

**Articles and Sermons :: The Experience of Soulish Believers--Nee**

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**THE LIFE OF SOULISH BELIEVERS**

THE SOUL VARIES inevitably from person to person. It cannot be stereotyped. Each of us has his particular individuality--a uniqueness which will extend on into eternity. It is not destroyed at our regeneration. Otherwise, in the eternity to come life will be most colorless indeed! Now since there is this variation in the souls of all men, it naturally follows that the life of soulish believers will likewise vary from person to person. Consequently, we can speak here, only in general terms and shall merely present the more prominent features, against which God's children may then compare their experiences.

Soulish believers are inordinately curious. For example, simply for the sake of knowing what the future holds do they try to satisfy their curiosity by studying thoroughly the prophecies of the Bible.

Carnal Christians tend to show off their differences and superiorities in clothing, speech or deeds. They desire to shock people into a recognition of all their undertakings. Of course such a tendency may have been theirs before conversion; but they find it hard ever afterwards to overcome this natural propensity.

Unlike spiritual Christians, who seek not so much the explanation as the experience of being one with God, these believers look diligently for an understanding in their mind. They like to argue and to reason. Failure of their life experience to catch up with their ideal is not what worries them;

it is their inability to understand this lack of spiritual experience which troubles them! They conjecture that knowing mentally is possessing experientially. This is a tremendous deception.

Most soulish believers assume an attitude of self-righteousness, though often it is scarcely detectable. They hold tenaciously to their minute opinions. It is doubtless correct to hold fast the basic and essential doctrines of the Bible, but certainly we can afford to grant others latitude on minor points. We may have the conviction that what we believe is absolutely right, yet for us to swallow a camel but also to strain out a gnat is not at all pleasing to the Lord. We ought to lay aside the small differences and pursue the common objective.

At times the mind of soulish Christians is assaulted by the evil spirit; hence their thinking becomes confused, mixed, and sometimes defiled. In their conversations they frequently answer what is not asked: their mind runs wild: they shift their topics of discussion ever so often, proving how scattered are their thoughts. Even when they pray and read the Bible their mind wanders far away. Although these Christians usually act without so much as exercising a single thought about it beforehand, they can tell others how they always act on principle and how carefully they consider every action, even citing some analogous incidents from their lives to corroborate their claims. Oddly enough, they occasionally do take an action after thinking thrice or even ten times. Their actions are truly unpredictable.

Carnal believers are moved easily. On one occasion they may be extremely excited and happy, on another occasion, very despondent and sad. In the happy moment they judge the world too small to contain them, and so they soar on wings to the heavens; but in the moment of sadness they conclude that the world has had enough of them and will be glad to be rid of them. There are times of excitement when their hearts are stirred as though a fire were burning within or a treasure had suddenly been found. Equally are there times of depression when the heart is not so stirred but rather gives way to a feeling of loss, making them most dejected. Their joy and their sorrow alike turn largely upon feeling. Their lives are susceptible to constant changes for they are governed by their emotions.

Over-sensitivity is another trait which generally marks the soulish. Very difficult are they to live with because they interpret every move around them as aimed at them. When neglected they become angry. When they suspect changing attitudes towards them, they are hurt. They easily become intimate with people, for they literally thrive on such affection. They exhibit the sentiment of inseparability. A slight change in such a relationship will give their soul unutterable pains. And th

us these people are deceived into thinking they are suffering for the Lord.

God is cognizant of the weakness of the soulsh when they make self their center and consider themselves special upon achieving a little progress in the spiritual realm. He accords them special gifts and supernatural experiences which enable them to enjoy times of such overwhelming bliss as well as times of such closeness to the Lord as though actually to have seen and touched Him. But He uses these special graces to humble them and bring them to the God of all grace. Unfortunately believers do not follow God's intent. Rather than glorifying God and drawing closer to Him, they grasp God's grace for their own boasting. They now regard themselves stronger than others; for, they privately imagine, who can be more spiritual than those who have had such encounters? Moreover, soulsh believers have numerous sentimental experiences which induce them to deem themselves more spiritual, not realizing these are but evidences of their being carnal. Not by feeling but by faith do the spiritual live.

Oftentimes a carnal Christian is troubled by outside matters. Persons or affairs or things in the world around readily invade his inward man and disturb the peace in his spirit. Place a soulsh one in a joyful surrounding and joyful he

will be. Put him in a sorrowful environment and sorrowful will he be. He lacks creative power. Instead, he takes on the complexion peculiar to that with which or whom he may be associated.

