Bowing At The Shrine Of Self

By L. E. Maxwell

The church world is full of Christian professors and ministers, Sunday school teachers and workers, evangelists and missionaries, in whom the gifts of the Spirit are very manifest, and who bring blessing to multitudes, but who, when known "close up," are found to be full of self. They may have "forsaken all" for Christ and imagine they would be ready like the disciples of old, to die for their Master, but deep down in their hidden, private lives there lurks that dark sinister power of self.

Such persons may wonder, all the while, why they do not have victory over their wounded pride, their touchiness, their greediness, their lovelessness, their failure to experience the promised "rivers of living water." Ah, the secret is not far away. They secretly and habitually practice "shrine worship" – at the shrine of self. There they bow daily and do obeisance.

They are fundamental. In the outward Cross they glory, but inwardly they worship another god – and stretch out their hands to serve a pitied, petted, and pampered self-life. The outward Cross, the payment of sin's penalty, the death of the Substitute – this "finished work of Christ," they know. But the amazing mystery and undreamed-of-depths of that Cross, as it is to be applied to the inner life - "the mystery of the *inward* as well as the *outward* Cross" – they know not.

But "until Christ works out in you an inner crucifixion which will cut you off from self-infatuation and unite you to God in a deep union of love, a thousand heavens could not give you peace." (F. J. Huegel in *Cross of Christ*.)

God harden me against myself,
The coward with pathetic voice
Who craves for ease, and rest, and joys:

Myself, arch-traitor to myself,
My hollowest friend, my deadliest foe,
My clog whatever road I go.

Yet One there is can curb myself,
Can roll the strangling load from me,
Break off the yoke and set me free.

– Christina Rossetti

From his original home and center in God, where God was his light and life, the very breath of his breath, the central Sun of his universe – from this secret place of the Most High, man broke off and plunged out into the far country of self, into the alienation and night of separation from

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God. God has been cast down. Self has usurped the throne, a usurper who never abdicates. Self is the new and false center upon which man has fixed. He loves himself as nothing else under the sun. Even his best deeds are but refined forms, the filthy rages, of his secret selfishness. He does always with his right hand that the left hand of self-satisfaction may know it. "Self," says William Law, "is the root, the branches, the tree of all the evils of our fallen state."

When this nearly almighty self unseated and dethroned El Shaddai, what could God do? He was scarcely taken by surprise. Yet how undo this tragedy of all tragedies? How unhinge and tear man loose from his foul and false self-infatuation? God must never coerce or force man. His supreme glory is an unforced worship. How dare He defeat His own divine purpose, His essential glory!

Herein is displayed the genius of God. The Cross is indeed "the power of God, and the wisdom of God." Calvary is God's axe laid at the root of the first family tree. Adam is cut off. A new Adam ascends the throne.

The Lord Jesus came as the new Head of a new race. He willingly came, came in the likeness of sinful flesh. With cords of selfless love He fastened us to Himself and took us with Himself down to the very depths of death, all in order to clear away sin's penalty and persuade us to choose God instead of self. He chose to die, to die for us, to die in our place, yea, to die our death – that He might save us from our sinful selves.

Come, O fellow believer, the Son of man is made sin – made a curse – lifted up like a serpent. Stand with His mother at the foot of the Cross: "A sword shall pierce through thy own soul also, that the thought of many hearts [yea, your heart, my heart] may be revealed."

"But," someone asks, "why a serpent? – why not a lily or a rose – why not something lovely inasmuch as it was to typify the King and His redemptive work?"

But when God would seek to picture the accursed character of the sinful self-life He made no mistake. Only the serpent could symbolize the truth. That throws an awful ray of light upon me. It shoots me through and through. I am perfectly photographed – not my sins only, but myself. What I did only sprang from what I am. The unvarnished truth is out. It is I, my very self. Why pull down the blinds? Let me take a square look at the Cross and be willing to abide by the awful implications.

I see the crowd in Pilate's hall,
I mark their wrathful mien;
Their shouts of "Crucify!" appall,
With blasphemy between.

And of that shouting multitude
I feel that I am one;
And in that din of voices rude
I recognize my own.

'Twas I that shed the sacred blood,

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I nailed Him to the tree,
I crucified the Christ of God,
I joined the mockery.

Around the cross the throng I see
Mocking the Sufferer's groan;
Yet still my voice it seems to be
As if I mocked alone.

– Horatius Bonar

Does such an admission seem too dreadful? Do I halt from owning it? But dare I disown it? Until I own it, I can never disown it. From the throne of the Cross, high and lifted up, I am drawn first to own and then disown self. I cease to speak about some of self and some of Christ. I am cursed, not cut back, but cut down, cut off. The connection is severed with all the past, and from self itself. I am simply consigned to the curse *in toto.* In the person of Another I have come to a lawful execution, an ignominious termination, and eternal undoing.

This judicial sentence calls for my most cordial acquiescence. Let me consent to my execution, and sign on the dotted line. I have not been left to crucify myself. Such a task is too tremendous, too divine. I have been already devoted to death, "crucified with Christ." That has been accomplished.

But I must sign my own death sentence. I must consent to God's consignment. I must choose, in the power of His death, to dethrone and deny self. The Cross is indeed God's master-weapon. But Christ's death has severing power only as we are united with it by faith. I must endorse this divine dying as it applies to me.

Such a denial of self is no mere severing of this or that indulgence, but putting the axe of the Cross to the very root of the tree of self. God says, Cut the tree down, not merely trim it back. All self-righteousness, self-esteem, self-vindication, self-glory, and fatal self-pity – these and ten thousand other manifestations are but fleshly foliage, the myriad branchings of that deeply rooted tree of self. To trim it back only means that the very life of self is thrown back into other more rugged roots, to develop the Pharisee into a more vigorous tree.

Outwardly he may appear beautiful and by highly esteemed among men. But behind the scenes those living nearest him could bear tearful witness to that bitter fruit that flourishes on the green bay tree of self.

But there is abundant hope. I am already grafted into the Crucified, a partaker of the divine nature. The life imparted to me is a crucified life, a life of death to self in its myriad forms. Self can never overcome self. But thank God I am already Christ-possessed. And, as I yield all to the Crucified, His mighty death will work out in me an inner crucifixion. The more fully the Crucified has me, the more fully I must die to self.

To one who asked George Müller the secret of his service, he replied: "There was a day when I died"; and, as he spoke, he bent lower, until he almost touched the floor. Continuing, he

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added, "Died to George Müller, his opinions, preferences, tastes, and will; died to the world, its approval or censure; died to the approval or blame even of my brethren or friends; and since then I have studied only to show myself approved unto God."

Though I be nothing, I exult
In Thy divine perfection,
And taste the deep, mysterious joy
Of absolute subjection.

Though I be nothing, I rejoice
To find my all in Thee:
Not I, but CHRIST, forevermore:
Amen! So let it be!

– Lucy A. Bennett

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