

# SUBJECTIVE RELIGION — AND ITS CURE

By

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“This nation is drowning in a sea of religious subjectivism,” according to Robert Brinsmead in a sermon March 4<sup>th</sup> in Amarillo, Texas. He had reference to the many who rely upon the excitement of their own experiences in faith rather than upon the gospel of Christ.

Subjective faith is that which is produced by what is transpiring inside one’s self. Objective faith is that faith produced by what transpired on the cross, completely outside one’s self.

Subjective faith is established upon one’s own experience. Objective faith is established upon the gospel, the experience of Christ dying to meet the penalty for sin for us.

Subject faith glories in one’s experiences — “Look what the Holy Spirit is doing through me.” Objective faith glories in Christ. “We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord” (II Cor. 4:5).

At Pentecost the apostle Peter turned attention away from the excitement that apostles had experienced, to center it upon the facts concerning Christ’s death and resurrection. The only action commanded was repentance and baptism. Modern crusaders dwell upon their experiences, excitement over the Holy Spirit, and establish faith in subjective thinking instead of objective facts.

Subjective religion embraces the idea that man becomes pleasing to God because the Holy Spirit enters his life to direct and transform it to make him acceptable. There is a frantic, almost hysterical, effort on the part of many to have a ‘Holy Spirit’ experience, some miraculous evidence that the Holy Spirit has entered and will take over to perform the necessary work to make the person righteous. A multitude of books are available on the techniques used to con God into giving you the Holy Spirit. One evangelist writes, “There are spiritual mechanics we need to know,” and he offers a book on “specific techniques” on working with the Holy Spirit.

It would be a mistake for anyone to think we are minimizing the work of the Holy Spirit in Christian life. The Holy Spirit abides with every Christian to empower him in the Christian warfare and to bring forth the fruit of true Godly character. However, the Holy Spirit was not given to make us righteous, but is promised to those already made righteous in Christ, to every baptized believer, those who have already “experienced” salvation wrought by Christ.

Subjective faith emphasizes what take place *inside one’s heart*, hence the popular expression, “open up your heart” to allow Christ to enter. (Scripture does not record any such expression from the apostles or early Christians.)

Subjective faith sounds like the real thing. It is beautifully camouflaged with Bible terminology. It says that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ. Apostolic (objective) faith also says that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ. But there is a vast difference. Subjective faith is that which thinks that Christ comes into the heart, by the Holy Spirit, to do a work that makes us acceptable in God’s sight. Apostolic faith teaches that through faith in Christ we are made acceptable by what *Christ did on the*

*cross*. The one (subjective) depends on something *inward*, something that happens inside the believer to make him acceptable; the other (objective) depends on something *outside*, something that God did for him which he could never do for himself.

“God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not reckoning unto them their trespasses...Him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf; that we might become the righteousness of God in him” (II Cor. 5:19, 21). Neither reconciliation nor righteousness is obtained by our experiences with the Holy Spirit. They are the result of the cross, when Christ suffered the full penalty of our sin in His death. Therefore, “if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature” (II Cor. 5:17) because Christ reconciled him to God and made him righteous by His death.

Paul wrote that we are “justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus; whom God set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood... (Rom. 3:24, 25). The justification is through the death of Christ, something wrought by God in Christ before we were ever born. It is our part to have “faith in His blood,” to believe that what was done on the cross does what God says it does when we are united through baptism into Christ’s death (Rom 6:3–4).

Christian faith is Objective faith; faith in what God has done through Christ’s death. Paul wrote of this giving up all former things “for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ...and be found in him, not having a righteousness of mine own, even that which is of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith” (Phil. 3:8–9). It is Christ who was totally sinless, perfect, obedient in all things, who took our sins and their full penalty on the cross. When we are “in Christ” we have the righteousness which is from God by faith. No amount of experiences and exciting adventures in our growth in Him can ever match this experience: to possess the righteousness of God by faith! Hallelujah!

Objective faith stands not on what the believer has done, but on what Christ has done. By contrast, subjective faith constantly rehearses its own accomplishments. “Look what the Holy Spirit had been doing in our lives.” Thus, an unhealthy and sinful pride is produced and the ego is dangerously inflated. The “church growth” movement encourages men to measure the power of God by what men are doing — men building the Kingdom by their own works, and receiving glory from one another for it. Of course, they deny it. It is God doing this work through them! But the credit always seems to accrue to the human side, boosting the pride of man, and the impression remains that the great works wrought by men lay up merit for his salvation.

God accepts us, not because we have done mighty works in His name (Matt. 7:22–23), but because Christ has cleansed us from sin. This is grace, that while we deserve death for our sinful works and thoughts, God gives us life for our faith in Him.

The disciples, who were given special powers, came back from a mission highly excited over their experiences, saying “Even the demons are subject to us in thy name.” They were bragging about their great experiences, as is common today. Jesus immediately corrected them. “In this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you: but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:17–20). This is objective faith: to believe that our names are written in heaven because we are in Christ, who died for us.

Faith can hardly mature in subjective religion. As long as the believer looks inward, as long as he keeps trying to find the “inside key” to give himself the feeling of assurance, he keeps on being frustrated. “Has my experience really been of God?” “Why

do I no longer feel the peace and joy I at first had?” “What is wrong with my experience?” “Why doesn’t the Spirit give me the kind of experience that Bill has?” “God doesn’t seem as close as he did at first.” These are some of the sad questions and comments I have heard from those who look to subjective faith. Somehow the exuberance and ecstasy keep slipping out of one’s grasp. That’s because they are grounded in fallible and sinful human flesh rather than anchored in the Rock of Ages, Jesus Christ.

The solution to the problems of subjective faith is to focus on what Christ has done, and to bask in the peace and joy of God’s grace. Christ has already paid the bill! He has purchased us to God. He has cleansed us from sin, and translated us out of the kingdom of darkness and the bondage of corruption into His own glorious Kingdom and freedom. It is the essence of Christian faith to believe this. As “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness” so the Christian is righteous, not because he attains it through experiences and feelings wrought by the Holy Spirit, but because he believes God has made him righteous through Christ.

It is Christ’s blood poured out for remission of sins, not ours.

It is Christ’s righteousness we possess, not our own.

It is Christ’s resurrection which is our justification. We are mortal, with no power of life. He was raised from the dead and has power to give life to “whom he will” (John 5:21).

It was his wounds and suffering efficacious before God, more than we are ever called to bear.

It is His Kingdom we enter. Of what value the transitory things of the world, however exciting the experience may seem at the moment?

“In the world you have tribulation,” Jesus said. “All who live godly shall suffer persecution.” The Christian life is a warfare, a fight against sin both within and without. What an experience! But our faith is not lodged in the warfare nor any experiences within. Rather it is anchored *outside* of us, in Christ and the promise made by God who cannot lie (no matter how we may *feel* about it).

“It is God that justifies, who is he that condemns? It is Christ Jesus that died, yea rather, that was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us” (Rom. 8:32–34).

The purpose of God stands unchanged, that His creature be totally righteous in order to live eternally with the Creator. This is possible only through Christ’s death, and our full faith in it. Subjective faith shifts the emphasis from this purpose of God to the natural purposes of man: happiness and excitement in this world which is in the bondage of corruption and is to pass away (Rom. 8:21, I John 2:17). It is ours to bear a witness to the world of its condition and fate and the hope given by Christ’s work, always seeking the “things that are above where Christ is.”

Our task is not to witness concerning subjective faith, that which goes on inside us, but to declare the truth of Jesus Christ and the power of his death and resurrection.

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