

GUILT AND GOD

By

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The world is ever looking for some place to fix the blame; somewhere to lay all the evil, the violence, the hunger, and the misery of man. George F. Will, writing in *Newsweek*, Dec. 29, 1977, noted that the theme of U.S. policy in the past year was “atonement for recent guilt (abandoning values, inordinate fear of communism, intellectual and moral poverty, etc.),” that President Carter appealed to the “nation to be more race conscious,” another form of atonement.

There is a proper palace for guilt in man’s response to God, but all other guilt is false and destructive. False accusation is one of the tactics of Satan, “Who accuses them (saints) before our God day and night” (Rev. 12:10). Guilt, whether real or imagined is a heavy load to bear and will defeat the strongest person. True guilt can be relieved only in the manner God prescribes. False guilt can be relieved when we recognize it as false. The worst condition is to struggle under false guilt and never see the real stuff for which God gives the solution.

GROUP GUILT. God requires the whole community to keep the law, and to punish the law breakers. The innocent is to “cast the first stone.” If the community refuses to punish the guilty than all are considered guilty.

As long as the community condemns the sin, only the actual sinner is punished. “The soul that sins shall die, the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him” (Ezek 18:20).

Evolution teaches that we are products of our environment, therefore, we are not personally responsible nor accountable. The criminal is not to blame for his crime; he is a victim of his community. Guilt is placed upon the group.

Prominent in advocating group guilt is the Women’s Liberation movement. Women who have failed to find satisfaction in life for various reasons find a scapegoat in a common enemy, the society which discriminates between male and female roles as God has given them. God is the culprit for having created two sexes with basic essential differences. Men cower in guilt and seek to change the rules, to change the function of sex and to atone for their imagined guilt.

Worldwide poverty is used by socialists to bring about their goals through the use of group guilt. The “haves” are made to feel guilty because they prosper while the “have-nots” suffer. To have is seen as a magical phenomenon, as if prosperity is by accident rather than by effort. To refuse to share with a brother is wicked, according to James. To knowingly fail to relieve the poor when one has opportunity is sin, but this responsibility should not make one guilty of the terrible poverty in the world. It was Judas who tried to lay the guilt upon Jesus and Mary when she anointed Him with the expensive ointment. “Why wasn’t this sold and the money given to the poor?”, he accused. But Jesus refused to accept the blame for poverty. In fact, Jesus is the One who could have fed all the poor, but did not do so, and yet He was without sin. We must be liberal and compassionate and

use our goods unselfishly, but Christ does not teach us to be burdened with guilt for what is happening in all the poverty areas of the world.

No one can long bear the burden of collective guilt for things he cannot control. Group guilt has no solution in scripture. It contributes to defeat of the Christian rather than to victory.

EASY FORGIVENESS. In the opposite extreme is modern evangelical religion of “cheap grace” which minimizes guilt. It offers a one-step solution: “Let Jesus come into your heart,” and all is forgiven. Thus one arrives at the sublime goal of redemption without ever having trod the hard path of repentance. One international group has widely publicized Rev. 3:20 as the sinner’s solution to guilt. “Behold I stand at the door and knock; If any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.” This is their basis for telling the sinner to pray for Jesus to come into his life. On the basis of this mere “invitation” to Jesus, the sin is forgiven, guilt is gone and salvation accomplished! They overlook the fact that this verse is written, not to sinners, but to the church. It was Christ’s challenge to the lukewarm church of Laodicea and not instructions to sinners on the forgiveness of sin. While the purpose of the gospel is to relieve men of guilt, that relief cannot be found until one acknowledges that he is guilty.

Another effort at easy forgiveness is the subjective experience popularized currently by the expression, “born again.” Being born is more than a subjective feeling, and so is being born again. Nothing is more personal than guilt and yet nothing is more deceiving than the false doctrine that guilt is expunged by a subjective experience. The guilt itself is **subjective**, but the forgiveness is **objective**. Christ does not enter the heart to cleanse it from the inside. What He did was outside — on the cross. Then penalty for sin is not just a guilty heart, it is death. In order to cleanse that heart from guilt, in order to wipe out the guilt and its penalty, Jesus assumed all the sin, took the guilt upon himself, then suffered the penalty for it by dying on the cross. Sin is not forgiven by the mere sentimental involvement in a religious experience, however traumatic it may be.

