

THE SENSUOUS CHRISTIAN

R.C. Sproul

I often have been tempted to write a book by the title *The Sensuous Christian*. *The Sensuous Woman*, *The Sensuous Man*, *The Sensuous Couple*, *The Sensuous Divorcee*, ad nauseam, all have become best sellers. Why not *The Sensuous Christian*?

- What is a sensuous Christian? One dictionary defines *sensuous* as, "pertaining to the senses or sensible objects highly susceptible to influence through the senses." The sensuous Christian is one who lives by his feelings rather than through his understanding of the Word of God. The sensuous Christian cannot be moved to service, prayer or study unless he "feels like it." His Christian life is only as effective as the intensity of present feelings. When he experience spiritual euphoria, he is a whirlwind of Godly activity; when he is depressed, he is a spiritual incompetent. He constantly seeks new and fresh spiritual experiences and uses them to determine the Word of God. His "inner feelings" become the ultimate test of truth.

The sensuous Christian doesn't need to study the Word of God because he already knows the will of God by his feelings. He doesn't want to know God; he wants to experience him. The sensuous Christian equates "childlike faith" with ignorance. He thinks that when the Bible calls us to childlike faith it means faith without content, a faith without understanding. He doesn't know that the Bible says, "In evil be babes, but in your thinking be mature" (1 Cor. 14:20). He doesn't realize that Paul tells us again and again, "My beloved brethren, I would not have you ignorant" (see, for example, Rom. 11:25).

The sensuous Christian goes his merry way until he encounters the pain of life that is not so merry and he folds. He usually ends up embracing a kind of "relational theology" (that most dreadful curse on modern Christianity) where personal relationships and experience take precedence over the Word of God. If the Scripture calls us to action that may jeopardize a personal relationship, then the Scripture must be compromised. The highest law of the sensuous Christian is that bad feelings must be avoided at all cost.

The Bible is addressed *primarily* though not *exclusively* our understanding. That means the mind. This is difficult to communicate to modern Christians who are living in what may be the most anti-intellectual period of Western civilization. Notice, I did not say anti-academic or anti-technological or anti-scholarly. I said anti-intellectual. There is a strong current of antipathy to the function of the mind in the Christian life.

To be sure, there are historical reasons for this kind of reaction. Many laymen have felt the result of what one theologian has called "the treason of the intellectual." So much

skepticism, cynicism and negative criticism have spewed forth from the intellectual world of theologians that the laymen have lost their *trust* in intellectual enterprises. In many cases there is the fear that faith will not hold up under intellectual scrutiny so the defense becomes the denigration of the human mind. We turn to feelings rather than to our minds to establish and preserve our faith. This is a very serious problem we face in the twentieth-century church.

Christianity is supremely intellectual though not intellectualistic. That is, Scripture is addressed to the intellect without at the same time embracing a spirit intellectualism. The Christian life is not to be a life of bare conjecture or cold rationalism; it is to be a life of vibrant passion. Strong feelings of joy, love and exaltation are called for again and again. But those passionate feelings are *a response* to what we understand with our minds to be true. When we read in Scripture, "Take courage; I have overcome the world" (Jn. 16:33), "ho hum" is not an appropriate response. We can be of good cheer because we understand that Christ has indeed overcome the world. That thrills our souls and sets our feet to dancing. What is more precious than to experience the sweetness of the presence of Christ or the nearness of the Holy Spirit?

"God forbid that we should lose our passion or go through the Christian pilgrimage without any experience of Christ. But what happens when there is a conflict between what God says and what I feel? We must do what God says, like it or not. That is what Christianity is all about.

Reflect for a moment. What happens in your own life when you act according to what you feel like doing rather than what you know and understand God says you should do? Here we encounter the ruthless reality of the difference between happiness and pleasure. How easy it is to confuse the two! The pursuit of happiness is regarded as our "unalienable right." But happiness and pleasure are not the same thing. Both of them feel good, but only one endures. Sin can bring pleasure, but never happiness. If sin were not so pleasurable, it would hardly represent a temptation. Yet, while sin often "feels good," it does not produce happiness. If we do not know the difference, or worse yet, do not care about the difference, we have made great strides to become the ultimate sensuous Christian.

It is precisely at the point of discerning the difference between pleasure and happiness that knowledge of Scripture is so vital. There is a remarkable relationship between God's will and human happiness. The fundamental deception of Satan is the lie that obedience can never bring happiness. From the primordial temptation of Adam and Eve to last night's satanic seduction, the lie has been the same. "If you do what God says, you will not be happy. If you do what I say, you will be 'liberated' and know happiness."

What would have to be true for Satan's argument to be true? It would seem that for Satan's argument to be true, God would have to be one of three things: ignorant, malevolent or deceptive. It could be that God's Word will not work for us because it proceeds from his divine blunderings. God simply doesn't know enough to tell us what we need to do to achieve happiness. Perhaps he desires our well-being, but simply does not know enough to instruct us properly. He would like to help us out, but the complexities of human life and human situations just boggle his mind.

Perhaps God is infinitely wise and knows what is good for us better than we do. Perhaps he does understand the complexities of man better than the philosophers, moralists, politicians, school teachers, pastors and the American Psychiatric Society, but he hates us. He knows the truth but leads us astray so he can remain the only happy being in the cosmos. Perhaps his law is an expression of his desire to take gleeful delight in our misery. Thus his malevolence toward us leads him to the role of Great Deceiver. Nonsense! If that were true, then the only conclusion we could come to is that God is the Devil and the Devil is God and Holy Scripture is really the manual of Satan.

Absurd? Unthinkable? I wish it were. In literally thousands of pastors' studies, people are being counseled to act against Scripture because the pastor wants them to be happy. "Yes, Mrs. Jones, go ahead and divorce your husband despite the fact that you are without biblical warrant, for I am sure you will never find happiness married to a man like that."

If there is a secret, a carefully guarded secret, to human happiness, it is that one expressed in a seventeenth-century catechism that says, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." The secret to happiness is found in obedience to God. How can we be happy if we are not obedient? How can we be obedient if we do not know what it is we are to obey? Thus, the top and the tail of it is that happiness cannot be fully discovered as long as we remain ignorant of God's Word.

To be sure, knowledge of God's Word does not guarantee that we will do what it says, but at least we will know what we are supposed to be doing in our quest for human fulfillment. The issue of faith is not so much whether we believe in God, but whether we believe The God we believe in.

A Matter of Duty

Why should we study the Bible? We have mentioned briefly the practical value, the ethical importance and the way of happiness. We have looked at some of the myths that are given why people do not study the Bible. We have examined something of the spirit of pragmatism and the anti-intellectual climate of our day. There are many facets to the ques-

tion and countless reasons why we ought to study the Bible.

I could plead with you to study the Bible for personal edification; I could try the art of persuasion to stimulate your quest for happiness. I could say that the study of the Bible would probably be the most fulfilling and rewarding educational experience of your life. I could cite numerous reasons why you would benefit from a serious study of Scripture. But ultimately the main reason why we should study the Bible is because it is our duty.

If the Bible were the most boring book in the world, dull, uninteresting and seemingly irrelevant, it would still be our duty to study it. If its literary style were awkward and confusing, the duty would remain. We live as human beings under an obligation by divine mandate to study diligently God's Word. He is our Sovereign, it is his Word and he commands that we study it. A duty is not an option. If you have not yet begun to respond to that duty, then you need to ask God to forgive you and to resolve to do your duty from this day forth.