

My Religious Life Before God Saved Me

Part 2

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I was ordained by my church and pastor in November, 1917, to the work of the ministry. There are some things that I have never been able to understand about my ordination. One is the fact that the presbytery who ordained me at the request of the church did not detect that I was not born again. Also, why did they take the experience that I gave of being called to the ministry as being genuine? Did they know the difference, or did they not? I believe that we ought to be very, very careful in putting our stamp of approval on men who say they are called to preach. How I have wished ten thousand times that someone had told me upon the authority of God's Word that I was deceived, that I was living and working under a delusion and under the influence of Satan. In this condition, fifteen years of my ministry went by. I was zealous in mission work. I preached to large crowds - never wanted a crowd to preach to.

Then in the spring of 1932, I came face to face with three great facts - first, there was still an emptiness in my heart and life that I could not account for. I tried to make the promises of God real to my heart. I tried to practice the presence of Christ, but I could not. I spent hours meditating upon a portion of Scripture. I read all the commentaries that I had on the reality of Christ, trying to make the Word real to my heart and mind, but to no avail. The second fact I faced was, that Christ was real to the early disciples, according to the record of the first chapters of Acts, more real after the Day of Pentecost than He was while on earth tabernacled in His earthly body. I read these first chapters of Acts over and over, asking myself this question, **"Why isn't Christ that real to me?"** but I could find no answer. I asked individuals, including preachers, if they could explain the difference to me; and the only answer I received was this: "These were Bible characters, and we are not living in Bible times." Then the question would come back to me, "Doesn't the Bible say that these are examples for us to follow? If not, why was the Bible written?" Finally, an old preacher told me, "Brother Shelton, just remember that you have all that you will ever get," and that didn't satisfy me.

During those years I gave myself to prayer, to the reading of the Word, and to personal soul winning, with one thought in mind, that there might come that personal union with Christ. I lingered in the closet of prayer, meditating on the Word, trying to fill that deep hunger in my soul, but Christ always seemed to be just beyond reach. I knew that He was the world's Redeemer, but there was a great gulf between Christ and my hungry soul. I struggled to find the answer in my mission work, as I gave myself sacrificially, laboring from sixteen to eighteen hours a day. I tried to lose my life in the ministry, that I might find the reality of Christ, which I was sure those early disciples experienced. I traveled far and near, meeting with different religious groups, trying to find the answer, but always I would return home disappointed, and with a hungry heart.

Then there was a third fact I faced. I was having hundreds and thousands of converts, or professions of faith, but as I watched their lives I saw there was no victory over sin as was

manifested in the lives of those early disciples. The vast majority of these converts lived the same life, under religious covering, as they had always lived. To me, my whole ministry was a sham and a camouflage because of that emptiness in my life.

So, grappling with these personal and ministerial problems, I set out, uninfluenced by anyone else, to find the answer to these three questions. The first thing I did was to read the biographies of outstanding men of God, such as Spurgeon, Whitefield, Moody, Brainerd, and others. As I read and studied their lives, I saw that Christ was a living reality to them, and these men were not Bible characters. So that cleared up the first problem and answered that statement that the average individual made to me that these are Bible characters, and since we are not living in Bible times, we can't expect Christ to be that real to us. Therefore, I began to give myself to the study of that great truth of UNION WITH CHRIST, and out of it grew some fourteen Bible studies on the general theme, "The Believer's Union With Christ." These studies in the Word of God created a greater hunger in my heart for the **reality of Christ**, for I had come to see that in some mysterious way the believer and Christ are united in salvation. I learned that doctrine intellectually; and I sat meditating before it, trying to lay hold upon it experimentally, yet there was still that aching void in my life. I do not know how much truth a person can learn intellectually, and yet not be saved, but I do know that an individual can talk about the great doctrines of the Word intellectually and yet have missed the new birth.

The second thing I saw in my study of the Word of God, as I searched for the reality of Christ, was that the Holy Spirit was the power in the lives of those early Christians, in their preaching, in their living. Then I came to the definite conclusion that the reality of Christ in a believer's life is for us today, just as it was in the primitive church, as recorded in the first chapters of Acts, and that it was the result of the indwelling Holy Spirit. This is as far as I came in my study along that line. Not one time did it ever cross my mind that the answer to the problem I faced was the new birth. The reason for this was that there was no Holy Spirit conviction. I was following only the natural light of reason that I had, and no sinner can ever be awakened to His guilty, lost condition before God apart from Holy Spirit conviction.

About this time there fell into my hands some writings on the Holy Spirit, such as, the filling of the Holy Spirit, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the anointing of the Holy Spirit, the gifts of the Holy Spirit; and other treatises on the Holy Spirit. I read and studied them, and as a result I began to pray for what is commonly known as "the baptism with the Holy Ghost." My seeking for the Holy Spirit came about like this: One Saturday night, as I was sitting on the side of my bed, I heard a voice saying, "Shelton, you've failed, haven't you?" Believing it was the Lord who spoke to me, I said, "Yes, I have miserably failed." Then came these words to me, "If you will give me your life as it is, fully surrendered, I'll give you back the task of evangelizing this great mission field," referring to Southeast Louisiana. Still believing it was the Lord who spoke, I said, "Yes, I'll close out the bargain with you right now." So I fell on my knees by the bedside and surrendered all to Him the best I knew how, and began to cry for mercy. It had been several years since I had heard that voice in an audible manner. As I relive this experience, I tremble, knowing now that it was Satan I was dealing with, but I praise the Lord that He delivered me out of it. The next morning I went to church and preached on prayer, calling the church to prayer, after making a confession of my failure. Several left the building that morning saying, "That is what we need." A people cannot rise any higher than their pastor.

