

IS THERE UNKNOWN SIN IN CONVERTED PEOPLE?

**By Paul Penno, Jr.
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There has always been wonderful converted Christian people who have gone to their graves not having all of the hidden recesses of their hearts opened to their understanding. John Wesley was used of God for reforming English Protestantism. He taught Christian perfection not rightly understanding the truth of Jesus' cleansing ministry in the sanctuary. Yet, he founded a Sunday-keeping church which to this day does not recognize the fourth commandment seventh-day Sabbath. Certainly this was an unknown sin to Wesley.

Martin Luther was used of God to proclaim and articulate in writing the truth of God's love in justification by faith. He understood it in its legal sense as God's forgiveness of the sinner. What should follow from that is sanctification where one lives a holy life. Luther never connected healthful living and the body as the temple of God with justification. So he worked on his beer-belly. He also opposed the sabbatarians as fanatics. Here was a converted man with hidden sin gone unrecognized to his grave.

The point is there are many such Christians who in the times of their ignorance God has winked at and laid to rest. They sleep until the resurrection. They were never a final demonstration of the gospel of Christ which reconciles completely alienated hearts

to Himself. However, they lived up to all the light which they understood and God is merciful.

Many such individuals have had to endure persecution for righteousness' sake. God sustained them. However, God knows that in the great controversy between Christ and Satan, the cross of Christ will be replayed thousands of times over around the globe. Satan seeks to win the war by unleashing his terrorism upon the saints. Hence, Jesus will produce a people who will stand unmoved by His grace.

The mark of the beast issue is what lies ahead. We are lulled into security by the thought that such persecution could not take place in Christian America much less on a worldwide scale. That Christians could be persecuted for Sabbath-keeping and not worshipping on Sunday seems inconceivable.

However, the civil liberties and religious freedoms that we now take for granted could suddenly disappear. The two great principles upon which our country, the leader of the free world, were established are Protestantism and a representative republic. The protesting nature of the churches against the paganizing of Christianity is virtually nonexistent. Protestantism has joined hands with Rome in all its teachings. Our representative republic of government of the people, by the people and for the people, is fast becoming a monopolized grab for power by a wealthy, ruling oligarchy, who do not listen to the people. Liberty-loving people today will oppress the consciences of their fellowmen and revive the religious persecutions of

the Dark Ages. "National apostasy will be followed by national ruin" (R&H Dec. 18, 1888).

Only the gospel can produce a truly converted people who will pass the test of the mark of the beast. They will be genuine gold through and through with no known or unknown sin. If there should be any vestige of sin it would come out in the day of trial.

For example, was Peter a converted man going into the crucifixion. All it took for him to deny Jesus was a conversation with a simple peasant girl. Hardly a test at all. The Lord had previously told Peter he was an unconverted man. "And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren. And he said unto him, Lord, I am ready to go with thee, both into prison, and to death. And he said, I tell thee, Peter, the cock shall not crow this day, before that thou shalt thrice deny that thou knowest me" (Luke 22:31-34). There was something unknown to Peter which caused his collapse in the hour of crisis. What was it? Surely we cannot come to the mark of the beast issue and give up to our shame and the Lord's dishonor!

The heart of the issue was to later come more sharply into focus for Peter when following His resurrection Christ asked him three times "Lovest thou me?" (John 21:15-17). Before the cross love had not been perfected in Peter, therefore self-preservation and self-centeredness was the ruling

principle of his life as an unconverted man. He had not yet learned the principle of the cross.

There are uncounted numbers of Christians who are attracted to Jesus for selfish reasons. They don't want to die and burn forever. They prefer going to heaven and living in condominiums with an address on golden streets. But the one constant before meeting Christ as well as after is that self is still firmly in place. The worship of self is disguised as the worship of Christ. This is the unconscious sin.

"Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Matthew 7:21-23). Why this fearful disavowal on the part of Jesus? Can you not see their motivation for doing the miracles in Jesus name? It's is "we." They did not really love Jesus they loved themselves. The miracles served to draw attention to themselves. Such self-serving motivation will not stand the judgment.

There is abundant testimony in the Bible regarding unknown sin in converted people. In Jeremiah's day the priests and people were not aware of their apostasy. They argued with God thus: "How can you say, 'I am not defiled; I have not followed the baalim'?" God's response was ". . . You say, 'I am innocent'. . . But I shall challenge your claim to have

done no sin” (Jer. 2:23, 35, REB). Their supposed self-declaration of loyalty and worship toward God was in reality self-worship in following Baal.

The final sin of sins that filled up their descendants’ cup of iniquity was an unknown one, for Jesus prayed for His murderers, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34). Thus the greatest sin ever committed was one “they do not know,” an unconscious one, done by the religious people of God’s chosen nation on earth.

And that sin remains the fundamental sin of the whole world even today: “That prayer of Christ for His enemies embraced the world. It took in every sinner that had lived or should live, from the beginning of the world to the end of time. Upon all rests the guilt of crucifying the Son of God” (DA 745).

