The Cross of Christ (part six)
By Jim Fowler, contributing writer

Rejection of the Mystical Cross

In summation, it might be useful to enumerate the reasons why the theories of the mystical application of the cross and its continued crucifying activity should be rejected:

(1) Un-Scriptural. Numerous contrasts have been made in the previous paragraphs between what the Scripture records and what the mystic writers assert. Every reference to "cross" and "crucifixion" in the entirety of the New Testament is applicable to one of the five categories with which we commenced this study: (1) the material object of the cross (2) the historical event of Christ's crucifixion on the cross (3) the theological significance of Christ's crucifixion on the cross (4) the Christ's spiritual identification with Christ's crucifixion (5) the figurative usage of "taking up a cross." There are no Scriptures whatsoever to justify the mystical application of the cross of Jesus in an ongoing crucifixion experience. The continued crucifying activity advocated by these predominantly Protestant authors is little different than the continued crucifying activity which Roman Catholicism postulates as transpiring in their eucharistic mass.

(2) "Works" Theology. Christian theology is based on the grace activity of God, not upon the "works" and effort of man. Within the Christian life, God's continuing activity is not contingent on our activity. We do not effect Christian living by engaging in any particular activity, specifically self-crucifixion. Yet it is asserted:

"I cannot draw upon the life of the Crucified without admitting a new vital fellowship with Him in His death. I have the new life as I refuse the old -- at the cross." ¹

"I must maintain my crucifixion position. I must keep the flesh in the place of crucifixion." ²

The Christian life is not a matter of "doing our best so God can do the rest," doing our part so God can do His part. Yet they have written:

"Our part consists in getting down in to the death of Christ; His part is to live out His own life in us." ³

Repetitive demands that the Christian should "die to self," "apply the cross," surrender and "be broken," all reveal a techniquism approach to a formulized Christian life, which is a theology of "works" sanctification. Particularly rampant is the admonition to "reckon" oneself dead, so God can work.

"Our reckoning the old man as crucified results in the Spirit's leading us daily in the path of the Cross." ⁴

As he (the Christian) reckons, the Holy Spirit makes real." ⁵
When Paul advised the Roman Christians to "reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:11, NKJV), he did not imply that reckoning creates the reality. He used a Greek verb that was an accounting term. It means that by reckoning, we count as a fact, a reality that already exists.

The focus of these crucifixionism teachers is misdirected. They are preoccupied with "self," instead of God; preoccupied with sin, instead of the Saviour; preoccupied with death, instead of life; preoccupied with the cross, instead of Christ. As a result, they are involved in a works-oriented "suppressionism" of self, the failure of which leads to inordinate "confessionism" of sin. They do not understand the "finished work" of Jesus Christ and the grace provision of God.

(3) Gnosticism. The gnostics and the mystery religions always claimed that they had found the secret knowledge of spirituality. The mystic crucifixionists likewise make such claims:

"Calvary is the secret of it all."  

"In the fellowship of the crucified, a secret door will be opened into the place of God's power."  

"The cross is a mystery. Taking the cross is a deep mystery. Crucified with Christ is the deepest mystery..."  

"The Cross will never reveal to us its sacred secrets...its treasures of holy power...except we plant our feet firmly in the way of self-abandonment."

(4) Elitism. Cultic thinking often develops attitudes of elitism and exclusivism, wherein they regard themselves as more "spiritual," more "mature," God's special people, the "remnant" of God's true followers. The spiritual pride underlying such attitudes is evident in these statements:

"Mature Christians...have experienced an inner crucifixion, and know what it means to count upon Christ's death."

"They rise, so to speak, to higher heights of spiritual life, by sinking themselves into deeper depths of death."

"They who stand by the Cross of Jesus are a little band, the very preaching of the Cross marking them out as 'crucified to the world.'"

(5) Perfectionism. Referring often to the "deeper Christian life" and the "victorious Christian life," some of the writers indicate that the Christian can arrive at a level of Christian experience where he/she no longer sins.

"Evil habits...are doomed the moment we put the Cross of Christ between ourselves and them, and if we keep the Cross there...the fate of these sinful habits is irrevocably sealed."

Others offer an adapted form of progressive perfectionism which might be called "triumphalism."

(6) Mysticism. The ideological symbol of the cross becomes a mystical object that allegedly serves as an agent of God. The cross is personified and attributed with the intrinsic power to work in Christian lives in order to enact a continuing crucifixion and create "spirituality." One author refers to this as the "bona-fide mysticism of Jesus and of the New Testament theology."
(7) **Subjectivism.** The inner work of the cross, which these writers advocate, is entirely experiential and subjective.