The next week I cancelled all my engagements and gave myself to prayer and fasting. I promised the Lord I would follow Him, no matter what it would cost, still believing that the Lord was leading. Thinking I was saved, I gave myself to prayer and fasting, and there came a deep conviction in my life, which I now realize is satanic conviction. I began to see all my failures: I thought I had been living a very good life until satanic conviction began to point out things in my life which were not right. Not realizing it was the conviction by a demon spirit, but believing it was the Holy Spirit leading me, I cried unto "Jesus" to have mercy on me. Everything he pointed out in my life that was wrong had to be set right before he would lead on. Many were the telephone calls, making things right with individuals; many were the visits to individuals straightening up things with them. Now, I know that this was satanic conviction. Now, the question may arise, "How do you know this was satanic conviction?" First, I was convicted ONLY of THINGS that were wrong in my life, according to my conscience, and according to the background of my teaching. Second, I know it was satanic conviction because I was not being led to Christ, but led to seek for what I thought then was the Holy Spirit. The third reason that I know it was satanic conviction is because I was not convicted at any time of my original sin or of my old sin nature. Satan, or his demon spirits, will not lead an individual to Christ; they cannot, because they cannot open a person's heart and let him see that he is a sinner by nature.

Day by day the hunger and thirst in my heart for God grew deeper, until it drove me on my face without food or sleep crying, "Oh God, I want You" By Friday morning I had such a hunger in my life for God that I could not be still. I could not be still! I could not eat; I could not sleep, and I didn't want to see anyone. I wanted God. I had never felt so unworthy as then, and nothing could satisfy that emptiness in my life. The hunger and thirst and longing in my soul for God was such that I was ready to give up everything – and I did, as the Scripture says, "I counted all things as dung to win Him." This was the cry of an unsaved soul. I was seeking the Holy Spirit, and not Christ. When you hear an individual constantly saying, "Oh God! I want God. I want to work for God," remember that is the cry of an unsaved soul! When a person is born into the kingdom of God, and Christ becomes his Lord and Saviour, then God becomes his Father and the indwelling Holy Spirit leads him to say, "My Father!" But to the unsaved heart, whether he is a preacher in the pulpit, or a deacon in the pew, or a drunkard in the gutter. He is only God.

When Friday night came, the hunger was so intense that I was coming to the point of despair. I asked myself, "Will God never break through the heavens and reveal Himself to me once again?" At 11:40 p.m., as I sat in our dining room, there was poured out upon me a spirit in a flame of fire. It began at my head and slowly covered my entire body from head to foot, lasting about twenty minutes. I had suffered with certain ailments, and my body was healed completely. It seemed to me that I could not have suffered more if someone had cast me into a furnace of literal fire. Someone standing by my side said my flesh was as cold as ice, but to me it was a burning furnace. During those twenty minutes I felt that God had absolutely forsaken me, and I recall crying unto Him not to leave me but to crucify my old flesh life.

After the first burst of light in this outpouring of the spirit of fire, everything grew dark and I began to scream. I suffered. I was met in a spirit of fire. When the fire had burned away, there appeared to me a vision of a world floating before my eyes, behind which loomed up a and above that cross flashed these words, *"Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every*

creature. "I took this as the sign that God had recommissioned me to preach His Word, which I thought He had done originally when I was sixteen years of age back in the old county church at Sardis, Louisiana, when I thought He became so real to me. As I look back now upon that experience and that vision, I realize that it was Satan transforming himself into an angel of light, and working in the realm of my mind to give me that vision. It was the demon spirit taking possession of my mind and body. This experience reveals to me what power Satan has through his demon spirits. As I relate these experiences that happened to me before God saved me, I tremble; and I am doing it only because my Lord is leading me that I may warn some other poor preacher out yonder who is living in such a realm of religious experience, or some demon-possessed individual who believes he is saved, but who is caught in Satan's trap. My friend, I am recording here what actually happened to this poor, benighted sinner before God saved me. Do you wonder now why I never cease to praise the Lord for His marvelous grace and love in opening my heart and writing His law upon my heart, bringing me to Christ for salvation and delivering me out of Satan's trap, and making me a child of His?

