

The Wednesday Word, June 15, 2011: The Terrors of Conscience and the Gospel

Those who read up on the history of revivals often get fascinated by the subject of the terrors of conscience. Some folks have gone so far as to say that we need this sort of thing today. It is true that terror of the conscience may sometimes go before faith, but this kind of terror is not to be confused with repentance. Indeed, the truth is this, terrors of conscience and the Law have the tendency to draw men away from the cross and not to it.

Let me illustrate. Several hundred years ago, in Northern Ireland, a Presbyterian minister by the name of Glendinning began to preach in a place called Sixmile Water in County Antrim. In accounts I've read, Glendinning arrived and, "Seeing the lewdness and ungodly sinfulness of the people, he preached to them nothing but law, wrath, and the terrors of God for sin." Multitudes were brought to cry out in terror and swoon under the Word. People were carried out of doors as if dead. But no one got saved. Why? The reason is that the poor minister knew only Law and not gospel! Eventually, the neighbouring ministers came to Mr. Glendinning's aid and brought the "stricken people" to an understanding of grace and salvation. (See, *The History of the Irish Presbyterian Church*; Editors Rev. Marcus Dods, D.D., and Rev. Alexander Whyte, D.D.).

True sorrow for sin, however, is gospel birthed. It comes from apprehending the mercy and grace of God in Christ. The broken heart is the result of our believing the gospel of God's free love in the death and resurrection of his Son. Nothing will melt the heart like a view of Christ and His dying love. What a dangerous anti-gospel business it is to try to get convictions, and terrors as preliminaries to believing the gospel. If God sovereignty does that's fine, but the preacher who insists that sinners can only find gospel peace if they get anxious or convicted enough is an enemy of the cross of Christ. Furthermore, they who insist that the sinner must pray through for conviction of sin and or pursue endless amounts of self-examination and self-improvement in order to believe in Christ, are teaching the very essence of a false gospel.

Christ asks no preparation of any kind whatsoever, whether outward or inward, for us to come to Him. If a person will not come as they are, they cannot come at all. It is not self-prepared or self-abased people whom Jesus receives, but "sinners." He came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32). This man receives sinners (Luke 15:2).

And here's something else: how we begin is how we continue! As believers we continue to come to God as we did in the beginning with nothing in ourselves to recommend us. We continue to come to God by Christ alone plus nothing. This means that, as believers, we dare not trust in our accomplishments or doctrinal rectitude to win us favour at God's throne; nor do we need to make vast improvements in our character to qualify us to pray to Him. We are called to trust that in and by Christ Jesus alone, one perfect, unchangeable, and unalterable work has been accomplished on our behalf. Through that one offering of Christ our consciences are made perfect (Heb. 9:7-15). At this very moment, through the gospel we have such an assurance of being set apart for God by the blood of Christ, that we can approach Him boldly and in full liberty without efforts of self-improvement (Heb. 4:16). Our sins are already purged (Heb. 1:3) and nothing offensive, whether guilt or defilement rests upon us (Eph1:4).

We can't improve on our standing with our vain pledges of re-commitment, re-dedication and re-doubled efforts. So great is the power of Christ that those he has already sanctified by His blood cannot be separated from Him (Heb. 10:10; Rom 8:35-39).

As gospel driven believers we learn to define ourselves by the finished work and not by our sins and failures.

And that's the Gospel Truth