Those who are soulsh usually thrive on sensation. The Lord affords them the sense of His presence before they attain spirituality. They treat such a sensation as their supreme joy. When granted such a feeling, they picture themselves as making huge strides towards the peak of spiritual maturity. Yet the Lord alternately bestows and withdraws this touch that He might gradually train them to be weaned from sensation and walk by faith. These do not understand the way of the Lord, however, and conclude that their spiritual condition is highest when they can feel the Lord's presence and lowest when they fail to do so.

Carnal believers bear a common stamp-talkativeness. Few should be their words, they know, but they are goaded into endless discussion by their excited emotion. They lack selfcontrol in speech; once their mouth is open, their mind seems to lose all control. Words pour forth like an avalanche. Now the soulsh Christian realizes he should not be long-winded, but somehow he is unable to withdraw once the conversation gains momentum. Then thoughts of all kinds swiftly invade the conversation, precipitating a continual shift in topic and an unending replenishment in words. And "when words are many, transgression is not lacking" says Proverbs 10.1.9. For the result will be either the loss of control through much speaking, the loss of peace through argument, or even the loss of love through criticism because secretly and hypocritically they will judge others who are loquacious and deem it most unbecoming in them. Fully aware that flippancy does not become the saint, the carnal person still loves to talk frivolously and bankers to speak and to hear coarse jests. Or he may go in for vivacious and gay conversations which he simply cannot afford to miss, no matter what. Although at times he does abhor such impious or unprofitable talk, it is not for long; for when the emotion is stirred once again he automatically returns to his favourite old pastime.

Soulsh believers also indulge in "the lust of the eyes." What often governs their attitudes is the particular artistic or aesthetic view momentarily current in the world. They have not yet assumed a death-attitude to human artistic concepts. Instead they pride themselves on possessing the insight of an artist. Now should they not be ardent admirers of art they may swing to the other extreme of being indifferent to beauty altogether. These will clothe themselves in rags as a token of their suffering with the Lord.

The intellectuals among those who live by the soul tend to view themselves as "Bohemians." On a windy morning or a moonlit night, for example, they are apt to be found pouring out their souls in sentimental songs. They frequently bemoan their lives, shedding many tears of self-pity. These individuals love literature and are simply ravished by its beauty. They also enjoy humming a few lyric poems, for this gives them a transcendent feeling. They visit mountains, lakes and streams since these bring them closer to nature. Upon seeing the declining course of this world they begin to entertain thoughts of leading a detached existence. How ascendant, how pure they are! Not like other believers who seem to be so materialistic, so pedestrian, so enmeshed. These Christians deem themselves most spiritual, not recognizing how incredibly soulsh they actually are. Such carnality presents the greatest obstacle to their entering a wholly spiritual realm because they are governed so completely by their emotion. Of greatest hazard to them are an unawareness of their dangerous position and an utter self-content.

Carnal believers may be long on so-called spiritual knowledge but usually are short on experience. Hence they condemn others but do not correct themselves. When they bear the teaching of the dividing of soul and spirit their natural minds smoothly assimilate it. But what happens then? They set about discerning and dissecting the soulsh thoughts and acts n

ot in their own lives but in those of others. Their

acquisition of knowledge has merely propelled them to judge someone else and not to help themselves. This propensity to criticize is a common practice among the soulsh. They have the soulsh capacity to receive knowledge but lack the spiritual capacity to be humble. In their association with people they leave one with the impression of being cold and hard. Their dealing with others possesses a certain stiffness about it. Unlike spiritual believers their outward man has not been broken and they are therefore not easy to approach or to accompany.

Christians who thrive on the soul life are very proud. This is because they make self the center. However much they may try to give the glory to God and acknowledge any merit as of God's grace, carnal believers have their mind set upon self. Whether accounting their lives good or bad their thoughts revolve around themselves. They have not yet lost themselves in God. These feel greatly hurt if they are laid aside either in work or in the judgment of others. They cannot bear to be misunderstood or criticized because they unlike their more spiritual brethren-still have not learned to accept gladly God's orderings, whether resulting in uplift or in rejection. Unwilling are they to appear inferior, as being despised. Even after they have received grace to know the actual state of their natural life as most corrupt and even after they may have humbled themselves before God-counting their lives to be the worst in the world, these nevertheless ironically end up regarding themselves more humble than the rest. They boast in their humility! Pride is deeply bred in the bone.

