

October 2008—*Conviction of Sin*

Why are our churches so shallow today and our lives so entangled in the world and its values? Perhaps a large part of the answer is that we do not take sin seriously enough. One hears very little preaching about sin these days, and when we do take notice of our personal sins, we often regard them simply as mistakes, errors, or accidents.

The insights of C.S. Lewis about this problem are sobering and as relevant today as when he first penned them.

Christ takes it for granted that men are bad. Until we really feel this assumption of His to be true, though we are part of the world He came to save, we are not part of the audience to whom His words are addressed. We lack the first condition for understanding what He is talking about. And when men attempt to be Christians without this preliminary consciousness of sin, the result is almost bound to be a certain resentment against God as to one who is always making impossible demands and always inexplicably angry. Most of us have at times felt a secret sympathy with the dying farmer who replied to the Vicar's dissertation on repentance by asking, "What harm have I ever done Him?" There is the real rub. The worst we have done to God is to leave Him alone—why can't He return the compliment? Why not live and let live? What call had He, of all beings, to be "angry"? It's easy for Him to be good!

Now at the moment when a man feels real guilt—moments too rare in our lives—all these blasphemies vanish away. Much, we may feel, can be excused to human infirmities: but not this—this incredibly mean and ugly action which none of our friends would have done, which even such a thorough-going little rotter as X would have been ashamed of, which we would not for the world allow to be published. At such a moment we really do know that our character, as revealed in this action, is, and ought to be, hateful to all good men, and, if there are powers above man, to them. A God who did not regard this with unappeasable distaste would not be a good being. We cannot even wish for such a God—it is like wishing that every nose in the universe were abolished, that the smell of hay or roses or the sea should never again delight any creature, because our own breath happens to stink.

When we merely say that we are bad, the "wrath" of God seems a barbarous doctrine; as soon as we perceive our badness, it appears inevitable, a mere corollary from God's goodness. To keep ever before us the insight derived from such a moment as I have been describing, to learn to detect the same real inexcusable corruption under more and more of its complex disguises, is therefore indispensable to a real understanding of the Christian faith.¹

One of the great objects of prayer should be for conviction of our sins and for a repentant heart. It is a prayer that is soon answered, clears the barriers that keep us from intimacy with God, and leaves joy in its wake.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), pp. 50-52.