

Steak And Arsenic
A Review of Neil Anderson's *Victory Over the Darkness*
by Pastor Steven J. Cole

Reading Neil Anderson's *Victory Over the Darkness* [Regal Books, 1990, 245 pp.] is like eating steak laced with arsenic. The steak tastes great and makes up the major portion, but the arsenic, imbedded throughout, will kill you.

First, the steak: Anderson strongly sets forth the believer's position in Christ and the beneficial effects of believing this truth. He underscores the many Scriptures affirming that believers are saints, new creatures, forgiven, righteous, etc. Certainly these are crucial truths for every Christian to believe and act upon.

Anderson rightly affirms that right thinking produces right emotions: "... feelings are a product of the thought life.... Anger, anxiety and depression are usually the result of a faulty belief system. The greatest determinants of mental and emotional health are a true knowledge of God, and acceptance of His ways and the assurance of His forgiveness" (p. 236). Amen!

Sadly, though, the book is laced with arsenic. An undiscerning reader will swallow the poison with the steak. The outcome will be worse than not eating the steak at all!

The main error is that Anderson repeatedly asserts that believers are not to view themselves as sinners, not even as sinners saved by grace, but as saints who occasionally sin. If unsuspecting Christians buy into this aberrant view, they will end up minimizing what Scripture presents as the major enemy against which we must daily fight: the ongoing power of the flesh. Here's how he puts it:

Many Christians refer to themselves as sinners saved by grace. But are you really a sinner? Is that your scriptural identity? Not at all. God doesn't call you a sinner; He calls you a saint--a holy one. If you think of yourself as a sinner, guess what you will do: you'll live like a sinner; you'll sin. Why not identify yourself for who you really are: a saint who occasionally sins (pp. 44-45).

Satan will try to convince you that you are an unworthy, unacceptable, sin-sick person who will never amount to anything in God's eyes (p. 56).

(Note the truth and error mingled in that single sentence: We *are* unworthy, unacceptable, and sin-sick. But by God's grace we will amount to something in His eyes.)

If you believe that you are part light and part darkness, part saint and part sinner, you will live in a very mediocre manner with little to distinguish you from the non-Christian (p. 71). (See also pp. 69, 83; and his book, *The Bondage Breaker* [Harvest House], pp. 44, 81, 156).

There are numerous problems with these overstatements (which amount to a serious denial of biblical truth). First, they depend upon picking and choosing certain Scriptures, but ignoring others. For example, on pages 45-47 Anderson has a long list of verses giving the positives of who I am in Christ. Great! But why did he leave out other verses, often in the same context, that aren't so pretty (Matt. 6:30; 7:5, 11; 5:4; Luke 17:10)? Anderson conveniently skips such "negative" verses.

Concerning Paul's late-in-life claim to be the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15), Anderson explains it as referring to his nature before conversion. But a study of the text in its context shows that Paul was talking about his ever-deepening awareness of his own sinfulness as he grew in grace. As Donald Guthrie comments, "Paul never got away from the fact that Christian salvation was intended for sinners, and the more he increased his grasp of the magnitude of God's grace, the more he deepened the consciousness of his own naturally sinful state, ..." (*The Pastoral Epistles, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* [Eerdmans], p. 65).

A second problem with not viewing ourselves as sinners is that it destroys the basis for growing in humility before God. The most godly men in the Bible all were deeply aware of their own utter depravity in the presence of God (see Gen. 18:27; Job 42:6; Isa. 6:5; Dan. 9:4-19; Luke 5:8).

It is significant that in none of these cases did the Lord say, "That's not true! You need to see yourself as a saint, not a sinner!" Once the man realized the truth of his sinfulness, the Lord graciously gave words of encouragement to restore (Job 42:7-8; Isa. 6:7; Dan. 9:23; Luke 5:10). But it can be argued that God's specific intent in every case was to bring these sinner-saints to this lower (and more accurate) estimate of themselves in God's holy presence.

Third, Anderson's view undercuts the need for self-distrust. The more I realize my own sinfulness, the less I'm inclined to trust myself and the more I'm inclined to cling desperately to the Lord, lest I fall into sin (1 Cor. 10:12). When I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

Fourth, Anderson minimizes the need for ongoing self-examination (2 Cor. 13:5). But this is the requirement for every Christian, especially before partaking of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:28).

Fifth, Anderson's view will lead to an anemic view of God's grace, which is the chief motivation for holy living. If I do not grow to see my own sinfulness in a deeper way, I will not grow in appreciation for the "mighty gulf that God did span at Calvary." Those who love God much know that they've been forgiven much (Luke 7:47). Jesus' point was not that some are forgiven more than others, but rather that those who realize how much they're forgiven are those who love God much. If I'm not growing to see more of the depths of my sinfulness, I will not love God more.

