

## For One Who Mourns

How glibly speaks the world  
when the pain belongs  
to someone else.

How easily the meaningless  
clichés and aphorisms  
come.

How cold the numbness  
when emotions lose  
the one who made them  
sing and cry.

What other voice  
can call them forth,  
once the voice which made them dance  
lies silent and alone?

When shall the dull  
persistent ache of loneliness  
be eased?

Why does love  
demand such tribute  
of the ones who know its joy?

Is this bitterness  
the morbid joke  
of cosmic cruelty?

Or is the agonizing throb  
a final gift that speaks  
the depth of what two lives had meant?

Pain is the final legacy that proves the purity of love,  
when one is gone without whom life can never be  
the same again.

—Harry Lee Poe

## CONVINCED OF SOMETHING

People have a physical and a spiritual dimension. Both aspects are important to what and who we are. Without a body we are just a ghost; without a spirit, we are a corpse. The importance of body and spirit being together and related together is emphasized in the way Genesis describes the creation of human life. Life is not just the body. God breathed into a body the breath of life, and it *became* a living soul. The soul is that intimate relationship of both body and spirit. You do not have a soul; you are a soul. A body and a spirit together are a human soul. Both aspects are important. Some religions deny the goodness of the physical realm. For instance, Zen Buddhism would deny that the physical is good; Buddhism would say that not only is it not good, it is a delusion and to think that it exists is a sin. Ancient Greek philosophy, particularly the philosophy of Plato, taught that the physical world is evil, so the purpose of life is to escape the physical world.

The Bible teaches that the physical world is good. God conceived it, God created it, and God declared it good. Everything he made was “very good,” and intended for good. Our bodies limit us in time and space. I cannot walk through a wall, and I cannot be in tomorrow and today at the same time, but God can. God does not have those kinds of limitations. My body makes it possible for me to know things. I know that I am sitting in a chair. I know that I have a pen in my hand. I know that there is a motor running somewhere in the building, probably related to the air conditioner. There are a

lot of things I know because of my body. I know the meal I ate was good, but now we are back to relativism. Nonetheless I want to hang onto this experience and have a conviction about it!

This is the kind of knowledge that my spirit by itself cannot have. The spirit by itself does not experience flavor. Many things my spirit by itself cannot experience. So we have knowledge, a variety of kinds of knowledge, simply because we are physical. As physical beings, we also have the possibility of relationship with others. I can relate to other people because I am physical and they are physical—I can see them, talk to them, shake hands with them, sit down and have a conversation, and over time get to know them better. Being physical allows that kind of distinction between people, but also the possibility of a relationship with others.

The spirit, the nonphysical part of me, is private. You cannot know the spiritual dimension of me except by great effort on your part and a willingness on my part. It is concealed, and anything I let you know about myself is what we might call *revelation*. Husbands and wives have discussed this matter before—for centuries—because husbands tend to clam up and wives tend to want to interact. It is a spiritual dynamic. The spirit also affects the body and the body affects the spirit because they are both a part of human life. It is not as though your spirit has a body and your body has a spirit; it is that you are one—you are a unity. How can the two affect each other? It seems that nothing can touch the spirit, yet the spirit still affects the physical.

Let us think through this little problem. Sin is essentially a spiritual matter, but is a matter of the heart that has physical expression and physical consequences. I can sin just sitting all by myself and not doing a thing—just thinking about people. Yet, even in doing nothing my sin can have a physical consequence. Doctors tell us about the effect of stress on the body, and as you begin to rage within about someone, it has a physiological effect on the body. Jesus said that it is not what goes into a person that is the problem; it is what comes out (Matt. 15:11). In that sense, the spirit interacts with the body.

## The Domains of the Spirit

The human spirit is multidimensional. The human spirit involves many different components. If you go through the Bible and do a study just looking at every reference to the human spirit, you will find that there are sev-

eral domains, or areas of life, that involve the human spirit. For instance, our emotions are an aspect of the human spirit. Our intellect is an aspect of the spirit. Character is an aspect of the spirit. The will is an aspect of the spirit. Vitality itself, the basic life force, is an aspect of the spirit. It is possible to divide these aspects even more. For instance, intellect can be broken into other categories related to abilities and creativity.