### THE WORKS OF SOULSH BELIEVERS

The soulsh are second to none in the matter of works. They are most active, zealous and willing. But they do not labor because they have received God's order; they labor instead because they have zeal and capacity so to do. They believe doing God's work is good enough, unaware that only doing the labor of God's appointment is truly commendable. These individuals have neither the heart to trust nor the time to wait. They never sincerely seek the will of God. On the contrary, they labor according to their ideas, with a mind teeming with schemes and plans. Because they diligently work, these Christians fall into the error of looking upon themselves as far more advanced than their leisurely brethren. Who can deny, however, that with God's grace the latter can easily be more spiritual than the former?

The labor of soulsh believers chiefly depends upon feeling. They take to work only when they feel up to it; and if these congenial feelings cease while working they will quit automatically. They can witness to people for hours on end without weariness if they experience within their hearts a burning and unspeakably joyful feeling. But if they sustain a coldness or dryness within they will scarcely speak, or not even speak at all, in the face of the greatest need-as, say, before a death-bed situation. With tingling warmth they can run a thousand miles; without it, they will not move a tiny step. They cannot ignore their feelings to the extent of speaking when stomach is empty to a Samaritan woman or talking while eyes are drowsy to a Nicodemus.

Carnal Christians crave works; yet amid many labors they are unable to maintain calm in their spirit. They cannot fulfill God's orders quietly as can the spiritual believers. Much work disturbs them. Outer confusion causes inner unrest. Their hearts are governed by outward matters. Being "distracted with much serving" (Luke 10.40) is the characteristic of the work of any soulsh believer.

Carnal Christians are readily discouraged in their exertions. They lack that quiet confidence which trusts God for His work. Regulated as they are by their internal sensations and external environments, they cannot appreciate the "law of faith." Upon feeling that they have failed, though not necessarily true, they give up. They faint when the surroundings appear dark and uninviting to them. They have not yet entered into the rest of God.

Lacking in farsightedness, believers who trust in the soul easily become discouraged. Only what is immediately ahead can they see. Momentary victory begets them joy, temporary defeat renders them sad. They have not discovered how to see on to the end of a matter through the eyes of faith. They yearn for an immediate success as comfort for their heart; if failure to achieve it renders them unable to press on unwearily and to trust God in continued darkness.

The soulsh are experts at finding fault, although they are not necessarily stronger themselves. Quick are the soulsh to criticize and slow are they to forgive. When they investigate and correct the shortcomings in others they exude a kind of self-sufficient and superior attitude. Their way in sometimes helping people is correct and legal, but their motivation is not always right.

The tendency to be hasty often stamps those who follow their souls. They cannot wait on God. Whatever is done is done hurriedly, precipitously, impetuously. They act from impulse rather than from principle. Even in God's work, these Christi

ans are so propelled by their zeal and passion that they simply cannot stay for God to make clear His will and way.

The mind of the carnal is occupied wholly with their endeavors. They ponder and plan, plot and predict. At times they pre-  
sage a bright future, hence are beside themselves with joy; at other moments they foreglimpse darkness and immediatel-  
y become haunted by untold misery. Do they thereby think of their Lord? No, they think more of their labors. To them, w-  
orking for the Lord is of supreme importance, but often they forget the Lord Who gives work. The Lord's work becomes t-  
he center, the Lord of work recedes to the background.

Soulful persons, lacking in spiritual insights, are guided by sudden thoughts which flash through the mind; their words a-  
nd works are therefore often inappropriate. They speak, in the first place, not because need summons them to do so but  
solely because they surmise there ought to be

such a need. And then, they may reproach when sympathy is called for or comfort when warning is in order. All these ar-  
e due to their deficiency in spiritual discernment. They place too much reliance upon their limited and limiting thoughts. A-  
nd even after their words have proved to be unprofitable, they still refuse to accept the verdict.