Sometime after midnight I drank a glass of milk, the first food I had taken for hours, and went to bed and slept the sleep of a little child. Next morning I awoke in the ecstasy of this experience, and for days I did not know whether I was on earth or elsewhere. I did not care to sleep. When I slept, it was the sweetest sleep I had ever experienced. The presence of what I thought was God was so real, and I was so taken up with it that it did not matter what people said about me. My honor, my reputation, my character, my ministry, the results of my labor, my salary, my work, what I did, how people treated me – all rested in the hands of, I thought, Christ. Do you see, my friend, what an imitation I had, and how closely the false experience imitates the real? Do you see that the expressions I use now to describe a sinner coming to Christ are almost identical with the language I have used to describe what happened to me (and I am giving you my experience in the words of the article I wrote in 1933 about it)? The wonder of wonders to me is that God through the power of the Holy Spirit ever took the Word of God and opened my blind eyes to let me see that I was a lost sinner, and broke me at His feet, and redeemed me from the power and kingdom of Satan.

Let me call your attention to another aspect of these religious impressions Satan gave me. When I awoke the next morning, I seemed to be in a new world. Everything seemed to be new. I had a new Bible. The whole world was new, and everything took on a different hue: the sun was brighter, the grass greener. The people seemed to be different. The whole world seemed to be filled with that presence. My friend, this is the work of Satan as an angel of light. To the born again believer, Christ becomes the Center of his life. To the born again believer, God becomes his Father, and he sees that all his sins were laid on Christ. Under the presence of Satan, the individual is taken up with self, taken up with his feelings, his emotions, his ecstatic joy and his peace, even though it is all false. To him, it is real. I know, because to me it was all just as real as could be. Now, let me make this statement: as long as I lived in the realm of that presence, I had no worry, no anxiety, no fretting – nothing but contentment; but when that presence faded away, I found there had come no change in my heart and life. It did not remove hatred and rebellion or jealousy out of my heart.

As I said, when this experience died away, I found the old heart was still the same. There is one thing I discovered in my own experience - and I find it to be true in the hearts and lives of

multitudes. It is this: as long as you can pray up that experience, as long as you can surrender your mind to that presence, if the Holy Spirit lets you alone, you can live on that false peace, false security, false joy, and false contentment. What grace when the Holy Spirit doesn't leave a sinner in Satan's snare!

All these experiences that I had were satanic, and they came as the result of a deliberate search for God with my whole soul, but being alienated from God by sin, being blinded by the god of this world, my understanding darkened, my heart darkened, I could not find God. I could only get a demon spirit. Oh, the tragedy of a poor soul seeking the Holy Spirit! A saved person will not seek the Holy Spirit, because he knows the Holy Spirit dwells within him. One who is born again, made a new creature in Christ, cannot and will not seek the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit will not let him seek Him as He is already at home in the believer's heart. Let me say this (and say it frankly), that no man by searching and seeking the Holy Spirit will find Him, because you do not receive the Holy Spirit by seeking Him. You receive Him by receiving the Lord Jesus Christ, who said, "I will send Him unto you, and He shall be in you." When you seek the Holy Spirit instead of seeking Christ, you will get only a demon spirit, which is sent to you by Satan, your god. Christ Jesus came into the world to seek and to save that which was lost (Like 19:10), and Christ must find His sheep, open their blinded eyes, and their darkened understanding, and their darkened heart, and deliver them from the power of darkness, the kingdom of Satan, and translate them into the kingdom of the Son of God, before they will ever start searching for Christ Only a sinner who is born again will seek Christ, but he doesn't know what has taken place, and the only thing he does know is that he wants Christ. To seek the Holy Spirit, you have to by-pass Christ, and God the Father honors His Son by speaking to us now only through Him, according to Heb.1:2.

Let's turn to Matt.3:11 and read, *"I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire."* Having experienced what I thought was the last part of that text, "baptized with fire," I did not rest until I experienced the other part, "baptized with the Holy Ghost." Again there came to my heart such a burden of prayer, and again He led me to surrender everything. I found myself ready to give up my position as a Baptist, along with everything else, if only I could receive what I thought was "the baptism with the Holy Ghost." I was led to lay my life, my home, my family, my ministry, my church, my denomination, and every doctrine I had ever believed on the altar, as it were, and to become nothing, if only I could receive the "baptism of the Holy Ghost." "I lost my life to find it again." That was my position at midnight of January 8, 1933. For awhile I sat at the table, then I stood with my elbow resting on the mantel. Having made the final, unconditional surrender, I waited. Then the demon spirit, under the guise of the Holy Spirit, filled me. Everything in the room was quiet; there was no great emotion. After the demon spirit took complete charge of my body, I broke forth speaking in what they call "the unknown tongue." I thought this was the answer to my prayer, so I began to pray for power to carry on this great mission work.

For days, whenever I opened my mouth to pray, I spoke in what they called "the unknown tongue." I was constantly praising "Jesus." For days I lived in the ecstasy of that presence. It was real, and as I said, as long as I lived in the consciousness of that presence, I experienced no worry, no anxiety. I didn't realize that it was the presence of Satan imitating the presence of the

Lord Jesus Christ. I said to myself, "Now I know what those early disciples experienced," because I thought and believed that this presence was the reality of Christ. But now, as I look back upon that experience, I see that the Lord Jesus Christ was not magnified; it was not He that filled the horizon of my heart and life. It was only the presence of a demon spirit that filled my mind.