You will also notice that parts of the body are associated with these aspects of the activity of the human spirit. For instance, we tend to associate the intellect with the brain. That is a physiological way of describing it. A doctor might talk about the brain, and a psychologist might talk about the mind, but the mind and the brain are not the same thing. Since ancient times, people have spoken of the heart in terms of the affections. Different disciplines may talk about these things, but they involve the spiritual domain. Just as we cannot separate body and spirit, we cannot separate the different aspects of the spirit. They all interrelate.

The Bible does not have a list of all the different domains of the spirit, because the Bible does not divide things up into neat little components the way we tend to do in the modern age. We like to separate life into boxes, like the cubbyholes that they use to sort letters at the post office—you put this letter here, and that letter there—or the way we divide things up in college into the different disciplines. You study English in one box, math in another box, and history in a third box. The disciplines never connect in school, but in life everything rushes together. College scatters things off into neat little areas that do not have anything to do with one another, but life is not neatly arranged like that, is it? It all just merges together. It is the same with the spirit. It is not that you have a part of your spirit that handles intellect and another part of your spirit that handles emotion and another part of your spirit that handles character. The human spirit handles it all, because intellect, emotion, and character cannot be separated. We cannot have a “good” intellect and a “bad” character.

So how am I to relate? The will is what finally leads us to act and do something. Paul said, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate to do. . . . For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out” (Rom. 7:15, 18). What Paul described is the failure of the will. What can cause the will to fail? Character can. What if I delude myself? What if I have low self-esteem? What if I am essentially a fearful person? These aspects of my spirit can affect my will to act. If I am

afraid, I may not act. There is a difference between fearfulness as a character trait and fear. A person may not be fearful as a character trait, yet every one of us, at any particular moment, may experience fear. The Bible tells us "Fear the Lord." So fear is not necessarily a bad thing; it is an emotion. In some cases, it is intellectual: the fear of the Lord. Fear may have a lot more reason than emotion involved. Fear may be a rational response.

All of these relate to one another. Consider the intellect. How can our intellect fail us? We can be very smart and yet our emotions can get the better of us. If we are emotionally upset, we can misread information and distort it. If we have a jealous character, it can affect our rational ability to consider information. It can get the better of us. So we see the different dimensions of the spirit are all subject to flaws or influences by other dimensions of the spirit. Each one affects the others.

### Conviction as Knowledge

In chapter 2 I suggested that it is possible not to understand being a sinner. That is, it is possible to experience but not understand the conviction of sin. The Holy Spirit makes us aware of sin but does not necessarily make us feel guilty. How we feel is a choice. Our attitude is a choice. How we respond to events in the world is a choice. We decide and we train ourselves, over life, how we will feel about situations. We know that different people, maybe different children in the same family, respond to the same situations differently. Sometimes we can anticipate how a spouse might respond, how a parent might respond, how friends we have known a long time may respond to a situation. You can almost tell exactly how they will respond to something, but not because the event makes them respond a certain way. The event does not make everybody respond the same way. We know how they will respond because they have gotten into a habit of responding in a particular way to a particular set of circumstances. I think we probably have all seen this dynamic. We can probably think of those areas in our own lives when we tend to do the same thing.

The critical dimension of the conviction of sin is not guilt, that particular emotional response. Instead it involves being convinced that we are experiencing something negative. In other words, it has an intellectual dimension that we call knowledge. Something about life is bad, and

we are convinced it is bad. We have a conviction that the experience is not good. The world's great literature, from ancient times to the present, reveals the deep spiritual issues of people and illustrates how people experience the effects of sin without necessarily linking the experience to God. I can be feeling something that the Bible tells me is the effect of sin, yet I do not necessarily understand my experience biblically. The person who says, "I don't believe in sin," can experience the effect of sin and not realize that what she or he is experiencing is what the Bible refers to as sin. It is a problem of ignorance as much as anything—not stupidity; but not knowing. From the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of Homer, to *Beowulf*, to poor Mr. Micawber in Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, we see characters aware of their plight without ever linking the problem to God. We find it in the vanity of Falstaff and Malvolio, the arrogance of Siegfried, the envy of Iago, and all the fatal flaws of Greek tragedy. We see it in the literature of our own day.

