

Studies on Saving Faith

Part 1 – Signs of the Times

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Part 1 - Signs of the Times

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PART 1 – SIGNS OF THE TIMES

It is generally recognized that spirituality is at a low ebb in Christendom and not a few perceive that sound doctrine is rapidly on the wane, yet many of the Lord's

people take comfort from supposing that the Gospel is still being widely preached and that large numbers are being saved thereby. Alas, their optimistic supposition is ill-founded and sandy grounded. If the "message" now being delivered in Mission Halls be examined, if the "tracts" which are scattered among the unchurched masses be scrutinized, if the "open-air" speakers be carefully listened to, if the "sermons" or "addresses" of a "Soul-winning campaign" be analyzed; in short, if modern "Evangelism" be weighed in the balances of Holy Writ, it will be found wanting—lacking that which is vital to a genuine conversion, lacking what is essential if sinners are to be shown their need of a Savior, lacking that which will produce the transfigured lives of new creatures in Christ Jesus.

It is in no captious spirit that we write, seeking to make men offenders for a word. It is not that we are looking for perfection, and complain because we cannot find it; nor that we criticize others because they are not doing things as we think they should be done. No; no, it is a matter far more serious than that. The "evangelism" of the day is not only superficial to the last degree, but it is radically defective. It is utterly lacking a foundation on which to base an appeal for sinners to come to Christ. There is not only a lamentable lack of proportion (the mercy of God being made far more prominent than His holiness, His love than His wrath), but there is a fatal omission of that which God has given for the purpose of imparting a knowledge of sin. There is not only a reprehensible introducing of "bright singing," humorous witticisms and entertaining anecdotes, but there is a studied omission of the dark background upon which alone the Gospel can effectually shine forth.

But serious indeed as is the above indictment, it is only half of it—the negative side, that which is lacking. Worse still is that which is being retailed by the cheap-jack evangelists of the day. The positive content of their message is nothing but a throwing of dust in the eyes of the sinner. His soul is put to sleep by the Devil's opiate, ministered in a most unsuspecting form. Those who really receive the "message" which is now being given out from most of the "orthodox" pulpits and platforms today, are being fatally deceived. It is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but unless God sovereignly intervenes by a miracle of grace, all who follow it will surely find that the ends thereof are the ways of death. Tens of thousands who confidently imagine they are bound for Heaven, will get a terrible disillusionment when they awake in Hell.

What is the Gospel? Is it a message of glad tidings from Heaven to make God-defying rebels at ease in their wickedness? Is it given for the purpose of assuring the pleasure-crazy young people that, providing they only "believe" there is nothing for them to fear in the future? One would certainly think so from the way in which the Gospel is presented—or rather perverted—by most of the "evangelists," and the more so when we look at the lives of their "converts." Surely those with any degree of spiritual discernment must perceive that to assure such that God loves them and His Son died for them, and that a full pardon for all their sins (past, present, and future) can be obtained by simply

"accepting Christ as their personal Savior," is but a casting of pearls before swine.

The Gospel is not a thing apart. It is not something independent of the prior revelation of God's Law. It is not an announcement that God has relaxed His justice or lowered the standard of His holiness. So far from that, when Scripturally expounded the Gospel presents the clearest demonstration and the climacteric proof of the inexorableness of God's justice and of His infinite abhorrence of sin. But for Scripturally expounding the Gospel, beardless youths and business men who devote their spare time to "evangelistic effort" are quite unqualified. Alas that the pride of the flesh suffers so many incompetent ones to rush in where those much wiser fear to tread. It is this multiplying of novices that is largely responsible for the woeful situation now confronting us, and because the "churches" and "assemblies" are so largely filled with their "converts," explains why they are so unspiritual and worldly.

No, my reader, the Gospel is very, very far from making light of sin. The Gospel shows us how unsparingly God deals with sin. It reveals to us the terrible sword of His justice smiting His beloved Son in order that atonement might be made for the transgressions of His people. So far from the Gospel setting aside the Law, it exhibits the Savior enduring the curse of it. Calvary supplied the most solemn and awe-inspiring display of God's hatred of sin that time or eternity will ever furnish. And do you imagine that the Gospel is magnified or God glorified by going to worldlings and telling them that they "may be saved at this moment by simply accepting Christ as their personal Savior" while they are wedded to their idols and their hearts still in love with sin? If I do so, I tell them a lie, pervert the Gospel, insult Christ, and turn the grace of God into lasciviousness.

No doubt some readers are ready to object to our "harsh" and "sarcastic" statements above by asking, When the question was put "What must I do to be saved?" did not an inspired apostle expressly say "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved?" Can we err, then, if we tell sinners the same thing today? Have we not Divine warrant for so doing? True, those words are found in Holy Writ, and because they are, many superficial and untrained people conclude they are justified in repeating them to all and sundry. But let it be pointed out that Acts 16:31 was not addressed to a promiscuous multitude, but to a particular individual, which at once intimates that it is not a message to be indiscriminately sounded forth, but rather a special word, to those whose characters correspond to the one to whom it was first spoken.