Because he possesses oceans of plans and mountains of opinions it is extremely trying to work with a carnal Christian.  
Whatever he deems to be good must be accepted as good by others. The essential condition for working with him is perf-  
ect agreement to his ideas or interpretations. The slightest interpretation is equated as a deep involvement in what he co-  
nsiders to be the faith once delivered to the saints. Any different opinion which is manifested he positively cannot tolerat-  
e. Although the soulful believer knows he should not hold on to opinions, he makes sure that whenever an opinion need-  
s to die it is certainly not going to be his! Sectarianism, he will admit, is unscriptural; but it is never his particular sect whi-  
ch must die. Whatever such a believer does not accept he labels as heresy. (Is it any wonder that other Christians-soulful  
h like himself--respond in kind by denying the authenticity of his faith?) He is deeply attached to his work: He loves his o-  
wn 'small, so-called inner circle and is thus incapable of laboring together with other children of God. And he insists on de-  
nominating God's children according to his own affiliation.

When it comes to preaching, the soulful cannot rely entirely on God. They either repose their confidence in some good il-  
lustrative stories and witty words or in their personalities. Perhaps a few notable preachers can even completely rely upo-  
n themselves: because I have said it, people are bound to listen! They may depend on God, but they likewise depend on  
self. Hence all their careful preparations. They expend more time in analyzing, in collecting materials, and in hard thinkin-  
g than on prayer, on seeking God's mind, and on waiting for the power from above. They memorize their messages and  
then deliver, them verbatim. Their thoughts occupy

a primary place in such work. With such an approach as this these believers will naturally put more confidence in the me-  
ssage than in the Lord. Instead of trusting the Holy Spirit to reveal man's need and God's supply to their listeners, they d-  
epend exclusively upon the words they deliver to move human hearts. What these carnal believers stress and trust are b-  
ut their own words. Perhaps their speech does convey truth, but without the quickening of the Holy Spirit even truth is of  
small advantage. There shall be very little spiritual fruit should anyone lean on words rather than on the Holy Spirit. How  
ever much these articulations are acclaimed, they only reach people's minds, not their hearts.

Soulful believers relish using high-sounding spectacular words and phrases. At least in this respect they are trying to imi-  
tate the genuinely spiritual ones who, having been given so much experience, are able to teach with a distinctiveness of  
which none of their predecessors may ever have conceived. The carnal consider this highly attractive, hence their deligh-  
t in employing wonderful imaginations in preaching. Whenever a masterful idea comes upon them-while walking, conver-  
sing, eating, or sleeping they will jot it down for future use. They never question whether such idea is revealed in their spi-  
rit by the Holy Spirit or is merely a sudden thought which burst upon their mind.

Some Christians who are indeed soulful find special delight in helping others. Since they have not yet reached maturity,  
they do not know how to give food at the proper time. This does not mean these do not have knowledge; actually they h-  
ave too much. Upon discovering any improper element or when told of some difficulty, they immediately assume the role  
of senior believer, eager to help with what limited insight they have. They pour forth scriptural teachings and experiences  
of saints in lavish abundance. They are inclined to tell all they know, nay, perhaps more than they know, now reaching o-  
ut into the realm of supposition. These "11 senior" believers exhibit one after another everything which has been stored in  
their minds, without at all inquiring

whether those to whom they speak really have such a need or can absorb so much teaching in one session. They are lik-  
e Hezekiah who opened all his storehouses and showed off all his treasures. Sometimes without any outside stimulus b

ut just because they are stirred by an inner emotion, they will shower others with spiritual teachings, many of which are mere theories. They wish to display their knowledge.

The above characteristic is not true, however, of all soulsh children of God. It varies with different personalities. Some will keep quiet, uttering not so much as a syllable. Even in the face of desperate need, when they ought to speak, they will clamp their mouths shut. They have not yet attained freedom from natural shyness and fear. They may sit next to those talkative believers and criticize them in heart, but their silence does not make them any less soulsh.

Because they are not rooted in God and have not therefore learned how to be bidden in Him, carnal people long to be seen. They seek prominent position in spiritual work. If they attend meetings they expect to be heard, not to hear. They experience unspeakable joy whenever recognized and respected.

The soulsh love to use spiritual phraseology. They learn by heart a large spiritual vocabulary which they invariably employ whenever convenient. They use it in preaching as well as in praying, but without any heart.

A vaunting ambition marks out those who live in the realm of the soul. The first place is often their desire. They are vainglorious in the Lord's work. They aspire to be powerful workers, greatly used by the Lord. Why? That they may gain a place, obtain some glory. They like to compare themselves with others: probably not so much with those whom they do not know as with those with whom they work. Such contending and striving in the dark can be very intense. Those who are spiritually behind they despise, regarding them as too laggard; those who are spiritually great they downgrade, visualizing themselves as almost equal. Their unceasing pursuit is to be great, to be the head. They hope their work

will prosper so that they may be well spoken of. These desires of course are deeply concealed in their hearts, barely detectable by others. Although these longings may indeed be well-nigh hidden and mingled with other and purer motives, the presence of such base desires is nonetheless an irrefutable fact.