Statistics may give us one kind of picture of the spiritual condition of people. If we look at the demographics, however, we see just one perspective of what Americans want. We can draw some statistical analysis about what Americans want, what is important to them, what they will buy, and what they want to entertain them. If we go back five years, however, we will get an entirely different picture. If we go back another five years, the picture was different again. One thing we can count on for Americans is that tastes and values constantly change. As a result, every few years a new book will come along that presents the definitive treatment of Americans. George Barna's book *The Frog in the Kettle* was one such book. If we backed up a few years, *Mega-Trends* was a big book that was the end all of discussions of Americans. If we back up a few more years, *Future Shock* was all the rage. Every time the American tastes and styles change, a new book appears. I believe, however, that the major problems that people face today are the same major problems that people faced five hundred years ago, a thousand years ago, two thousand years ago. These are the problems people will always be dealing with and the gospel is the answer to these problems. It is not necessary to have a statistical analysis of American habits to understand what concerns people. Just as we can see it in the pages of a great novel, we can see it in the most popular television programs.

## Popular Culture

We see the conviction of sin operating in the most secular of television programs. *Cheers* was a TV program in the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> It was on for ten years, and it was in the top ten TV programs the entire decade. Nonetheless, it only had one plot. The program told the same story night after night after night. The plot is told in the program's opening song about wanting to be with people who know your name. They could have called it "Church" instead of "Cheers." This is a hymn. It is a cry. It is the cry of needing to be with people who care about you, who know your name, and who can sympathize with your troubles. The theme song strikes at one of the deepest spiritual experiences of any age: loneliness. Unfortunately, there is a problem. The characters are not able to overcome the troubles. Episode after episode after episode, the troubles are all the same, and the characters never get over them. Here is a clue about what people in our culture are experiencing. So why was it a top ten show for ten years if it only had one plot? Because people identified with it. *Cheers* illustrates the function of popular art as a mirror of its culture. Americans were watching themselves, and the troubles were all the same.

What are the troubles that the characters experienced? Popular culture provides a clue to understand how the Holy Spirit convicts people of sin. What are people convinced about in their own lives? The ultimate questions people ask relate to how the Holy Spirit convinces people about their own lives, though they may have no consciousness whatsoever of the influence of the Holy Spirit. When people are dealing with the deep questions of their own lives, they need to understand how Jesus answers their questions. The Holy Spirit raises the questions. Satan would be delighted for the troubling questions never to arise. Any answers a Christian may give to a "lost" person must actually answer the questions that arise from how the Holy Spirit is convincing that person of sin for those answers to be of any help.

Suppose you work at an information booth in a hospital. Someone comes in and asks, "Could you direct me to the Eye Clinic?" And you say, "The Eye Clinic is two doors down on the left." The next person comes in and asks,

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1. I first began to reflect on *Cheers* and *The Cosby Show* in an article in 1994. See "Improving Creativity in Preaching," *Preaching* 9, no. 5 (March–April 1994): 4–13. I explored the idea from another perspective in *Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 135.

“Could you direct me to the Cardiovascular Unit?” And you say, “The Eye Clinic is two doors down on the left.” Someone else comes in and asks, “Could you direct me to the Burn Unit?” You reply, “The Eye Clinic is two doors down on the left.” Someone else comes in and wants to be directed to the Prenatal Care Unit, but you say, “The Eye Clinic is two doors down on the left.” It is true that the Eye Clinic is two doors down on the left, but it does not answer the question the person is asking. I fear that for about a hundred years, Christians in America have been answering a question, and giving the truthful answer to the question, but it is not the question that everybody is asking. It may have been the question that some were asking, but we were ignoring the other questions. Before we can give the answer, we must understand the question. In short, how do people experience the conviction of sin? When it is sin, it means they do not have an answer for it. They do not know what to do about it. One of my theological convictions is that there is no solution for the problem of sin except Jesus Christ. In order to help people recognize how Jesus is the solution to their problem of sin, it is necessary to understand how they are experiencing coming short of the glory of God.