BEFORE GOD. David cried out, “My sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned” (Psa. 51:3–4). Men like to think that there is no real conflict with God; that our chief problem is in getting along with our fellow man, and that God’s particular displeasure is over bad human relationships. This is humanism. It simply ignores God. It says that if we get along with each other God will have no complaint coming.

David knew better. In spite of the fact that he had seriously injured others in his sin, he concluded that the real problem was in resisting the will of God and violating His commandments. It is in God’s image we were created and it is to God that we must account. Whatever we may do in regard to the other person, the real evil is in the fact that we have violated God’s will and marred his image.

Every sin is against God. He is the one who sets the penalty — death. He is the one who gives the remedy — the death of Jesus. And He is the one — the only One — who can tell us that we are forgiven. That is why a subjective experience of the very deepest kind does not take away one’s guilt and does not assure him of his salvation.

For example, suppose I offend you in a serious way. Later on my conscience bothers me and I am grieved over what has happened. Then I am reminded of your compassion and the fact that you still treat me right. Reflecting on this, I have the feeling

of relief — and conclude from this feeling that I am forgiven! Yet, we all know that if forgiveness is to take place it must take place in your mind and that the only way I can know you have forgiven me is for you to indicate it to me, not by my feeling toward you.

This is the way it is with God. Our sin is against God. We deal with God, not just our own feeling. Realization of our guilt is a deep experience, but the forgiveness must take place in the mind of God, not in ourselves. The only way we can know that such has taken place is by what God Himself says about it in His word. Jesus said, “He that believes and is baptized shall be saved”(Mark 16:16). He commanded us to go and make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them (Matt. 28:18–20). The instructions of Peter on Pentecost are clear enough for everyone: “Repent and be baptized” for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38). Here is word from Heaven, word from God Himself, that sins are forgiven in the way that God forgives — not according to man’s elusive feelings nor subjective experiences.

This is not to suggest in the least that man is contributing to his salvation. He does nothing to earn redemption by his obedience to the commandment to repent and be baptized. In this he only complies with the terms which God gives for His grace to be applied.

There is a strange tendency among many to lean over backwards to keep from giving the sinner the sense of guilt. By contrast, Jesus called attention to guilt and the necessity of repentance. To lust and hate, He said, is to make one guilty of adultery and murder! Repentance and remission of sins He commanded to be preached to all. In obeying the command, the apostles did not minimize the burden of guilt on the individual by offering cheap grace and easy forgiveness. They knew nothing of “Plop, plop, fizz, fizz; oh what a relief it is.” Sin requires the extreme penalty. Guilt can be lifted only by God’s extreme work of grace at the cross. The guilty can be relieved only by being crucified with Christ (Rom. 6:4–7). Either take up the cross or bear the guilt — there is no other alternative.

But, what a relief it really is! The guilt is real, personal — my own. Then Christ took it upon Himself and died — a real death. Now I get the benefit — I, personally, get the benefit of Christ’s redeeming death.

David said, “My sin is ever before me,” meaning that he was every mindful of horrible sin in his past, but at the same time he rejoiced in the knowledge of the amazing fact that he was forgiven. So we continue to be aware of our unworthy selves and yet unburdened by guilt.

It is sometimes argued that we need not point out guilt but simply present God’s love and forgiveness, because man is already burdened with his guilt. While he may be aware of a burden of guilt, too often man has no sense of his personal responsibility to God, and therefore has no sense of repentance toward God. Where there is no guilt there is not repentance and where there is no repentance there is no forgiveness. The saint may go on his way rejoicing because he has been relieved from the pain of guilt, not because he has been made to feel guiltless.

It is only by knowing the meaning of guilt and by accepting it upon ourselves individually and personally that we may come to a true repentance before God and receive the sin-offering that takes away our sin, guilt, and death.

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