be yielding, self-disciplining, striving against temptation, striving in prayer. According to Paul, the very fact that "it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure" is the reason why we are to "*work out your own salvation*" (Phil. 2~ 12, 13).

Any renewal which may be wrought within the moral nature of the Christian believer *must* be exclusively the work of the Holy Spirit, for self cannot change self; but no holiness ever inwrought by the Holy Spirit removes the need for co-operative human activity. Let there be prayerlessness or carelessness, and we lose the blessing. There is a true sense in which divinely inwrought holiness is to be *completed* by human response. As Paul says, in 2 Corinthians 7:1, "Let us cleanse *ourselves* from all uncleanness of the flesh and spirit, *completing* holiness in the fear of God". Or, again, "If a man therefore cleanse *himself* from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified . . ." (2 Tim. 2: 21).

As we have said earlier, our dear Lord fights our battles *with* us, but never *instead* of us. There is no need for *Him* to gain new victories, for through the once-for-all victory of His Cross and resurrection, all foes are forever "beneath Him". What He now designs is *our* victory in union with Himself. If (as is theorized) Christ now lives *instead* of me, all the temptations which come ostensibly to me *miss* me (for I am no longer there) and present themselves to Christ, on whom, however, they are completely wasted, as *He* has no response whatever. It robs me of all the benefits of self-discipline, of all union with Christ in moral conquest, and of all rejoicing in victory "through Christ which strengtheneth *me*" (Phil. 4: 13). It also leaves me with the strange puzzle: if Christ in me now lives *instead* of me, why do all the temptations which come to *Him* because of His having replaced me, keep hurting *me*?

We would warn everyone who chances on these pages: Beware just as wakefully against

hyper-spiritual extremisms as against theological heresies. They may not tamper with foundational verities of the Faith, but they cause untold havoc among sincere Evangelicals. I think the following culling from J. R. Miller is well worth pondering.

"There are those who sigh for holiness and beauty of character, but they are not willing to pay the price. They sing 'More holiness give me,' and dream of some lofty spiritual attainment, some transfiguration, but they are not willing to endure the toils, fight the battles, and make the self-sacrifices necessary to win these celestial heights. They would make prayer a substitute for effort, for struggle, for the crucifying of the flesh. They want a larger spiritual inheritance, but they have no thought of taking it in primeval forests which their own hands must cut down. "The truth is, however, that God gives us our inheritance just as He gave Joseph's lot to him. Our promised land has to be won, every inch of It. And each one must win his own personal portion. No one can win the inheritance for any other. You must conquer your own temptations—your dearest friend by your side cannot overcome them for you. You must train your own faith. You must cultivate your own heart-life. You must learn patience, gentleness, and all the lessons of love for yourself. No one can give you any Christian grace. . . . Even God cannot give us holiness, peace, and all the results of victorious living, without struggle, battle, or self-denial upon our own part."

Let us treasure more than ever the truth of Galatians 2:20, "Christ liveth in me"; but let us not strain it into meaning "Christ liveth *instead* of me". Dear Christian, even our Lord Jesus cannot live your life *for* you, though, thank God, He is ever *with* you and within you. Your victory over sin must be your own, If it is Christ's only, and *not* your own, then it is artificial, not real; you have not been made morally strong enough to win; you have been made merely negative; your holiness is false; you yourself are not really changed at all. But, according to Scripture, *you* are meant to win *through* Christ. That kind of victory develops holy character in yourself, but gives all the ultimate glory to Christ. Our true motto is Philippians 4:13, "**I CAN . . . THROUGH CHRIST**". That, and that alone, is my true secret of moral and spiritual victory.



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