### How *Cheers* Portrays Sin

*Cheers* offers a sampling of how many Americans experience sin. Consider Cliff the postman. He knew nothing, but pretended that he did. Why was he pretending that he knew something? Acceptance! He was lonely. He had no friends. He had low self-esteem. He was never accepted, so he tried to be an intellectual who knew the answers. It was his little trick to get attention. Over twenty-five years ago Dr. Bryant Hicks, my cultural anthropology professor, told me that there are two things every person needs emotionally. They need love and they need attention. You cannot make someone love you, but you can make someone give you attention. There are other things you can do to get attention. You can break bottles, break a window, get in a fight, call people names, and many other things. As American society continues to fray and the crisis with children and young people who must raise themselves continues to accelerate, this problem will intensify as a social issue. Apart from the social consequences of the breakdown of the family, the personal consequences for the person who feels unloved are enormous. This is Cliff who learned to get attention with his little intellectual

thing: “Well, do you know how many microbes there are on—um—one of those things?”

In a sense, Cliff and so many people like him are Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10). Zacchaeus was an outcast from Jewish society because he was a publican, a tax collector. Why would any Jew become a tax collector, knowing that he would become an outcast? Could it be a way to get even? He probably already felt cast out, and he found a way to get some attention. He was lonely and unaccepted. What did Jesus Christ do for him? He accepted him. He went to his house to eat. The most intimate of all social occasions is the meal. Loneliness is an effect of sin. Loneliness is the first thing in the Bible that God says is not good. It is possible to feel the effect of being alone without ever having done anything to cause the situation. Nonetheless, loneliness is a sinful state because it is a condition that comes short of the glory of God. Loneliness is an experience contrary to what God wants people to enjoy.

Consider Sam the bartender. A recovering alcoholic and former baseball player, Sam is only interested in getting girls. Sexual conquest is his sole aim in life. As a former baseball player, his life is past. What does he have left? He is going to “score” with the girls, and he is always keeping score. After sex, is he capable of love? Over and over again he demonstrates he has no capacity for commitment and intimacy. He sees women as objects. He is trying to make up for something that is slipping away from him. This ego need, or compulsion, drives him, but he never finds satisfaction. Sam is the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:4–26). She has had a number of men, but is not married. Was she ever married? Jesus related to her in a way that men did not normally relate to her. It is not the usual drive to the bedroom. He talks to her as a person, relating to her in an entirely different way. We do not know her background. We do know, however, that a person who can only relate to other people sexually or manipulatively is experiencing the effects of sin. The inability to love constitutes a state of sin, because it comes short of the glory of God who *is* love.

Consider Carla the waitress. She is a single mother, with several children, each with a different father. She is bitter, cynical, dried up, and alienated from everybody. She uses her smart mouth to keep people away. What does she want? She wants to get married. She holds people at bay while saying, “Come close.” The biblical term for this situation is *alienation*. She is aggressive and alienated from people. That is how she responds to her

situation in life. She is the Gadarene demoniac (Mark 5:1–20). She is pulled apart. She does not know what she wants, and she is wild. Demon-possessed? No. She is rational, but the effect is the same. She is a wild woman, and everyone is going to stay away from her, just like the Gadarene demoniac. What she needs is reconciliation with herself, acceptance of herself, self-respect, an internal sense of peace, and then reconciliation with other people. This is what Jesus Christ came to do—put lives back together. People like Carla who are torn within and alienated from others are experiencing the effects of sin because this situation falls short of the glory of God who is peace.

