

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

THE IMMACULATE ASSUMPTION

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

I John 1:8

Dr. Ernest T. Campbell



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Since the message of the day has to do with confession, let me at the outset confess that the title "The Immaculate Assumption" was designed to pique your curiosity and effect an innocent deception. One would not be so brash as to speak from this pulpit to Roman Catholic belief in the Immaculate Conception or the Assumption of Mary. "The Immaculate Assumption" is suggested by the words of John: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves." It is the assumption that we are righteous and without guilt.

Chances are the author of this text was attempting to nip heresy in the bud. There was a gnostic strain in the early church which held that evil resided in matter and not in spirit. The soul of a religiously illumined man, therefore, was free from the sins of the flesh. It is also possible that there were some antinomians among his readers, people who believed that because they had experienced inner-illumination they no longer had to subscribe to conventional moral and ethical standards.

Not infrequently in the course of Christian history inner light has led to outer darkness. At any rate, the rebuke is stern: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

One is driven to this text in the belief that our society is in deep need of a quickened sense of sin. This is not a popular observation. "Not that again," someone says. For the idea is strongly entrenched that any talk about sin and guilt indicates a return to primitive religion. Progressive and sophisticated individuals do not talk or think this way. Even in

Christian theology nowadays salvation is understood more in terms of estrangement and reconciliation than in terms of sin and forgiveness. Yet, the ancient word stands: "If we say we have no sin," for whatever reason, "we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

"If we say we have no sin." Who says it? Why we Americans do as we defend our nation in world affairs. It is positively impossible for some of our citizens to understand why the United States is not loved, admired and appreciated by everybody all across the earth. They are baffled when asked to explain why in so many countries the American Embassy is just "a stone's throw away." Belief in our immaculacy derives from an over-riding conviction that we were divinely appointed to be the saviour of the world, the executors of the divine will. People, therefore, should welcome American business interests anywhere, they should welcome our missionaries, our military forces and even our missile bases. Even when we defoliate the environs of Vietnam, they should know we are doing it as their saviour and for their good. This myth is re-enforced by the fact that we Americans have never lost a war. Only the vanquished have war criminals; the victors have only heroes.

We have no sin, really. And we are quick to brand as ignorant or under-developed any people who do not wish to live our Coco-Cola, neon lighted, coronary way of life.

If now and then we have to peel off a few atrocities to assert ourselves, we do it only because they did it first, forgetting the fact that we claim to be a nation "under God" and the enemy does not. Dwight Morrow, a rather well-known business leader who became Ambassador to Mexico, has noted that one of the chief barriers to international brotherhood is that we judge ourselves by our ideals and other people by their actions.

But the verdict stands, even for America. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." George Bernard Shaw was right when he said, "We shall not see a better world unless at the close of this war we say, not how we can punish the Kaiser, but God forgive us all." 1

Moreover, "The Immaculate Assumption" underlies the dominant approach that we Americans take to our problems here at home. We have no sin, we simply suffer from faulty structures. I think you know me well enough by now to understand that I believe with all my heart that Christian people should address themselves to the evils that reside in the systems and structures of our society. But one grows in concern for the passive view of man that is developing in our nation. Increasingly man is seen as "more sinned against than sinning." High wickedness and low, embezzlement and rape are all traceable to poor housing, bad education, and inferior jobs.

We still hear it bandied about at banquets here and there that there is no such thing as a bad boy. If there is no such thing as a bad boy, where do all the bad men come from? Jacques Rousseau gave us the answer, apparently held by the majority today, that bad men come from the institutions and conventions of society. There is evil in the system, but there is no sin in man.

One feels that our young, ardent radical reformers are in for a bitter let-down eventually because they expect too much from a revision of the structures. They are dreaming of a system so perfect that no one will have to be good. They seem to forget that our systems are flawed because they were devised and are operated by flawed people. When we keep assigning the responsibility for our predicament to systems and structures we are living in bad faith, which Peter Berger defines as "pretending something is necessary that in fact is voluntary." 2 It is essential in these revolutionary times that we recognize the importance of inner person-

al assent to righteousness without which no society can survive.

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." We say we have no sin as more and more we analyze our personal problems in psychological rather than moral terms. One rushes to concede the fact that there is such a thing as an inordinate, pathological, pre-occupation with guilt. There are people in every community who wish to go on and on about their sin, who seem to enjoy the self-laceration of sustained confession. But having said this let us recognize that there are men of rank in psychology and psychiatry who feel that the church has over-capitulated to certain schools of psychiatry by refusing to reckon seriously with honest guilt.