The soulsh are terribly self-satisfied. Should the Lord use them to save one soul they will explode with joy and consider themselves spiritually successful. They take pride in themselves if they succeed but once. A little knowledge, a little experience, a little success easily provokes them to feel as though they have achieved a great deal. This common trait among soulsh believers can be likened to a small vessel easily filled. They do not observe how vast and deep is the ocean of water which remains. So long as their bucket is brimming they are satisfied. They have not been lost in God, else they would be able to take in their stride all things as nothing. Their eyes focus upon their petty selves and hence they are greatly affected by a simple little gain or loss. Such limited capacity is the reason why God cannot use them more. If such boasting erupts upon winning only ten souls to the Lord, what will happen should a thousand souls be saved?

After they have experienced some success in preaching, one thought lingers with soulsh believers: they were truly wonderful! They derive great joy in dwelling upon their superiority. How distinct they are from others, even "greater than the greatest apostle." Now sometimes they are hurt in heart if others have not thus esteemed them. They bemoan the blindness of those who do not recognize that a prophet from Nazareth is here. At times when these soulsh believers think their messages contain thoughts which no one has discovered before, they become troubled should the audience fail to appreciate the marvel of it. Following each success they will spend a few hours, if not a day or two, in selfcongratulation. Under such deceit, it is no wonder that they often come to assume that the church of God shall soon see

a great evangelist, revivalist or writer in them. What anguish for them it must be if people fail to take notice!

Carnal believers are those without principles. Their words and deeds do not follow fixed maxims. They live instead according to their emotion and mind. They act as they feel or think, sometimes quite contrary to their usual pattern. This change can be seen most vividly after preaching. They change to what they recently have preached. If for instance they speak on patience, then for a day or two afterwards they are unusually patient. If they exhort people to praise God, then they will begin to praise and praise. This will not last long, however. Since they act according to feeling, their own words will activate their emotion into behaving in such and such a way. But once the emotion has passed, all is over and done with.

Another special point concerning soulsh Christians is that they are uncommonly gifted. Believers bound by sin are not so talented; neither are the spiritual ones. It seems that God bestows abundant gifts upon the soulsh in order that they may deliver their gifts to death voluntarily and then reclaim them renewed and glorified in resurrection. Yet such saints of God are loathe to consign these gifts to death and instead try to use them to the maximum. Godgiven abilities ought to be used by God for His glory, but carnal believers often regard these as theirs. So long as they serve God in this frame of mind they will continue to use them in accordance with their ideas without letting the Holy Spirit lead them. And when su

successful they render all glory to themselves. Naturally such self-glorification and self-admiration are quite veiled; nevertheless, however much they may try to humble themselves and to offer glory to God, they cannot avoid being), self-centered. Glory be to God, yes: but be it unto God and to me!

Because the carnal are greatly talented-active in thought, rich in emotion-they readily arouse people's interest and stir the latter's hearts. Consequently, soulish Christians usually possess magnetic personalities. They can quickly win the

acclamation of the common people. Yet the fact remains that they actually are lacking in spiritual power. They do not contain the living flow of the power of the Holy Spirit. What they have is of their own. People are aware that they possess something, but this something does not impart spiritual vitality to others. They appear to be quite rich; they are really quite poor.

In conclusion. A believer may have any one or all of the aforementioned experiences before he is delivered entirely from the yoke of sin. The Bible and actual experience together substantiate the fact that many believers simultaneously are controlled on the one hand by their body unto sin and influenced on the other by their soul to live according to themselves. In the Bible both are labeled as being "of the flesh." Sometimes in their lives Christians follow the sin of the body and sometimes the self-will of the soul. Now if one can encounter many of the delights of the soul while attendantly indulging no lesser amount of the lusts of the body, is it not equally possible for him as well to have great soulish sensations in association with many experiences of the spirit? (Of course it should not be overlooked that there are some who conclude one phase before entering upon other phases.) A believer's experience is consequently a rather complex matter. It is imperative that we determine for ourselves whether we have been delivered from the base and the ignoble. Having spiritual experiences does not render us spiritual. Only after we have been delivered from both sin and self can we ever be accounted spiritual.