Consider Rebecca, the manager of the bar, a tall, beautiful brunette with long, dark hair. What drives her? She is interested in money, but she is not so shallow that this is her only interest. She also wants power! And what else? She wants to get married to a rich man. What else does she want? Everything! She keeps score, like the rich fool (Luke 12:13–21). She tears down her barns to build bigger barns, because that is how you keep score in life. She is also the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17–23). Yes, she wants happiness but she would rather have the money. This is Rebecca. She is consumed with what Solomon referred to as vanity. It means nothing, but she is consumed with the things of this world that do not matter. As soon as she gets one thing checked off her list, she discovers that was not really it after all. It was not really the Volvo—it must be a Mercedes. The fact that she knows that the last thing did not do it does not stop her from thinking that the next thing will do it. Most people have a list that they compile of what they think will make life worthwhile. Rebecca and people like her are looking for substitutes for love. Power is a substitute for love. Money is a substitute for love. The acquisition of things is a substitute for love, because we think that if we have these things, people will love us. People who have fallen into this pattern of idolatry are experiencing the effects of sin, because they have fallen short of the glory of God who made people precious in and of themselves.

Sam and Rebecca represent two different faces to the same problem of lovelessness. Sam is interested in sex and Rebecca is interested in objects. Rebecca will engage in sex to get objects and Sam will give objects, or tender words, or whatever it takes, to get sex. This behavior is so common that some sociologists argue that there is no such thing as love. My college sociology professor certainly took this line. What we call love is really a game of

mutual exploitation or intense negotiation and bargaining. Love is only one of many transactions in which people engage. I do not accept my sociology professor's professional opinion, but I do believe that he accurately observed one of the greatest examples of human sin.

Consider Norm, the accountant. He sits at the end of the bar all day long. Why is he not at work? He does not have a job. He is a smart fellow. You do not get to be a CPA unless you are a smart person. He is a smart person, but he is a failure. He tries to get a job from time to time, but he cannot hold down a job. He is afraid. There is a difference between the experience of fear as an emotional response to a dangerous situation and fear as a character trait, which is your character response to life. That is one of his problems, but he is a basketful of problems. He is reconciled to failure. He is reconciled to futility; he is someone who has no hope. We can look at Norm and like him. I think to myself, "Why doesn't he get in there and succeed?" He has so much going for him, but he does not see it. Individuals like Norm cannot see what they have going for them. It is often the problem of those who suffer from anorexia. They cannot see themselves as lovely. In the New Testament, this fellow's name is Peter—Simon Peter. He failed, over and over and over again. He could talk a good talk, but it tended to merely reflect an impulsive personality. Peter was the one who would jump out of the boat to walk on the water, only to sink. He was the one who confessed that Jesus was the Christ, but he did not want Jesus to go to Jerusalem to fulfill his mission. Peter was the one who swore to stay by Jesus through thick and thin, only to deny him a few hours later. He could speak of his devotion to Jesus until it mattered, and then he denied him. He was a failure. Failure is not sin, but the person who is reconciled to failure, who is hopeless, is experiencing the effects of sin, because hopelessness comes short of the glory of God.

What was the response of Jesus to Peter as a failure? He gave him responsibility. Remember how Jesus interacted with Peter after the resurrection? Jesus was cooking a fish breakfast by the seashore when Peter swam to shore to meet him (John 21:1–22). Jesus asked, "Peter, do you love me?" And Peter answered, "Yes, I love you." Three times! Peter denied Jesus three times, and three times he had a chance to undo it. Even the name *Peter* related to Simon's flaw. Can you imagine the disciples laughing when Jesus referred to Simon as "Peter" (Matt. 16:17–18)? *Peter* was a Greek word for rock, but Simon Peter had feet of clay. Yet the same Peter who was afraid

to acknowledge Jesus at the time of the trial stood up fifty days later, on the Day of Pentecost, in the shadow of the temple before a huge crowd, and told them that they had killed the Lord of glory (Acts 2:22–36). It was the same town, the same high priest, the same Roman army, but Peter was changed. This is the whole point of being saved: Christ changes us. Everyone experiences the effects of sin in different ways, but we all experience the effects of sin in some way. Everyone has different flaws that come short of the glory of God, but in everyone's life God wants to eliminate the flaws. He desires to change us into something beautiful, into children of God. Paul described it as being changed "from glory to glory" (2 Cor. 3:18 KJV). If sin is falling short of the glory of God, the remedy is to be drawn into the glory of God and brought back to the relationship God intended in Creation.

