Are We Saved While Sinning?

A recent book poses this crucial question: “Is it possible to sin and to know you are sinning and keep on doing what you’re doing wrong, and still be a Christian?” This is one of the most important questions that we as sinners in need of salvation could possibly ask. In answer, the book refers us back to the experience of the disciples and Christ. “The disciples continued their discussion along the road to Jerusalem, taking care of their unfinished business. But they knew what they were doing was wrong, because they lagged behind Jesus.” The unfinished business was their argument about who would be the greatest in Christ’s soon-coming kingdom. Now these disciples had been forgiven by Jesus, brought into a special relationship with Jesus, and set apart for a special work by Jesus. They had been justified, but their sanctification was not working very well at the moment. They were not experiencing holiness at the moment. “From this Scripture lesson we see that the disciples were guilty of sin. What sin? The sin of pride... Pride is one of the worst sins in God’s eyes... So the sin of which the disciples were guilty was not only sin, it was a bad sin. And they knew it was wrong, and they knew what they were doing, but they kept right on doing it... .That qualifies in my definition as known sin, continuing sin, habitual sin, cherished sin, persistent sin… On the basis of this Bible story, we can conclude that it is possible to have a relationship with God going on and to have a known sin going on in your life at the same time.” (Morris Venden, How Jesus Treated People. pp. 43-46)

The concept here is that since the disciples had been justified, and since they were following after Christ, the fact that they were willfully sinning did not invalidate their relationship with Christ. In this gospel, the only way one can lose his or her salvation is to reject Christ and justification. As long as one is professedly following Christ and has been justified, the state of one’s sanctification is irrelevant to one’s saved status. Since the disciples had not denied Christ or justification, they were just not exhibiting the fruits of salvation very well. The absence of a sanctified heart, with pride and jealousy controlling the life, did not disqualify them for heaven. (Do we remember that Lucifer was cast out of heaven for holding pride and jealousy in his heart?) This is the result of the gospel teaching that says that only justification is necessary for salvation, while sanctification comes along later as the fruit of salvation.

We find similar teachings in the book Beyond Belief. “Many sincere Christians are trapped in a subtle form of legalism, living in fear and insecurity. Every time we fall or sin we become unjustified. This is another common misunderstanding about justification. It is a monstrous teaching that has no support from the Word of God... If we believe that we lose our justification in Christ each time we sin, we completely invalidate the truth of justification by faith.” (p. 104) “Stumbling under grace, falling into sin, does not deprive us of justification. Neither does it bring condemnation.” (p. 166)

In this gospel, the disciples were just stumbling under grace, so they remained justified and saved while the spirit of Satan was controlling their hearts. This is the result of teaching that only justification qualifies one for salvation, while sanctification is an add-on experience once one's saved status has already been secured. Is there any wonder that we are having a hard time with lifestyle issues in Adventism today? If jewelry and immoral movies and rock music are only add-ons to salvation, then why make such a fuss about them? Especially our young people are hearing this message very clearly. Our reasoning about being a good witness or a mature person or a better example are very weak and ineffectual against the glamour of sinful activities. If they hear constantly that you are still in Christ and saved while participating in sin, then sin is not nearly so ugly anymore. They are asking a bottom line question: “What is absolutely necessary for me to be saved?” And the answer we are giving them is “Justification alone.” Sanctification and maturity and obedience will all come along later, maybe years down the road, as good fruits gradually appear on the tree. Focus on being justified, and obedience will take care of itself. Of course, our lifestyle problems are not limited to young people. We are having church-wide problems with Sabbath keeping, alcohol use, divorce and remarriage, immorality, and a host of other “sanctification” issues. As long as we continue to teach that sanctification does not qualify us for heaven, but is a fruit of salvation, our lifestyle problems will only increase.

Now we are going to look at some very clear statements from the Spirit of Prophecy. As you read them, compare each one carefully with the statements quoted above. “The willful commission of a known sin silences the witnessing voice of the Spirit, and separates the soul from God. Whatever may be the ecstasies of religious feeling, Jesus cannot abide in the heart that disregards the divine law....We cannot for one moment separate ourselves from Christ with safety.” (MYP 114-115) “But the commission of any known sin, the neglect of