Why is this so? Because “every sinner” by nature would do that awful deed if he had not repented and thus been redeemed from it. Given the right circumstances, the right pressures, “every sinner” would do no better than those people did two thousand years ago. We actually crucify Christ afresh in all lovelessness of our brethren or our fellow-men. The inhumanity of man toward man is in reality inhumanity toward Christ. “The books of heaven record the sins that would have been committed had there been opportunity” (5BC 1085). If they “record” such sins, it is obvious that such sins must eventually be blotted out because a record is permanent until erased.

There is an important truth implicit in the message of Christ’s righteousness—no one of us is innately better than another; all genuine righteousness is imputed by Christ. Luther wisely said, “One should exercise mercy, for we are all made of the dough of which prostitutes and fornicators are made. If we stand, we stand by grace alone; otherwise our piety stands on a wisp of straw and soon collapses.”¹ This principle is expressed as follows:

“We are still in a world where Jesus, the Son of God, was rejected and crucified, where the guilt of despising Christ and preferring a robber . . . still rests. Unless we individually repent . . . we shall lie under the full condemnation that the action of choosing Barabbas instead of Christ merited. The whole world stands charged today with the deliberate rejection and murder of the Son of God. . . . All . . . would act the same part, were the opportunity granted, as did the Jews and people of the time of Christ. They would be partakers of the same spirit that demanded the death of the Son of God. (TM 38).

The ancient Jews were so fixated on self-preservation as a nation from the threat of Rome that they did not discern by faith their true Messiah. Therefore their representative high priest, Caiphas, argued a sociological reason for the crucifixion of Christ. Caiphas argued that it was “expedient” that one die for the nation rather than for all to die at the hands of the Romans. To Caiphas, crucifying the

¹ *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, ed. Ewald M. Plass, Vol. III, p. 4263.

Son of God is not sin; it is merely an unpleasant administrative necessity.

So unbelief was the root cause for the crucifixion of Jesus. This was belief in the law of self-preservation. “For whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (Romans 14:23).

An example of obviously unconscious sin is Hazael. He was “astonished . . . when the prophet told him of his future course”: “I know the evil that you will do to the children of Israel: Their strongholds you will set on fire . . . and their young men you will kill with the sword; and you will dash their children, and rip open their women with child.’ So Hazael said, ‘But what is your servant—a dog, that he should do this gross thing?’” (2 Kings 8:12, 13; MYP 278). Probably Hitler in his youth also never dreamed of the evil he was capable of doing.

Many converted people have died while in a state of ignorantly committing unknown sins. Christ imputes His righteousness to them, He substitutes for them. But the point of the Seventh-day Adventist sanctuary doctrine is that He cannot remain an Intercessor and Substitute forever. *The issues we are now concerned about is not getting ready for death, but for translation.* Otherwise, Seventh-day Adventism has no valid reason to exist.

The books of heaven are accurate “photographs” or [“daguerreotypes”] (7BC 972) of the characters of God’s people. Sins can not be blotted out of the books of heaven until first they are cleansed from the hearts of God’s people on earth, not merely excused, pardoned, or forgiven. And the last root, the very taproot, of sin must be eliminated.

The real issue is whether there is a practical change of our behavior significance to the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary, or whether that High Priestly ministry is merely a ritual performed millions of light years away from us, without relation to human hearts.

As we have seen, the taproot of sin is unbelief, alienation from God, enmity against Him. It participates in the murder of the Son of God—the very sin of which “the whole world stands charged today” apart from specific repentance. All other sins are mere fruit growing from that root.

The Lord’s servant took pains to tell us of Peter’s shameful failure after he was so sure that he could never deny his Lord. He did not know his own heart (DA 673 and 713):

“Self-confidence led him to the belief that he was saved. . . . Never can we safely put confidence in self or feel this side of heaven, that we are secure against temptation. Those who accept the Saviour, however sincere their conversions should never be taught to say or to feel that they are saved. This is misleading. . .

“It was necessary for Peter to learn his own defects of character.” (COL 155).

Note the counsel we have—“however sincere their *conversion*” those who follow Christ “should never” claim or *feel* that “I am saved.” Is not such a claim virtually the same as to feel that one is fully and finally “converted?” It is much wiser to say, “I am *being* saved, I am in the *process* of being saved, I have given my heart to the Lord and I am following on to know Him, I have chosen to serve Him and I

seek to be newly converted every day. Conversion is linear, not merely punctiliar.

Assurance of salvation is a glorious paradox—the closer one comes to Christ the less he is concerned about it. If the yearning for such assurance is rooted in fear, immediately we are rebuked, for “there is no fear in *agape*, but perfect *agape* casts out fear. . . . He who fears has not been made perfect in *agape*.” And *agape* is not an advanced course irrelevant to ordinary followers of the Lord: “He who does not love [with *agape*] does not know God, for God is *agape*.” (1 John 4:18, 8). Genuine NT faith is always a heart appreciation of that *agape* not a fear-motivated fire-escape from hell. Fear was not the motivation to which the apostles appealed. They presented even to beginners the motivation inspired by the cross (Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 2:1, 2; DA 480). True righteousness by faith applies itself to those roots of motivation.