### The Variety of the Experiences of Sin

*Cheers* reflects only a few ways that people experience the effects of sin. We can think of other kinds of effects of sin. We have seen the three dreads of the existentialists. This perspective does not necessarily come from Christians. For the most part, the existentialist philosophers were not Christians, but they have made an accurate observation. A dread might also be referred to as the conviction of sin. Dread involves a gnawing sense that there is nothing you can do about it, and it tears you apart. People experience these things, but they do not have anyone to interpret for them what is actually happening.

If you can take others' experiences and help them understand, you have done a good thing. When someone tells you, "I'm going through a terrible time," that person is sharing with you a personal testimony. We talk about a personal testimony as something that a Christian has, but every human being has a personal testimony, because a testimony is merely an account of one's own experience. A Christian testimony is an account of an experience with Jesus Christ, but everybody has a story to tell. As they tell their story, people describe how they experience the effects of sin in their lives. If you can show them how their story is in the Bible, then you have done something very personal, very specific for them. You have shown them that you are not just interested in religion. You are interested in them and perhaps what God is saying to them.

Some people experience sin as darkness, as we saw in chapter 5. Darkness

is a word we find throughout the Bible. Sometimes it has to do with intellectual confusion and sometimes it has to do with emotional confusion, or depression. Life feels dark when it seems as though everything is closing in and it is going to stay that way. Darkness can easily lead into hopelessness. When I was a seminary student in 1977, Willis Bennett took me and a group of ten seminary students to New York City for about eight or nine days. We stayed in a ministry office in lower Manhattan to learn about urban ministry in that great city. We saw all parts of New York. We saw the South Bronx, which looked like bombed-out parts of Europe that had not been rehabilitated after the war. We went into parts of New York where an individual brownstone house cost \$3 million. And we saw everything in between, from Chinatown to Harlem. I preached in a French Haitian church. It was a fabulous experience, but I will always remember one of the pastors who said that what the city most desperately needs is hope. The young people in the city have no hope. Remember that Peter, who first experienced failure, reminded us, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15). Having a reason for hope changes people.

Many people experience guilt and shame as their primary experience of conviction. Conservative evangelical Christianity tends to stress guilt as the primary effect of sin. We need to recognize shame as well, because in some cultures, for instance in Japan, the sense of guilt for transgression of sin is really not a part of the spiritual understanding within the Zen Buddhist or Shinto tradition. Shame, however, represents a profound aspect of Japanese culture. Jesus Christ deals with the problem of shame as much as he deals with the problem of guilt. Most Americans have no shame, but a lot of guilt. You can almost flip-flop the American spiritual experience with the Japanese—not necessarily a sense of guilt, but a profound sense of shame.

For some people the problem of the stain of sin represents their experience of conviction. Our culture has almost lost the idea of stain or pollution or defilement, but it was a profound part of the ancient understanding of sin. Oddly, in the last fifty years we have begun to regain a sense of the meaning of defilement and pollution. Christians must not give that away to the ecological movement and ignore any sense of the tragedy and the offense to God at pollution and the defilement of creation. The strange thing is, pollution can happen to people as they feel the effect of being sinned against. A woman who has been raped experiences defilement and pollu-

tion. It is a terrible thing. It is something that happened to her; nonetheless, she feels the consequences of another person's sin. The emotions can be destroyed. The image of the cleansing of sin is extremely important for the person who is conscious of defilement and pollution.

