

## Conviction for Sin

[Gardiner Spring](#)

It is no certain evidence that a person has been born of God because he has been the subject of deep convictions for sin. Some degree of conviction for sin is absolutely necessary to the existence of religion in the soul. If I were to describe the lowest degree of conviction that is consistent with the possessions of gracious affections, I should be willing to affirm that no man can be a child of God who has not seen his heart to be so sinful as to need regenerating grace, his sins so great as to deserve everlasting condemnation, and his helplessness so complete as to need an Almighty Saviour. And yet many a man has this view of himself who is not a true penitent. It is difficult for persons who hear the Gospel always to remain unaffected and thoughtless, and their solemn impressions often continue for considerable time. They are frequently made to see their own sinfulness and to feel that they are under the dominion of a carnal mind that is enmity against God (Rom. 8:7). The law of God in all the reasonableness of its precept and equity of its sanctions, in all its extent and spirituality, comes home to their consciences, and brings with it the knowledge of sin and the impression of guilt. They see that in them there dwelleth no good thing, that it is in vain that they search for the least holiness in anything they have done, and that all they have ever thought, felt, or performed, is in direct opposition to the law of God. Sometimes it is the burden of some particular sin which lies heavy on their consciences, and sometimes it is a life of sin which fills them with distress and trembling. Not infrequently they are awfully miserable. They feel wretched and forlorn, exiled from the favor of God, bound over to the execution of the final sentence, abandoned to despair, and already beginning to sink into the eternal pit. To aggravate their misery, persons in this state of mind very frequently also have lively impressions of their ill dessert. They deeply feel that they deserve to suffer the weight of God's holy and everlasting indignation. They are stripped of all their excuses, and know that it would be just if the penalty of the law should fall upon them to the uttermost.

Impressions like these also frequently lead men to make very humble confession of their sins. Nor is this all. They frequently lead them to forsake external sins and commence the work of actual reformation. They are for a time afraid of sinning and are restrained and deterred from it by the severity of their apprehensions.

Now there is not necessarily any religion in all this. A man may be sensible that he is a sinner and a great sinner and never become a penitent. The

consciousness of sin is a very different thing from repentance for sin. I have seen living men and dying men, deeply impressed with a view of their sinfulness, who at the same time had no heart to turn to God as self-abased and humbled penitents. No doubt the reprobate at the bar of judgment, as well as the damned in hell, possess a keen conviction of their personal sinfulness. We are informed that when the Lord cometh with ten thousand of his saints to execute judgment upon all that he will convince all that are ungodly among them, of all their ungodly deeds, which they have ungodly committed (Jude 14-15). So that the mere conviction of ungodliness cannot be evidence of godliness.

Equally certain is it that no apprehension of the coming wrath constitutes vital piety. There can be no holiness in being afraid of hell. Felix trembled under the preaching of Paul, and yet remained wedded to his idols. The devils also tremble and remain devils still. So a man may be sensible of his ill desert, and yet continue in his sins. The man without the wedding garment was speechless. At the last day, the whole world will feel guilty before God and through interminable ages the victims of the final curse will be made to acknowledge that their condemnation is righteous.

Nor is there necessarily any religion in confessing our sins. It is right to confess them when that confession proceeds from a right heart. But there is many a confession that is extorted by fear. Saul confessed, "Behold, I have played the fool and have erred exceedingly" (I Sam. 26:21). Seamen in a storm and landsmen in distress will confess the sins of their whole life and promise amendment, but as soon as the storm is over and health and mercy return, they forget their vows and become tenfold more the children of hell than before.

Nor is it less obvious that men may partially forsake their sins, and yet hold fast the love of sinning. They may abandon their open sins and yet practice their secret sins; they may abandon disreputable sins and yet cleave to those that are reputable; they may abandon sins that are hurtful and yet practice those that are apparently harmless; they may abandon one course of sinning, for the sake of entering upon another; and they may abandon all outward sins, and yet retain all their inward sinfulness. And the very love of sinning in the mind of a convinced sinner may be restrained and suppressed and yet never altered nor changed to holiness.

No degree of conviction for sin, therefore, is conclusive evidence of having been born of God. If you impartially examine the character of a convinced sinner, you will find no evidence of genuine holiness — no evidence of one Christian grace — nothing more than multitudes have felt who have gone to the pit in their blood. If a man never has been convinced of sin, he may be confident that he has never been turned from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God. Still it does not of course follow because he has been convinced that he has experienced this saving change. Impressions of sin and danger do not slay the enmity of the heart. Purposes of amendment do not slay the enmity of the heart.

The conscience may be convinced while the heart is not renewed. It is infinitely dangerous, therefore, to rest in conviction of sin as a substitute for sound conversion

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