Verses of Scripture must not be wrenched from their setting, but weighed, interpreted, and applied in accord with their context; and that calls for prayerful consideration, careful meditation, and prolonged study; and it is failure at this point which accounts for these shoddy and worthless "messages" of this rush-ahead age. Look at the context of Acts 16:31, and what do we find? What was the occasion, and to whom was it that the apostle and his companions said

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ?" A sevenfold answer is there furnished, which supplies a striking and complete delineation of the character of those to whom we are warranted in giving this truly evangelistic word. As we briefly name these seven details, let the reader carefully ponder them.

First, the man to whom those words were spoken had just witnessed the miracle-working power of God. "And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed" (Acts 16:26).

Second, in consequence thereof the man was deeply stirred, even to the point of self-despair: "He drew his sword and would have killed himself, supposing that the prisoners had been fled" (v. 27).

Third, he felt the need of illumination: "Then he called for a light" (v. 29).

Fourth, his self-complacency was utterly shattered, for he "came trembling" (v. 29).

Fifth, he took his proper place (before God)—in the dust, for he "fell down before Paul and Silas" (v. 29).

Sixth, he showed respect and consideration for God's servants, for he "brought them out" (v. 30).

Seventh, then, with a deep concern for his soul, he asked, "What must I do to be saved?"

Here, then, is something definite for our guidance—if we are willing to be guided. It was no giddy, careless, unconcerned person, who was exhorted to "simply" believe; but instead, one who gave clear evidence that a mighty work of God had already been wrought within him. He was an awakened soul (v. 27). In his case there was no need to press upon him his lost condition, for obviously he felt it; nor were the apostles required to urge upon him the duty of repentance, for his entire demeanor betokened his contrition. But to apply the words spoken to him unto those who are totally blind to their depraved state and completely dead toward God, would be more foolish than placing a bottle of smelling-salts to the nose of one who had just been dragged unconscious out of the water. Let the critic of this article read carefully through the Acts and see if he can find a single instance of the apostles addressing a promiscuous audience or a company of idolatrous heathen and "simply" telling them to believe in Christ. Just as the world was not ready for the New Testament before it received the Old; just as the Jews were nor prepared for the ministry of Christ until John the Baptist had gone before Him with his claimant call to repentance, so the unsaved are in no condition today for the Gospel till the Law be applied to their hearts, for "by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20). It is a waste of time to sow seed on

ground which has never been ploughed or spaded! To present the vicarious sacrifice of Christ to those whose dominant passion is to take their fill of sin, is to give that which is holy unto the dogs. What the unconverted need to hear about is the character of Him with whom they have to do, His claims upon them, His righteous demands, and the infinite enormity of disregarding Him and going their own way.

The nature of Christ's salvation is woefully misrepresented by the present-day "evangelist." He announces a Savior from Hell, rather than a Savior from sin. And that is why so many are fatally deceived, for there are multitudes who wish to escape the Lake of fire who have no desire to be delivered from their carnality and worldliness. The very first thing said of Him in the N.T. is, "thou shalt call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people (not "from the wrath to come", but) from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Christ is a Savior for those realizing something of the exceeding sinfulness of sin, who feel the awful burden of it on their conscience, who loathe themselves for it, who long to be freed from its terrible dominion; and a Savior for no others. Were He to "save from Hell" those who were still in love with sin, He would be the Minister of sin, condoning their wickedness and siding with them against God. What an unspeakably horrible and blasphemous thing with which to charge the Holy One!

Should the reader exclaim, I was not conscious of the heinousness of sin nor bowed down with a sense of my guilt when Christ saved me. Then we unhesitatingly reply, Either you have never been saved at all, or you were not saved as early as you supposed. True, as the Christian grows in grace he has a clearer realization of what sin is—rebellion against God—and a deeper hatred and sorrow for it; but to think that one may be saved by Christ whose conscience has never been smitten by the Spirit and whose heart has not been made contrite before God, is to imagine something which has no existence whatever in the realm of fact.

"They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick" (Matthew 9:12): the only ones who really seek relief from the great Physician are they that are sick of sin—who long to be delivered from its God-dishonoring works and its soul-defiling pollutions.

Inasmuch, then, as Christ's salvation is a salvation from sin—from the love of it, from its dominion, from its guilt and penalty—then it necessarily follows that the first great task and the chief work of the evangelist is to preach upon SIN: to define what sin (as distinct from crime) really is, to show wherein its infinite enormity consists; to trace out its manifold workings in the heart; to indicate that nothing less than eternal punishment is its desert. Ah, and preaching upon sin—not merely uttering a few platitudes concerning it, but devoting sermon after sermon to explaining what sin is in the sight of God—will not make him popular nor draw the crowds, will it? No, it will not, and knowing this, those who love the praise of men more than the approbation of God, and who value their salary

above immortal souls, trim their sails accordingly. "But such preaching will drive people away!" We answer, better drive people away by faithful preaching than drive the Holy Spirit away by unfaithfully pandering to the flesh.