Though everyone experiences the conviction of sin at some time, it is not a constant experience. Like any other spiritual experience, conviction comes and goes. We are aware and then we suppress the experience in all of the business of life. We speak of it as "getting over" the experience. When the experience comes, however, it frequently comes in a crisis moment of life. It may be a painful crisis like the death of a spouse or close family member, an illness, the loss of a job, divorce, a broken heart, or some other tragedy. In the midst of such crises, people are more attuned to the spiritual dimension in life because all of the glitter of life loses its narcotic effect. Oddly, we may experience the conviction of sin in the positive crises of life as well, such as the birth of a child, a marriage, or the beginning of some other major enterprise. When so much is at stake, people may have a sobering recognition of their own frailties that could jeopardize the future.

Just as the conviction of sin is not a constant experience, the conviction of sin rarely applies to all areas of life. People may have a successful career, an active involvement in philanthropic ventures, a brilliant mind, and many other positive assets that commend them. They make a contribution to the community. From the outside we would say that these are truly "good" people. We do not have the advantage, however, of experiencing life from their perspective. This is why we are always surprised when someone like this commits suicide. They have been completely convinced of the hopelessness of their situation and they have no reason to think it will change. Conviction of sin brings a certain insight into the human condition that cries out for hope.

In all of these and more experiences, it is important to listen and hear how the Spirit convinces someone of this awesome thing that they do not understand which the Bible calls "sin." The Spirit teaches each person about the experience of coming short of the glory of God. When we can hear how others experience the Spirit's conviction of sin, we are then in a position to bring the gospel to them and help them understand how Jesus Christ can solve the problem of sin in their life. To learn how to recognize the experience of conviction in others, it helps to recognize it in our own lives without universalizing our own experience.

## Righteousness and Judgment

Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would convince people not only of sin, but also of righteousness and judgment. In chapter 2 we examined the ancient understanding of righteousness as a building term. Righteousness is the standard for a wall to be upright. It provides a basis for comparison to evaluate something. A plumb line provides a consistent standard regardless of the wall under consideration. The walls may vary, but the standard remains the same. When people are convinced of the experience of sin, they also have a conviction about righteousness and judgment. It is not necessary for them to have any biblical or theological knowledge to have this conviction. They only need to be themselves. They are their own source of information. It is the ultimate postmodern experience of authority centered in the isolated individual.

If the *Cheers* program gives us a clue as to how the broad culture is experiencing the effects of sin, *The Cosby Show* from the same decade illustrates how the same culture was convinced of righteousness. For the same years that *Cheers* was a top-rated TV show, it shared the spotlight with *The Cosby Show*. Both programs continue to be popular in syndicated reruns. The *Cheers* program reflects the American consciousness of the experience of the consequences of sin, alienation, meaninglessness, futility, vanity, and the inability to maintain relationships. The popularity of *The Cosby Show* provides a clue as to how the Holy Spirit is convincing our culture of righteousness. Cultural artifacts reflect both the values and the aspirations of a culture. While our culture has almost erased all the old cultural institutions by which positive values and virtues were passed on to the next generation, occasionally we find them in a TV program.

Whereas *Cheers* reflects the behavior and plight of contemporary culture, *The Cosby Show* portrays what people would like to experience. It presents a standard. The television family goes through many of the traumas of life, but the way they approach life helps them avoid greater traumas. They get mad at each other, but they also resolve their differences. The parents argue, but do not divorce. They do not betray each other. They attend to their children in appropriate ways. They make mistakes and acknowledge them. *The Cosby Show* portrays life characterized by belonging, acceptance, love, forgiveness, security, and purpose.

The unfortunate American interest in realism that has led to the success

of “reality TV” has also led to the near extinction of art forms that hold up a standard by which we can compare ourselves or to which we can aspire. Even though our art forms may no longer reflect the continuing longing for something better, people continue to be convinced of righteousness, that there is something better. Being convinced of righteousness is like hunger or thirst. Jesus described it that way in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed [happy] are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matt. 5:6). Happiness does not come by pursuing a BMW or a better job or political office or more sexual relationships. Happiness comes in pursuing righteousness. You do not pursue happiness. You pursue righteousness. The happiness comes as a by-product. Since *Cheers* and *The Cosby Show* we have gone through the exploits of *Friends* and *Sex and the City*. Even hedonistic programs that promoted the pursuit of meaningless, casual sex could not help but admit in the end that what really matters is a devoted, permanent marriage characterized by commitment and concern for the other person. Even without intending it or planning it, the cultural art forms reflect the corruption (sin) and the aspiration (righteousness) of our culture.

