

CIVIL WAR IN THE SOUL

“I know that nothing good lives in me, that is in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.”
—ROMANS 7:18

Paul held little hope of any intrinsic improvement of the human heart. In the above verse, he laments to the Romans that nothing good lives in him; that is in his sinful nature. This is not a statement of what used to be before he came to know Christ, but of what he continues to be for the rest of his life.

The term ‘sinful nature’ is a translation of just one word in the original Greek – the word ‘flesh’. ‘Sinful nature’ is an Augustinian term, coined in the fifth century and has served as a useful description. The word ‘flesh’, however, when it occurs in this context, refers not to the body, but to all that a person is in themselves apart from the presence of God. To live ‘in the flesh’ is to live in a spirit of independence and self-reliance rather than a spirit of dependence on and obedience to God. It refers to the bankruptcy of human resources and capabilities when detached from the enabling grace, presence and power of God.

It is this sense of despair over any hope of the natural person being able to function as God intends on the basis of human capability that lies behind Paul’s view of humanity. This may at first seem a rather pessimistic view, but it is entirely realistic and accurate. Apart from revelation of this in Scripture and God’s provision of the Holy

Spirit, we would not have the grounds nor the courage to face this truth about the human condition.

Jeremiah wrote long before Paul's day, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). Most disillusionment with the Christian life has its origin in an expectancy that given time, discipline and the grace of God, our hearts will somehow improve and our natural selves will grow in godliness. But that is not true to Scripture. The Christian life does not involve eradication or the suppression of sin, but involves counteraction of sin by the indwelling presence of the Spirit.

It is at the point of new birth when the Holy Spirit comes to indwell a person that there begins a civil war in the soul; that is an ongoing battle of flesh against the Spirit. Paul writes in Colossians 1:27, "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Glory, being the moral character of God, can only be expressed by the indwelling life of Christ who is the exact radiance of God's glory. In Him, we have our sole means of victory over the flesh for in the sight of God, we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ, and our sin done away with.

PRAYER: I know how futile it would be to try living a godly life on my own. I ask that You reign powerfully in me so that my life becomes more and more a reflection of You. Thank You, Lord.

TO REFLECT UPON: In what areas of my life do I need a deeper work of Christ in expressing His image?