"Victory is yours by Calvary becoming experimentally real in your life day by day."  

"Submit to die. Oneness with the dying Christ becomes more and more an experimental reality."  

"This bearing of the Cross is an inward thing...the subjective working of the Cross...a continuous process."  

"Believers must individually accept the Cross in its experimental aspect, and deliberately choose to follow the Lamb in His path of the Cross on earth."  


(8) **Idolatrous.** God has always warned His people against idolatry. The teaching which is herewith being exposed equates an object (the cross), a place (calvary) and an activity (crucifixion) with God. The symbol of the cross is deified. The mystical cross is equated with the person and activity of the Holy Spirit and with Jesus Christ Himself.

The scope of this false-teaching is such that the teachers of the same surely fall within Paul's indictment of being "enemies of the cross" (Phil. 3:18), despite their preoccupation with the cross. In their advocacy of ongoing crucifixion, they deprecate the once and for all death of Jesus Christ on the cross, implying that "Christ died needlessly" (Gal. 5:21), for he did not complete His work, and thus, "make the cross of Christ void" (1 Cor. 1:17). They reveal their fundamental misunderstanding of the "finished work" of God in Jesus Christ, and the sufficiency of God's grace in the Christian life. Yes, these are severe indictments, but the integrity of the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ is at stake, as the context of the foregoing Scriptural statements indicate.

J. Sidlow Baxter writes similarly of this same phenomena:

"In the conventional form of holiness teaching today there is a certain peculiar feature which seems so Scriptural and so widely endorsed that apparently few Christians ever think of questioning it. ...The teaching to which I refer is, that sanctification comes through an inward crucifixion of the believer with Christ; a subjectively experienced dying with Him on the Cross, and a 'reckoning' oneself to be 'dead indeed' unto sin from then onwards..."

"I believe that this theory of death to sin by an inward crucifixion with Christ is error. I maintain, after unbiased study, that according to careful exegesis of the New Testament, the Christians believer's identification with the death of our Lord is judicial, not experiential; that it was once-for-all, and is not continually re-enactable; that it was objective, but not transferably subjective; that it was a judicial death completed, and is not a crucifixion still to be effected inside the believer... ...so thoroughly wedded are many Christians to the usual form of holiness teaching, they still persist in thinking that somehow the believer's long-ago judicial identification with the Cross must also become a duplicated identification in the believer's present-day experience. But the onus is on all who so argue to show us where it is taught in the New Testament: and they cannot do so, for the New Testament nowhere teaches it."

"...we cannot but marvel at the naive unawareness of patent self-contradictions which are inescapable in the theory of experiential co-crucifixion with Christ, and the death of a so-called 'old nature' thereby.
"Much as we esteem and love many of those who have taught the 'identification' theory, we would earnestly advise Christian believers against it. Though it may sound attractively 'spiritual' it is not truly Scriptural; and those who presume to act upon it are exercising, not faith, but credulity." 21

This study is not intended to be an attack on personages, and this is the reason all names of the teachers and writers being critiqued have been reserved for the documentary evidence of the footnotes. Their ideas and theses have been evaluated in the light of the Scriptures, for it is of utmost importance that we remain biblical in our interpretation and proclamation of the gospel. In the early years after my personal conversion, I read the writings of all the authors cited in this study and was personally caught up in using their mystic terminology. After years of further exegetical studies of the New Testament, I determined that the teaching of the mystic identification of the cross was not in accord with Scripture. I also observed the detrimental effect it was having upon sincere Christian people, some of whom came for personal counselling extremely distraught and on the verge of emotional breakdown, saying, "I've tried to 'die to self,' and 'embrace the cross,' but I'm still not living the 'victorious Christian life' as an 'overcomer.'" These tragically misled persons were on a helpless, hopeless performance trek, ignorant of the grace of God in Christ. Many Christian people have been confused and befuddled by this mystic, magical and masochistic terminology. It is imperative that we employ proper hermeneutical principles of interpreting Scriptures, and not let our imaginations get carried away with figurative, metaphorical illustrations of God's spiritual in-working.

FOOTNOTES

(8) Murray, Andrew. The Cross of Christ. pg. 65.
(11) Huegel, F.J. Bone of His Bone. pg. 33.
(18) Penn-Lewis, Jessie. ibid. pg. 90.
(20) Baxter, J. Sidlow. ibid. Pg. 167.

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