

THE COMPETENCY OF THE SOUL

"So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God." Romans 14:12.

In the divine council which preceded the creation of man, the proposal was, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." Genesis 1:26. The Bible then declares "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them." Genesis 1:27. It is thus evident that man was a being of great dignity, a person with the God-like faculties of intellect, emotion and will. Man was made a rational being. He was created a holy being. It was great for him to be made like God in his intellectual excellencies, but it was his greatest glory to be made like Him in his moral perfections.

After the holy, righteous, loving and merciful God had made man in His own image, He placed him in perfect surroundings in the beautiful garden of Eden. He gave him very congenial employment, and above all the inestimable joy and privilege of direct fellowship with Him. It is difficult to refrain from contemplating the happy condition of the primeval pair. They walked in the unclouded light of the divine countenance. Their souls were filled with love and peace and joy. Every desire was gratified, and every want was supplied. Their hearts were lifted in thanksgiving to God and their voices were lifted in praise for the blessings bestowed upon them in richest profusion.

In the midst of the garden God placed the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Of the fruit of this one tree Adam was forbidden to eat on pain of death. The serpent sought to decoy Eve by raising a doubt in her mind as to the goodness of God. The doubt which Satan thus injected into her mind caused her to distort God's Word by exaggerating the severity of the prohibition and minimizing the danger of transgression. Eve disparaged her privileges by misquoting the terms of the divine permission as to the other trees, overstated the restrictions by misquoting the divine prohibition and underrated her obligations by misquoting the divine penalty.

Having insisted that God had cheated her out of life's highest privileges, Satan appealed to Eve's pride by promising her two things provided she would eat of the forbidden fruit: that her eyes would be opened and that she would be as a god, knowing good and evil. In this temptation there was an appeal to the physical, the aesthetic and the intellectual. By yielding to the temptation she came to know good without the power to do it, and evil without the power to resist it.

When Eve sinned by eating the forbidden fruit, she went immediately and influenced Adam to do likewise. How true to life that is! Oh, that God's people were as zealous to get other Christians to do right as sinners are to get others to join them in their sin.

While Eve was beguiled and sinned under deception, Adam sinned, as we say, with his eyes open. Adam acted intelligently and voluntarily. He knew what he was doing. His sin also had a far more important connection with the human race than the sin of Eve. The man, and not the woman, was to be the head and the representative of the race. We are therefore told that "by one man sin entered into the world," Romans 5:12; and that "in Adam all die." I Corinthians 15:22.

When Adam and Eve disobeyed God their perfection was marred. Their sin brought upon them terrible penalties, and also defiled their posterity. On account of their disobedience God was forced to pronounce judgment. Since the fall man has been totally depraved.

Depravity is total in the sense that it reaches to all the faculties of the soul. The mind is defiled, the understanding is darkened, the heart is deceived, the conscience is weakened, the will is enslaved and the affections are perverted. Sin has permeated every faculty of man's being just as a drop of poison would permeate every molecule of a glass of water. By nature man is destitute of spiritual life, alienated from God and utterly unable to deliver himself from this unhappy condition.

In the light of these facts it is encouraging to learn from the scriptures that man does not need to remain in this state because Christ has provided for him that which he never could have obtained otherwise. God deals with men as individuals. His Word emphasizes the supreme worth of the individual and the dignity of human personality. This doctrine of the relationship between God and the individual soul has been insisted upon by Baptists always and everywhere. It is something for which to thank profoundly our Baptist progenitors and to cherish tenaciously for those who are to come after us.

By the competency of the soul we mean the ability of the individual to deal directly with God. This ability, or competency, grows out of the fact that man was created in the image of God. The Creator is a Person who is able to reveal Himself to man whom He has created in His own image. Man is able to receive the revelation of God to him, and to commune and co-operate with his Creator. Made in the image or likeness of God, man possesses intelligence, emotion and will.

That which makes Baptists different from all other religious groups is their doctrine of the competency of the individual soul. This principle has been stated in various ways. E. Y. Mullins said, "All men have an equal right to direct access to God." W. R. White has said, "The individual not only must act for himself; he is the only one who can. God has made him competent." J. B. Lawrence declares, "The Baptist distinctive is the belief that every person who ever lived or ever would live has as much inherent right to deal personally with God as any other person who ever did or ever would live..... Baptists believe that every individual is sovereign in his own soul and stands face to face with a sovereign God; that all matters between him and God are personal; that he must act for himself, believe for himself, repent for himself, and worship God in his own way without let or hindrance by any outside authority."

We cannot overemphasize this doctrine of the competency of the individual soul. However, we must always keep in mind that it is competency under God and not apart from Him or the means which He has provided. It is not competency apart from the Bible, which is the revelation of God to men, but under the guidance of it. It is not competency apart from Christ, who is the God-given and blessed Redeemer, but in Him. It is not competency apart from the Holy Spirit, who is the divine Guide and Teacher, but in partnership with Him.

The Christian faith is a matter which concerns exclusively the relations between an individual and God. Each person is competent to approach God personally through the one Mediator, Jesus Christ, and to have dealings with Him.

I. What This Excludes.

1. Sacerdotalism.

This has reference to the character and function of the priesthood. The principle of soul competency is opposed to all forms of sacerdotalism. Note what a priesthood does.

- (1) It holds souls at a distance from God by making priestly mediation necessary.
- (2) It makes the priest the custodian of souls and the forgiver of sins.
- (3) It is conducive to ignorance and fear.

Priests play on the credulity of ignorant masses. That is why they do not want people to read for themselves.

- (4) It is conducive to graft.

This is evident in the granting of indulgences for money.

Baptists believe in the priesthood of all believers, which excludes any priestly order among us. Every believer in Christ is a priest and can approach God through the mediation of Christ without the help of any man. "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." I Timothy 2:5.

2. Sacramentalism.

This is the doctrine that the ordinances are inherently efficacious, that is, they bestow certain blessings. There are those who contend that baptism is necessary to salvation. They argue that the baptismal waters wash away sin and impart spiritual life. Believing as the Roman Catholics do that if infants died without being baptized they would be consigned to an eternal hell, many groups sprinkle water on the helpless babies and call it baptism.

This practice, which is totally without any scriptural warrant, takes the inalienable right of the individual to choose for himself away from him and makes him subject to the choices of others when he was helpless to resist. It is bad enough to have parents tack an unlovely name on to one, let alone to force him to be sprinkled.

II. What This Includes.

1. The right to approach God directly through Christ for salvation.
"Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." John 14:6.
2. The right to approach God through Christ in prayer.
"And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son." John 14:13.
3. The right to read and interpret the Word of God.
We believe that every individual has the right and the responsibility to read and interpret the Bible for himself. In God's Word we read, "Search the scriptures."
"Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." II Timothy 2:15.
4. The responsibility of a personal accountability to God.
"So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God." Romans 14:12.
You will not have to render an account for what father, mother, brother, sister or friend does, but for what you think, say and do. Individualism must prevail if you are to be what God wants you to be. Everyone must:
 - (1) Repent for himself.
 - (2) Exercise faith for himself.
 - (3) Be baptized for himself.
 - (4) Worship for himself.
 - (5) Serve for himself.
 - (6) Give for himself.
 - (7) Pray for himself.
 - (8) Die for himself.
 - (9) Give an account for himself.Since you are required to give an account to God, you are certainly competent to render it. God does not require people to do something they are unable to do.