

“Do Not Harden Your Hearts”

(Hebrews 3:12-19)

Rev. Dr. Alfonso O. Espinosa

Introduction: Christians Out Place *Then* and *Now*

- A. Out of place *then*: in the book of Hebrews, the young Christian Church in Jerusalem was a persecuted church. As a Christian at the time you forsook the religious status quo.
 - 1. You would have rejected Judaism so firmly established in the Roman Empire.
 - 2. You were viewed as subversive towards the emperor and as a result, the whole empire. You were seen either as a rebel, a moron, or just plain weird: being among those who worshipped the carpenter crucified, claiming him to be alive while also claiming to eat his body and drink his blood.
- B. Out of place *now*: Pew report released their updated religious survey of the U.S. population this past week. It is now staggering to consider that 32% of all adults under 30 claim no religious affiliation. They are the so-called “nones.” Furthermore, there are now more U.S. citizens in the combined category of atheists + agnostics + those who say they are “nothing in particular”

(19.6% of the U.S. population) than the number of mainline Protestants (like Lutherans) in the United States (only 15%). Welcome dear friends to the minority! Under such sociological circumstances, how is it dear Christian to be among those who are so exacting and exclusivistic? You are among those who claim that there is no way to the Father except through Jesus Christ (John 14:6) and that there is no other Name given to people under heaven by which they must be saved (Acts 4:12).

- 1. But let me make you even more self-conscious about yourself: while I was conducting research for my dissertation on American Christian fundamentalism and evangelicalism, I had never realized how religious socialists categorize the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (all of us). George M. Marsden in *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford, 2006) writes:

“Other denominations, including the Missouri Synod Lutheran and the Christian Reformed were also Americanized to an extent by adopting some fundamentalist ideals while retaining other distinctive features of their European traditions (p 195).”

“...[as] ethno-religious groups, such as Missouri Synod Lutherans...came into contact with the mainstream culture it developed...a strong group of conservatives who made the inerrancy of Scripture a firm test of the faith and who tended to adopt the causes championed by the Religious Right (p. 239).”

2. And while it is hard to pin-down the precise meanings of “fundamentalist” and “evangelical” -- at least in a religio-sociological sense -- there are some distinctive religious affirmations that all fundamentalist Christians embrace. Let’s see which of these we can relate to:
 - a. Miraculous creation.
 - b. The virgin birth of Jesus Christ.
 - c. The atonement of sin through Christ’s blood on the cross.
 - d. The bodily resurrection of Christ.
 - e. The real and actual 2nd coming of Christ.
 - f. The view that the Holy Bible is God’s inspired and inerrant Word.
 - g. Personal responsibility for sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to other people.

C. Now why go through these facts? Because we don’t really like standing out and most of us certainly don’t like to be labeled. Now there may be more than one reason for this, but labels put us on the spot and give us attention that we don’t always want.

D. There were new Christians in Jerusalem in the first century who most certainly did not want the attention, because they didn’t want to be persecuted.

E. And in our sinful weakness, we don’t want the attention either especially in a culture where conservative, evangelical Christianity is diminishing...but how far are you willing to run from the labels? You are after-all a Christian, a baptized child of God, a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ...there are some labels which you and I can never run from, because they represent our core being...they stand for our life in the Living God!

Part I: So we are warned, don’t have “an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the Living God.” (v 12)

A. The concern of all concerns – as these words are addressed not to unbelievers, but to people like you,

namely, Christians – is that it is possible to start off in the faith, but to end your life no longer in the faith.

- B. Soak this in. Could anything be more sad than what I've just described? Receiving the forgiveness of sins, coming to possess eternal life, having the kingdom of God in your midst, being filled with the Holy Spirit, and then coming to a place in your life in which you become tired, or ashamed, or embarrassed, or whatever...and for some insane sinful reason, you give it all up, you turn away...there is nothing dear Christians more catastrophic than this.
- C. But notice the words of the text, there is one central diagnostic: the heart. The heart, the heart, the heart. It is the seat of desire; it is the seat therefore of what we choose to pursue; it is the seat of volition...it reveals the core of our being...what you love is your god. Every person alive on this earth is quite religious and has a god...unfortunately, most of them are idols; false gods which come up empty in the end. Not so with you, because you are one with the Living God.
- D. That's a fascinating reference to God, but it is one that is intended by the writer to the Hebrews to wake us up. Our God is not static, nor is He sleeping, nor is He

tied up in the bathroom (like Baal was accused of by Elijah the prophet in 1st Kings 18).

- E. No, our God, THE God, the ONLY TRUE God, is the Living God and the Living God keeps His promises and He executes His threats. If that doesn't wake you up every, single day, then nothing will. Every day, our faith is revived because of the promise of God in Christ which grants you eternal life. Hey, for *that*, I don't care what the world thinks of my labels. Jesus, I am never giving up! As for the alternative, nothing is more horrifying.