It is a break-through, to be sure, to learn that we are the way we are in part because of our biochemical makeup, our heredity and our training. One would not minimize this. But one would insist that this is not the whole story about your life or mine. We keep shifting the categories to minimize the moral. Hence, we speak today about being mature or immature; integrated or not integrated; functional or dysfunctional; achieving or not achieving; developed or arrested. We talk about our tensions, our hang-ups, our neuroses, our complexes, our blocks, our phobias and our dreams, but we do not talk about our sins. Hobart Mowrer may have a point when he insists that men do not behave the way they do because they are neurotic, they are neurotic because they have behaved the way they have. A tangled psyche may be the result of violated virtue, wrong choices, misguided values or what William Ernest Hocking calls, "the unbanishable call of ignored obligations." 3

One is suggesting that if we understand ourselves exclusively in psychological terms we are at bottom fabricating a self-spun sophistry. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves." Awareness of guilt can

be a step toward wholeness. This is the gist of that word from T. S. Eliot's play, The Elder Statesman:

"You think that I suffer from a morbid
conscience,
From brooding over faults I might well
have forgotten.
You think that I am sickening, when I'm
just recovering!" 4

"If we say we have no sin." The good news of our text is that there is no need to posit such a false assumption, for there is a live-giving alternative available. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (I John 9)

What a refreshing difference confession makes! Did you feel as I did, a sense of thanksgiving when shortly after the oil well in the Santa Barbara Channel refused to stay capped Stewart Udall stepped forward and said "I am responsible and I take full responsibility." What more can you say when a man comes forward saying "I confess." How different this is from scattering blame up and down the landscape.

The Greek behind the word confess connotes continuing confession. It is not the case that we confess once and are done with it. Confession belongs not only at the beginning of Christian experience but at the middle and the end as well. It belongs to the daily regimen of the Christian's life. This is why prayers of confession have been a part of the liturgy of the church in every century. If God knows what I do, why must I confess it? We confess in order to make His forgiveness available to us. The bridge was out between man and God, and God restrung the bridge from His side. It is by confession that communion is restored and forgiveness attained.

I make the ascertainment again, that our society is

in deep need of a quickened sense of sin. But how to achieve it? Did you ever read those lines in William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying, where Addie says, "One day I was talking to Cora. She prayed for me because she believed I was blind to sin, wanting me to kneel and pray too, because people to whom sin is just a matter of words, to them salvation is just words too." 5

Here me correctly when I say that a sinner is the work of God.

"What comfort can a saviour bring
To those who never felt their woe?
A sinner is a sacred thing,
The Holy Ghost hath made him so."

We become aware of our sin not through the haranguing of the preacher or the self-righteous indictments of the pharisee, but through direct reference to Jesus Christ. John Maguire has shown that Jesus Christ has a windowing and mirroring function. As window He helps us to see God. As mirror He helps us see what we were meant to be. I was meant to be that free! that open! that compassionate! that useful! that fulfilled! that courageous! that resolute! that pure! that loving!

"A life so faint, is this to live?
A goal so mean, is this a goal?
Christ love thee, remedy, forgive.
Save thee, O foolish soul."

(Christina Rossetti)

Let me sum the matter up for you by reading the appropriate verses in the rendering of J. B. Phillips: "If we are silly enough to refuse to admit that we are sinners, then we live in a world of illusion and truth becomes a stranger to us. But if we freely admit that we have sinned, we find God utterly reliable and

straight-forward - He forgives our sins and makes us thoroughly clean from all that is evil. For if we take up the attitude, 'we have not sinned,' we flatly deny God's diagnosis of our condition and cut ourselves off from what He has to say to us." 6

CLOSING PRAYER

Give us, O God, to see ourselves as
Thou dost see us;
The good faith to accept responsibility
for our transgressions;
The good sense to confess the
same - that we may be forgiven.
For we would walk in the liberty
of the Sons of God

Through Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. A Review by William Barclay of Herbert G. Wood,
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Clark, Edinburgh, September 1967.
2. Berger, Peter L., Invitation to Sociology, p. 143,
Doubleday & Co., 1963.
3. Hocking, William Ernest, The Meaning of God in
Human Experience, p. 491, Yale University Press,
1912.
4. Mowrer, O. Hobart, The Crisis in Psychiatry and
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5. Faulkner, William, As I Lay Dying, p. 168,
Vintage Books, 1957.
6. Phillips, J. B., Letters to Young Churches, p. 216
Macmillan Co., 1956