Thus, a yearning for “assurance” that is based on fear may be rooted in the unconscious sin of unbelief. It can be superficially satisfied. But it is a cross-less “assurance” that stifles the conscience and hardens the heart against the Holy Spirit’s continued conviction of sin. Then we have the terrible self-deception and spiritual pride which is Laodicea’s problem.

The cleansing of the sanctuary cannot be complete until the last ounce of that egocentric, sinful fear is cleansed away. This is because such fear will automatically program the soul to succumb to the test of the mark of the beast. And spiritual pride will effectively mask the need.

A clearer understanding and heart appreciation of what happened on the cross alone can cleanse away this deeply rooted fear. It is possible that a truly converted person may have sins to be overcome that he has not yet realized. This fact has nothing to do with his “assurance” or his standing with the Lord. If he should die living up to all the light he has (like Luther or Wesley), his eternal security is certain because of the continued imputation of Christ’s righteousness. “He that is dead is freed from sin” (Rom. 6:7). But there will come a time when the High Priest will cease His ministry, and *the saints must be done with funerals*. Meanwhile, the continued ministry of the Holy Spirit is true to Christ’s word: His work is to “convict of sin” (John 16:8).

Jesus declares that the first work of the Holy Spirit is to discover or expose to one’s conscience an awareness of sin which has previously not been known. Does this work of the Holy Spirit come to an end when one is first converted? Without this *convicting* ministry of the Holy Spirit, no one can possibly know what lies deep within his heart.

Thus the Holy Spirit has the ability to make unknown sin become known to us. But at any moment that the converted person refuses this continued ministry, his conversion suddenly ends.

Is this a discouraging doctrine? Not if we welcome the continuing and blessed ministry of the Holy Spirit, whose work is to “convict of sin.” Not if we are concerned about preparing for the Lord’s return rather than merely for death.

Some of Ellen White's frequent references to unknown sin in the hearts of converted people are as follows:

"We know that there is no one, however earnestly he may be striving to do his best who can say. "I have no sin." He who would say this would be under a dangerous deception. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves: and the truth is not in us" 1 John 1:81. . . .

"Through affliction God reveals to us the plague spots in our characters, that by His grace we may overcome our faults. Unknown chapters in regard to ourselves are opened to us, and the test comes. whether we will accept the reproof and the counsel of God. (DA 301).

If we have defects of character of which we are not aware, [the Lord] gives us discipline that will bring those defects to our knowledge, that we may overcome them. . . . In each new position, we meet a different class of temptations. . . . Your circumstances have served to bring new defects in your character to your notice; but nothing is revealed but that which was in you. . . .

"When we begin to realize that we are sinners, and fall on the Rock to be broken, . . . and we are brought close to the heart of Jesus." (RH Aug. 6, 1889).

The difference between the *forgiveness of sins* and the *blotting out of sins* is essential to the truth of righteousness by faith. A genuinely converted person knows the joy of his sins being *forgiven*. But, however sincere his conversion, it is still possible that he could fall and reactivate all his sins. Yes, he

can become as Hazael and do evil that he may not at present imagine possible. Not until his sins are *blotted out* is he eternally secure so that the seal of God can be placed upon him.

"The books of heaven" will continue to "record the sins that would be committed had there been opportunity" until such time as they are *blotted out*. This involves the final atonement, which in turn involves a final repentance. And this in turn involves repenting of those sins that we would commit if sufficiently pressured, but which we may not now realize we could commit. And to make the progression complete, this repentance alone can make possible the love for souls that will characterize the 144,000.

The final test of the mark of the beast will be the ultimate in pressure or "opportunity" that will expose that final taproot of sin, participation in the crucifixion of Christ. This sin can be ultimately repented of and blotted out only when self in the believer is truly "crucified with Christ." In other words, the world will eventually be catalyzed into two camps—those who crucify Christ afresh in the person of His saints, and those in whom self is "crucified with Him."

Perhaps Luther and Wesley will be students in a special class along with others: "In heaven instruction will be given to those who, when they died, did not understand perfectly the plan of salvation" (*Notebook Leaflets*, Vol. 1, No. 20). However, those whose faith will endure through the time of trouble "without an Intercessor" will have to become more mature in their knowledge of truth

and in their victory over self. In a practical sense, they must “understand perfectly the plan of salvation,” or they will not be able to stand. This is another way of saying that for them all unknown sin must come to consciousness and be repented of. And this blessing can be realized only through a true understanding of righteousness by faith.

In taking upon Himself our fallen, sinful nature, Christ assumed all the temptability that possession of a natural but fallen self-centeredness entails. **{19}** But never once did He yield to that temptation. He tells us that He constantly had to deny His own will in order to follow His Father’s will (John 5:30; 6:38; Mt. 26:39; Rom. 15:3).

For a people to become truly like Him, yes, to stand at His side as a Bride, must require the work of the final atonement, a blotting out of sins. He is the firstborn among many brethren. The good news is that we can overcome even as He overcame. And He will not be ashamed to call us brethren!