

Sin and the Christian Life

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In the book of 1 John, John is dealing with tests – how we can know that we have life and are saved.

The first test is of our attitude or relationship toward sin. A life given over to sin proves that we are not saved, do not have the life of a holy God in us. John begins and ends a major section of his epistle with this thought (cf. 1 John 1:6-7, 2:1a).

In between, he warns us against the opposite error: various forms of denial of sin, such as eradication, perfectionism, etc. In between he also points us to the provision made for dealing with the sins of Christians: confession on our part, advocacy on His part.

Since it is desperately important that we understand this teaching thoroughly, please allow me to summarize some of these truths here. I am not trying to document or prove them now – simply to state them as I see them.

The Christian life is not a life of continuing sin. In fact, sin and the new life in Christ are incompatible. The Christian life properly is a life of holiness. We should not sin. Neither is it a life in which the problem of sin has been removed.

God has made provision for complete victory over sin: (1) He has put within us a new nature and His own Spirit, who is holy, and He will lead us in a life of holiness; and (2) He has guaranteed not to allow any temptation beyond our ability to endure (cf. 1 Cor. 10:13). There never is any excuse for sin. Thus, a Christian is able not to sin.

We still have to live our lives in the flesh and we still have our old natures, which still exercise the power of habit – the “bent toward sin” in our lives. Thus a Christian is also able to sin.

The Christian life is a life-long struggle with these two opposing tendencies. The deciding factor as to which will have the upper hand at any given moment is my yielding to one or the other. The struggle may become less acute as I habitually yield to one or the other, so that I may become characteristically carnal or spiritual. But it never stops – in either direction.

The secret of victory for the Christian in this struggle is given in the book of Romans. Two factors are presented: (1) Romans 6 gives the realization and application of the doctrine of our union with Christ; and (2) Rom. 8:2 shows the enabling help of the Holy Spirit.

An experience of Spirit-filling is not God's appointed means of accomplishing holiness in the Christian. Cleansing and growth in Christlikeness are accomplished by the Word, the Scriptures. Of course, this is the Spirit's work because He uses the Word. But in the Bible, Spirit-filling is always associated with enabling, with power for service – never with cleansing.

What should be our attitude toward the so-called "holiness movement"? I offer two thoughts for your consideration: (1) We should learn from them two truths of Scripture which they have emphasized and other groups have tended to neglect – first, that we desperately need, and God expects, holiness of life; and second, that the work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life needs more emphasis; and (2) We should understand and guard against their two basic errors – first, that the Holy Spirit comes upon the believer sometime after conversion in a so-called "second blessing;" and second, that it is possible through a present experience to get rid of the continuing struggle with sin.

Note: This article is adapted from Dr. Boyer's syllabus on 1 John, pages 23, 24.

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