known duties, at home or abroad, will destroy faith, and disconnect the soul from God." (FLB 138) "Wrong feelings have been cherished, and there have been pride, self-sufficiency, impatience, and murmurings. All these separate us from God." (GAG 139) "He (Satan) exults when we are overcome and the spirit of impatience and faultfinding is indulged... This grieves the Spirit of God and separates us from our Strength." (UL 35) "Any sin in them separates them from God." (5T 661) "Every impurity of thought, every lustful passion, separates the soul from God, for Christ can never put His robe of righteousness upon a sinner to hide his deformity." (OHC 214) "Well may the question be asked with earnest, anxious heart, 'Is envy cherished, is jealousy permitted to find a place in my heart?' If so, Christ is not there." (Letter 55, 1886) "Just as soon as we separate ourselves from God by sin, which is the transgression of the law, Satan takes control of our minds." (RH July 12, 1887) "The least regard for iniquity cherished in the heart will sever us from the communion and help of Heaven." (RH March 27, 1888) "When we give way to impatience, we drive the Spirit of God out of the heart, and give place to the attributes of Satan." (2SM 236) "Sin is from beneath; and when it is indulged, Satan is enshrined in the soul, there to kindle the very fires of hell." (41 345) "If we give him (Satan) the least encouragement.. .he will take possession of the mind, and then, although we may even think that we are being wonderfully led by the Lord, we shall be deceived." (RH July 9, 1908)

It is too clear for any possible misunderstanding. Sin separates us from God. When sin is cherished, Satan takes control of the heart, and the Spirit of God is driven out. How could we possibly think that we are in a saved condition while sinning? We are even warned that we might experience ecstasies of religious feelings and think that the Lord is leading us while we are in this condition. Self-delusion and rationalization are major components of Satan's attempts to deceive us into a false sense of security.

There are some equally clear statements about our justified status while sinning. "It is by continual surrender of the will, by continual obedience, that the blessing of justification is retained." (1SM 397) "No one who truly loves and fears God will continue to transgress the law in any particular. Whatever his profession may be he is not justified, which means pardoned." (MLT 250) "In order for man to retain justification, there must be continual obedience." (1SM 366) "We should not be satisfied until every known sin is confessed, then it is our privilege and duty to believe that God accepts us." (RH Sept. 4, 1883) "Every

transgression brings the soul into condemnation and provokes the divine displeasure.' (4T 623)

It is crystal clear that the justified state and obedience are as closely linked as are hydrogen and oxygen in water. Where obedience is missing, there is no justification. Only when our sins are confessed, which is not while we are participating in them, are we accepted by God. Every sin we choose to commit carries with it the penalty of condemnation. No matter how ingenious the interpretive devices, the Evangelical gospel cannot he supported from the Spirit of Prophecy. While the disciples were arguing about who was the greatest among them, while their hearts were filled with pride and jealousy, they were in an unsanctified, unjustified, unsaved state. Only upon repentance and confession could their salvation be restored. The disciples simply did not maintain a steady relationship with Christ until after Pentecost.

The summary of all these statements can he found in MH 180. "His (Christ's) life declares that humanity, combined with divinity, does not commit sin." Isn't it easy enough to understand that the divine-human connection in Christ made sin impossible as long as the connection was maintained? Then why would the divine-human connection in us be any different? Will the divine nature in us commit sin, when it did not in Christ? So when I am sinning, it is clear that I have broken the connection somehow, and my first priority should be to restore the connection. "Harshness, roughness in words or in manner, evil speaking, passionate words, cannot exist in the soul that is looking unto Jesus." (YI Feb. 10, 1898) In other words, unchristlike behavior and a genuine relationship with Christ are incompatible. We can have one or the other, but not both at the same time.

Perhaps it is good for us to look at the bigger picture here. Sin is not just about me and my salvation. Sin is dishonoring God and proving that Satan is right in the great controversy when he says that God's law cannot be obeyed, particularly by those who have fallen natures. How can God be vindicated when His people are proving Satan right a good share of the time? This is why the sins of believers are far more serious than the sins of unbelievers. They are showing that God's law and His power are no match for the deceptions of Satan. Unless the divine-human connection shows that God's grace has more power than Satan, what is the point of it all? Justification and sanctification are God's way of

revealing His power to transform and restore, not just to forgive and overlook.

Legalism has been a serious problem for Adventists, but now we face an even more serious problem. False assurance is going to destroy far more Adventists than legalism ever did. False assurance is presently our greatest enemy and Satan's most successful deception. And false assurance feeds off of the Evangelical gospel that justification saves while sanctification is the fruit of salvation.