The terms of Christ's salvation are erroneously stated by the present-day evangelist. With very rare exceptions he tells his hearers that salvation is by grace and is received as a free gift; that Christ has done everything for the sinner, and nothing remains but for him to "believe"—to trust in the infinite merits of His blood. And so widely does this conception now prevail in "orthodox" circles, so frequently has it been dinned in their ears, so deeply has it taken root in their minds, that for one to now challenge it and denounce it as being so inadequate and one-sided as to be deceptive and erroneous, is for him to instantly court the stigma of being a heretic, and to be charged with dishonoring the finished work of Christ by inculcating salvation by works. Yet notwithstanding, the writer is quite prepared to run that risk.

Salvation is by grace, by grace alone, for a fallen creature cannot possibly do anything to merit God's approval or earn His favor. Nevertheless, Divine grace is not exercised at the expense of holiness, for it never compromises with sin. It is also true that salvation is a free gift, but an empty hand must receive it, and not a hand which still tightly grasps the world! But it is not true that "Christ has done every thing for the sinner." He did not fill His belly with the husks which the swine eat and find them unable to satisfy. He has not turned his back on the far country, arisen, gone to the Father, and acknowledged his sins—those are acts which the sinner himself must perform. True, he will not be saved for the performance of them, yet it is equally true that he cannot be saved without the performing of them—any more than the prodigal could receive the Father's kiss and ring while he still remained at a guilty distance from Him!

Something more than "believing" is necessary to salvation. A heart that is steeled in rebellion against God cannot savingly believe: it must first be broken. It is written "except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3). Repentance is just as essential as faith, yea, the latter cannot be without the former: "Repented not afterward, that ye might believe" (Matthew 21:32). The order is clearly enough laid down by Christ: "Repent ye, and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15). Repentance is sorrowing for sin. Repentance is a heart-repudiation of sin. Repentance is a heart determination to forsake sin. And where there is true repentance grace is free to act, for the requirements of holiness are conserved when sin is renounced. Thus, it is the duty of the evangelist to cry "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord (from whom he departed in Adam), and he will have mercy upon him" (Isaiah 55:7). His task is to call on his hearers to lay down the weapons of their warfare against God, and then to sue for mercy through Christ.

The way of salvation is falsely defined. In most instances the modern "evangelist" assures his congregation that all any sinner has to do in order to escape Hell and

make sure of Heaven is to "receive Christ as his personal Savior." But such teaching is utterly misleading. No one can receive Christ as his Savior while he rejects Him as Lord. It is true the preacher adds that, the one who accepts Christ should also surrender to Him as Lord, but he at once spoils it by asserting that though the convert fails to do so nevertheless Heaven is sure to him. That is one of the Devil's lies. Only those who are spiritually blind would declare that Christ will save any who despise His authority and refuse His yoke: why, my reader, that would not be grace but a disgrace—charging Christ with placing a premium on lawlessness.

It is in His office of Lord that Christ maintains God's honor, subserves His government, enforces His Law; and if the reader will turn to those passages—Luke 1:46, 47; Acts 5:31 (prince and Savior); 2 Peter 1:11; 2:20; 3:18—where the two titles occur, he will find that it is always "Lord and Savior," and not "Savior and Lord." Therefore, those who have not bowed to Christ's scepter and enthroned Him in their hearts and lives, and yet imagine that they are trusting in Him as their Savior, are deceived, and unless God disillusion them they will go down to the everlasting burnings with a lie in their right hand (Isaiah 44:20). Christ is "the Author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey Him" (Hebrews 5:9), but the attitude of those who submit not to His Lordship is "we will not have this Man to reign over us" (Luke 19:14). Pause then, my reader, and honestly face the question: are you subject to His will, are you sincerely endeavoring to keep His commandments?

Alas, alas, God's "way of salvation" is almost entirely unknown today, the nature of Christ's salvation is almost universally misunderstood, and the terms of His salvation misrepresented on every hand. The "Gospel" which is now being proclaimed is, in nine cases out of every ten, but a perversion of the Truth, and tens of thousands, assured they are bound for Heaven, are now hastening to Hell, as fast as time can take them. Things are far, far worse in Christendom than even the "pessimist" and the "alarmist" suppose. We are not a prophet, nor shall we indulge in any speculation of what Biblical prophecy forecasts—wiser men than the writer have often made fools of themselves by so doing. We are frank to say that we know not what God is about to do. Religious conditions were much worse, even in England, one hundred and fifty years ago. But this we greatly fear: unless God is pleased to grant a real revival, it will not be long ere "the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people" (Isaiah 60:2), for "Evangelism" constitutes, in our judgment, the most solemn of all the "signs of the times."

What must the people of God do in view of the existing situation? Ephesians 5:11 supplies the Divine answer: "Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them," and everything opposed to the light of the Word is "darkness." It is the bounded duty of every Christian to have no dealings with the "evangelistic" monstrosity of the day: to withhold all moral and financial support of the same, to attend none of their meetings, to circulate none of their

tracts. Those preachers who tell sinners they may be saved without forsaking their idols, without repenting, without surrendering to the Lordship of Christ are as erroneous and dangerous as others who insist that salvation is by works and that Heaven must be earned by our own efforts.

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