Sixth, Anderson minimizes the major hindrance to holy living. If I am "a saint who occasionally sins," then "No big problem!" That is precisely what Satan would have me believe! God wants me to see the gravity of my sin problem so that I will take responsibility to put to death the deeds of the flesh. The more I grow, the more I discover that my problem is much bigger than I ever realized! (This error is magnified if you add Anderson's book, *The Bondage Breaker*, which places much of the blame for Christians' problems on evil spirits, not on the flesh.)

Seventh, if I am not to see myself as a sinner, then how can I deny myself (Mark 8:34)? Clearly, self-denial is to be a daily, ongoing exercise (Luke 9:23). Do I deny a slight tendency I have toward an occasional sin or do I deny my continual propensity toward selfishness, pride, and the deeds of the flesh?

Eighth, Anderson's error runs counter to the experience and teaching of the most godly men in church history. Augustine, Calvin, Luther, John Owen (the great Puritan theologian), Jonathan Edwards, Charles Simeon, J. C. Ryle, Charles Spurgeon, Martyn Lloyd-Jones and many others all taught the ongoing depravity of the human heart, even after conversion. How then can Anderson claim that if you see yourself as a sinner "you will live in a very mediocre manner with little to distinguish you from the non-Christian" (p. 71)! Those men were hardly mediocre Christians!

Ninth, Anderson's false teaching denies the facts of every revival in church history. As Lloyd-Jones points out (*Revival* [Crossway], p. 231),

And there has never yet been a revival of religion, but that the moment that God's people have this experience, though they may have been Christians for years and years, they feel utterly unworthy, they see themselves as sinners as they have never done before. Some of them have even doubted whether they have ever been Christians. They are wrong, of course, but the sight of the holiness of God, the realisation of it, has made them see nothing but their own sinfulness and their own unworthiness. It is invariable.

Indeed, Dr. Lloyd-Jones makes this point repeatedly (see pp. 41, 70-71, 80-83, 101, 156-157), thus showing how far Anderson is off.

Tenth, not seeing myself as a sinner would lead to my shrugging off the many repeated Scriptural warnings against the power and dangers of sin. Why worry about it if I'm just a saint who occasionally sins? Why should pastors preach against sin if Anderson is right? Just preach positional truth. Why preach the need for an ongoing life of repentance? Occasional repentance for occasional sins will do!

Thus Anderson's unbiblical assertion that believers are not to view themselves as sinners is the major dose of arsenic in the steak. But other minor traces can be found in his penchant for overstatement. Some examples:

Feelings "are neither good nor bad; they're amoral, just part of your humanity" (p. 182). If so, why does the Bible label certain feelings as sin (lust, selfish anger, bitterness, jealousy, etc.)? Anderson encourages

a counselee to vent sinful anger and uses one of David's imprecatory (and Christological) psalms as justification for "being honest with our feelings" (pp. 186-187)!

Concerning sharing with a grieving friend, he overstates what would be sound counsel if it were in balance, namely that we're to respond to emotions with emotions, not with words (p. 189). He cites Jesus' weeping with Mary and Martha as biblical warrant. But he conveniently omits Jesus' pointed words (not just emotions) to Martha from the very context he cites as "proof" (see John 11:23-26).

Anderson argues (p. 215) that it is always wrong to defend oneself, since if we're wrong, we should accept the criticism; if we're right, God will defend us. Please snip 2 Corinthians, Galatians, 1 Thessalonians 2, and many other portions from your Bible (excuse my sarcasm). Paul defends himself rather vigorously in those places, sometimes with sarcasm, even!

We're told that it's always wrong to judge character; we're only supposed to judge actions (p. 221-222). But don't repeated deeds reflect inner character? In the same context that we're told not to judge we are told to discern and avoid false prophets who inwardly are ravenous wolves (Matt. 7:15). Paul often judged the motives and character of his critics, based on his observation of their deeds (2 Cor. 11:13-15; Gal. 1:8-10; Titus 1:10-16).

Anderson draws a false dichotomy between being and doing (pp. 237-239). The subtle implication of his teaching here is that we can't (and perhaps even shouldn't) obey God ("doing") until we're squared away with who we are in Christ ("being"). He states (p. 237),

One of the great failures of Christian ministry is to expect people to behave as Christians ... before they have matured as Christians In so doing we are asking people to behave in a manner that is inconsistent with their perception of their identity and their level of maturity, and that's an impossible task.

No! Obedience is always right, whether I understand "who I am in Christ" or not. We grow to understand our identity in Him as we trust and obey (see 2 Pet. 1:5-11).

Overall, the book, in common with many modern "Christian" books, has an underlying selfistic bent: "You will be motivated in life by what you believe will bring you success, significance, fulfillment, satisfaction, happiness, fun, security and peace" (Table of Contents description of Chapter 7, which elaborates on this bent). That's a far cry from the self-denying faith of the martyrs! I have trouble imagining Latimer and Ridley thinking about success, significance, fulfillment, satisfaction, happiness, and fun as the flames were lit around them!

In short, Anderson's book contains a lot of good ol' American selfism wrapped in a lot of truth to fool the unsuspecting—steak laced with arsenic! Dear brethren, do not be deceived!