Now all of this could be very discouraging for us, except for one thing-God's love. God is not looking for ways to reject us. He is the seeking God, the One who will not let us go, even when we are rebelling against Him. While He cannot save us in sin, He will continue to love us and draw us back to Him. When we fall into sin, there are two ways that we can deal with our sin. The human way-Satan's way-is to justify our sin and excuse it. That is the way of separation from God, and there can be no salvation while separated from Him. The right way to deal with personal sin is to recognize it for what it is as soon as it happens within us. We see that once again we are dishonoring God and vindicating Satan, and we fall on our knees immediately in deep repentance. There is only one thing that should scare us in this mortal life, and that is watching our hand slip out of the hand of our heavenly Father. Immediately we ask God to reach down and grasp our sinking hand and pull us up to safety again. Nothing matters-not ego or reputation or image--except reconnecting with God. As long as the connection is maintained, we can have full assurance of salvation. This means that we have to deal with sin, not just assume that it will go away. We need to allow God to fix the sin problem in us. "Just as soon as you commit sin, you should flee right to the throne of grace, and tell Jesus all about it." (ST Feb. 15, 1892)

But what about the person who sins and doesn't have a chance to repent before he dies? Perhaps he loses his temper and is killed in an accident. We have come up with all kinds of theories to cover that hypothetical situation. Our favorite theory seems to be that God sees the general direction of his life and so ignores his loss of temper. Let us listen to God's answer to this difficult problem. "Satan has sought to afflict and ruin you, and even to take your life; but your Saviour has shielded you again and again, lest you should be cut down when your heart was filled with a satanic frenzy, your tongue uttering words of bitterness and unbelief against the Bible and against the truth you once advocated." (5T 338) "The

angels never leave the tempted one a prey to the enemy who would destroy the souls of men if permitted to do so. As long as there is hope, until they resist the Holy Spirit to their eternal ruin, men are guarded by heavenly intelligences." (OHC 23) "If they yield to the enemy, and make no effort to resist him, then the angels of God can do but little more than hold in check the host of Satan, that they shall not destroy, until further light be given those in peril, to move them to arouse and look to heaven for help." (1T 345) The answer lies in God's love, not in the Evangelical gospel. We are not saved while sinning, hut God will protect us as long as there is hope of repentance. God protected the disciples while they were sinning, He protected David while he was sinning, and He will do no less for us. The sincere person will have a chance to repent before death. That is God's promise, and we should trust in that rather than in false gospels.

Anyone who assures you that there is safety in disobedience is teaching a false gospel, which is far more serious than a false day of worship. There will be many people in heaven who have never kept the Sabbath, but there will be no disobedient people there. This is why Satan is desperately trying to substitute a false gospel for the real one. He doesn't have to destroy the Sabbath or soul-sleep or the second coming. All he has to do is to destroy the gospel of Adventism and he has sealed our doom, because there is simply no way for Adventism to complete its mission without the everlasting gospel. This is how he is attempting to deceive the "very elect" today. The elect are hearing those whom they have trusted and respected proclaim a false gospel, and it is very persuasive. May God help us in this emergency!

Some wonder how they can discern between truth and error when there are credible people teaching opposite things. The best way to judge a teacher's work is not by what he or she says. The best practical way to determine truth and error is to watch the net effect of the message on those who believe it. Don't focus on a few extremists who take the message into fanaticism, but look at what is happening generally among those who are accepting the message. The evangelical gospel has been having a strong impact on the Seventh-day Adventist Church for about twenty years, so it is appropriate to examine the results of this gospel in the lives of church members. A number of church analysts have warned that we are not passing on the torch very well to the next generation. We are teaching the next generation how to be Christians, but not the vital place of Adventism in the fulfillment of

prophecy. We are blending into the mainstream of Christianity. As one person put it, we are becoming one more gray church in a sea of gray churches. Adventism has long been known for its high lifestyle standards, but we have become so afraid of legalism that we have been eliminating these standards one by one. We are allowing the values of popular culture to replace the values which Adventism has held for its first hundred years. In short, we are in serious danger of losing our identity-our reason for existence. The concepts of the final atonement and the vindication of God are not only ignored, but actively opposed. It is my opinion that these effects are the direct result of the popularity of the Evangelical gospel among us today. This gospel is producing its fruits. It teaches that doctrines and standards are not essential to salvation-all that is important is a “relationship with Christ.” If we allow this gospel to continue to invade Adventism, we are destined to preside over the slow death of a God-ordained movement of prophecy.