As we observed in chapter 2, judgment is not a trial. It is not a legal matter. Though we often think of judgment as a court case, in the Bible Jesus does not describe judgment this way. Judgment involves simply recognizing something for what it is. It is not necessary to have a court case to decide if something is a sheep or a goat. You just know it. It is simply the way things are. The Holy Spirit convinces people of the basic facts of life. Conviction of judgment involves coming face-to-face with ourselves. People convinced of their own situation have to deal with their own flaws and failings, even if they deal with them by deciding to ignore them.

Jesus spoke of the conviction of judgment when he described the prodigal son as down in the gutter after all his friends had left him (Luke 15:11–32). His money was gone. He was no longer important. He was cut off from his family. He was going nowhere and had no prospects whatsoever in life. Jesus said he came to himself. He saw himself face-to-face. The Holy Spirit convinced him of judgment. People constantly experience the conviction of judgment. They know their experience. They know there has got to be something better. They know that there is no way out for them. At this point, people need answers that Jesus provides. Through talking with people we discover how they are experiencing sin. If we talk with them long enough

we discover the sorts of things they are dealing with. These are the issues that the gospel addresses.

The woman at the well had seven husbands and the man she was with was not her husband (John 4:4–26). Nothing has changed much since then. Was there condemnation in the way Jesus talked to her? If it is there, I cannot find it. She had all the condemnation herself. It was there already. It was not something that had to be laid on her. She was dealing with the failure. She was dealing with the pain of being Carla in *Cheers*. Perhaps she experienced life like the despairing French existentialists who saw no way out.<sup>2</sup> Jesus Christ came to her and said there is a way out. There is something more. You can have something more. You can have relationships. You can have a relationship with God. The Holy Spirit will become to you a fountain of living waters who makes it possible to have relationships with other people.

The conviction of sin is one of the universal spiritual experiences that all people have in common. Some people speak of it in impersonal terms such as “the moral law.” Actually, the awareness of right and wrong, good and evil, suffering and joy, has a highly personal dimension to it, as we have seen. This recognition of the personal dimension has led many people in the West during the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century to believe that values are nothing more than subjective, personal opinions. The Holy Spirit makes people believe in the reality of sin even when they do not think in terms of religious vocabulary. They still have the experience. So it is not the responsibility of people to convince other people of the reality of sin. The Holy Spirit has already convinced people of sin. They just do not know that “sin” is the theological term for their problems. The human responsibility is to help others come face-to-face with themselves and see what is going on. Those who have faced up to the problem of sin in their own lives may be interpreters to others of what is going on in their lives. In this way people may bring a word from God to help others understand their own situations. Even if there are no rules, like in the postmodern culture of the United States today, people still have to live with their own sin. This experience is something very personal, individual, and unique to every person. It is where people experience the pain in their lives, because sin always has a consequence. If we can discover how people are experiencing

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2. Jean-Paul Sartre explored this despairing view in his play *No Exit*. See *No Exit and Three Other Plays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1949).

the consequences of sin, we can help them see that the ultimate problem they are dealing with is a spiritual matter. I do not have to convince others that they are sinners. The Holy Spirit does that, but I may have the opportunity to discover how the Holy Spirit is convincing someone of sin, righteousness, and judgment.

Ultimately, people need to understand that God has done something about the problems they experience. Oddly enough, the world's great literature from ancient times has understood what it takes to defeat evil. Most recently we have seen it in *The Lord of the Rings* with the willingness of Frodo Baggins to lay down his life so that everyone else may live, free of the domination of evil. We also see it in the Harry Potter stories in which children long for some power to protect them and keep them safe from danger. The greatest power in the stories, the power so great that it can destroy evil, is the power of love expressed by one who dies for another. And that is exactly what God did to break the power of evil and darkness.