Part II: But if nothing is more horrifying than the alternative, then why oh why do some Christians not remain Christians?

- A. The answer is here in Hebrews and that answer is called at verse 13, "the deceitfulness of sin."
 - 1. Look, all sin is deceitful; all sin flows from lies and deception. Sin trying to convince you that what is good is evil and what is evil is good. Sin tries to convince you to replace the Living God with a false God. Sin lies through its teeth.
 - 2. However, it has a way of being violently deceitful...it comes in versions that are destructively deceitful.

3. And when a Christian is caught off guard by such sin – by the deceitfulness of sin – then it is possible for faith in the heart to be replaced by unbelief and when this happens then you have a hardening of the heart.

B. But how does this happen? How might unbelief through the deceitfulness of sin conquer your faith?

1. It might be through worldliness...you start to crave the things of this world, and at first you think to yourself, “What is the harm, what is the danger...it doesn’t seem so serious, it’s not really a big deal...I am just in a time of my life when I deserve to be happy!” And so you train yourself to thirst for the things of this world, and before you know it, you don’t desire Christ anymore...all of your desires have turned into a craving for the things that will turn to dust.
2. It might be through formality...you start to form your identity through what you do, instead of faith in Christ and who you are in Christ...this can happen to pastors who come to love their tradition and their theology more than Jesus.

3. It might happen because you have too little knowledge. You are lazy and you do not care about growing in your knowledge of the Word.
4. It might happen because you have too much knowledge. You are proud of your knowledge of the Word and you’ve forsaken your first love.
5. It might happen because you have too little concern for the state of your heart.
6. It might happen because you are too preoccupied with yourself.
7. But in all of these, you become so engrossed by something else, that you are no longer willing to suffer or sacrifice for the Gospel. You cross over from being unashamed of the Gospel – as St. Paul declared in Romans 1:16 – to becoming ashamed of the Gospel and as a result, you turn away from following Jesus and when this happens, everything is lost!

Part III: But dear brothers and sisters in Christ, no one knows this great threat against you better than your best friend and Savior Jesus Christ! And He did not stand idle!

- A. It is for this reason that Jesus never, *ever* allowed the deceitfulness of sin to creep up on Him, not even during His worst suffering. He even turned away from the temptations of the devil to come down from the cross when He was in excruciating pain for you and for me.
- B. Jesus would never allow the deceitfulness of sin to convince Him that some sin is only slight and that some sin sanctioned.
- C. Jesus would never allow the deceitfulness of sin to compromise by force of habit or to accept some sin marking societal customs which though sinful, citizens go along with.
- D. Jesus would never allow the deceitfulness of sin to convince Him that some sin has no bearing upon or significance in life.
- E. Jesus never permitted Himself to have a hard heart and so He never lost sight of why He was born: the sinless One Jesus had to be strong for the weak ones – you and me – threatened every, single day by the deceitfulness of sin.
- F. And so dear Christian: Jesus beat the devil at his own game! Luther is eloquent here: *“The kingly authority of the divinity is given to Christ the man, not because of His humanity but because of His divinity...Nor did the humanity conquer sin and death; but the hook that was concealed under the worm, at which the devil struck,*

conquered and devoured the devil, who was attempting to devour the worm (AE 26:267 where Luther borrows the patristic metaphor which Gregory the Great had previously used).”

- G. Jesus deceived the deceiver...He took on your flesh and Satan saw Jesus as He sees you...oh so vulnerable, but when Satan took the bait, He was hooked by the flesh of the One who was also God and the Eternal Life conquered death and the deceitfulness of sin was deceived by the all-powerful body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- H. So what do you do by grace, filled with the Holy Spirit?
 - 1. As the writer to the Hebrews says at chapter 3, verse 1 say sublimely, so simply, and so powerfully: “consider Jesus.”
 - 2. Whenever the deceitfulness of sin tries to sneak up on you (which is every, single day), just “consider Jesus.” Consider His conquering all sin for you and for covering all of your sin with His blood.
 - 3. Consider Jesus and as you do, you will have by God’s grace a heart that continues in real love affair with your Savior...a healthy heart, a heart looking to Christ; a heart abiding in the Word; a heart pounding with prayer, the heartbeat of faith; a heart that wants to get outside of our internal idols by living externally for others. Consider Jesus!

4. And as Hebrews 3:14 says, take confidence...live in confidence in a living faith in the Living God: ***“For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.”***
5. Hold to your confidence Christian and never be ashamed...no matter who is watching and no matter who is listening! There are some labels we should just be proud of: “Baptized into Christ,” “Son or Daughter of the King;” “Christian;” “Child of God;” “Disciple of Jesus”...give us the labels, they represent a living faith, the antithesis to a hardened heart! Soli Deo Gloria!