

SELF-EXAMINATION

The ability to detect one's own fault, weakness or shortcoming as to make amend and to distinguish between what one is and what one ought to be is important. It is on this ground self-examination is required of Christians in their spiritual development and in working towards the attainment of holiness in the service of God.

"Self-examination" is the act of examining one's own behaviour, motives, moods, beliefs, state and so on with a view to detecting or knowing for oneself the areas where one has not done well or lived up to expectation. It is encouraged by God because by so doing men are able to correct themselves of their errors in order not to be subjected to the judgment of others.

A brief survey of what goes on in the world easily brings into focus the need for self-examination. Any substantial business concern has a time to take stock of its transactions over a period of time. This is to ascertain whether it is making profit or not, and if it is not making profit it is then able to identify sources of loss, or steps are then taken to sustain or improve on the profit, or to minimize and even avoid the losses.

Every nation also has a time for stock-taking. The rulers take the opportunity to make known to the citizens not only their achievements but also their shortcomings. The tendency is to create the incentive to forge ahead as to overcome the shortcomings for greater achievements in the interest of the nation.

At the turn of the year there is always the joy among people that they have entered a new year. They are often full of expectations for the new year and they make resolutions regarding what they will do or avoid doing so as to achieve one thing or the other. Sensible people at such times normally examine themselves in regard to what they had done in the past year. By such self-examination they are able to know whether they did well or not in the past year. And they may find that although they have been able to achieve something, there is still room for improvements.

If self-examination can be so useful in the ordinary way of life as illustrated in the foregoing, there is no doubt that it is even more rewarding in the service of God. It was Baltasar Gracian who stated: "Self-reflection is the school of wisdom."

A man may think that he is doing well and may be unaware of some of his bad habits by which he offends people. It is by self-examination he can discover his fault and amend his ways. It may even be that in his domestic life he has offended his wife in one way or the other or treated her unfairly. Or the wife on her part may have done something wrong against the husband. Through self-examination they will see where one is offending the other and know how to improve or strengthen their relationship. Similarly, a man who is highly placed and who has people subject to

him may find by self-examination that he has treated some of his subordinates badly or unfairly. Thus the offender has the opportunity to make amends. It is good therefore to examine ourselves from time to time.

The Heart

The heart of man is the centre for self-examination. The Holy Bible shows that if in the course of pondering our actions or utterances we find that our heart condemns us, we should realize that we are already before God Almighty. As it is written: "For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, *then* have we confidence toward God." – 1 John 3:20, 21

It is of vital importance for one to be well equipped with the accurate knowledge of the will of God so that the heart can evaluate things accordingly. Otherwise, it is easy, very easy for the heart to mislead one because of our sinful nature. It is against the background of the laws of God, according to the Scriptures, Christians should examine themselves.

In ancient times people who gave themselves to righteousness had the habit of pondering their affairs from time to time. Sometimes when they went to bed at night they searched their hearts and mediated on the works of God. The Psalmist said: "I call to remembrance my song in the night: I commune with mine own heart: and my spirit made diligent search. I will remember the works of the LORD: surely I will remember thy wonders of old. I will meditate also of all thy work, and talk of thy doings." (Psalm 77:6, 11, 12) King David was a man given to such habit. And he admonished: "Stand in awe, and sin not: commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still." – Psalm 4:4

Divine help is required for effective self-examination. The psalmist said: "Good and upright *is* the LORD: therefore will he teach sinners in the way. The meek will he guide in judgment: and the meek will he teach his way." (Psalm 25:8, 9) We can therefore appreciate why King David prayed: "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if *there be any* wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." – Psalm 139:23, 24

There are some people who, when they suffer one kind of misfortune or the other, quickly resort to accusing others of being responsible for their troubles. And some even accuse witches or wizards of troubling them. True worshippers of God do not behave or act in that way.

When a Christian suffers any setback or misfortune in life, what he should do is to examine his ways. Perhaps his troubles are of his own making because of his sins. If so, he has no cause to point accusing finger at others. Rather, he should repent of his sins and retrace his steps to God. As it is written: "Wherefore doth a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins? Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the LORD." – Lamentations 3:39, 40

In this connection, the experience of the sons of Jacob as is recorded in the book of Genesis chapter 42 readily comes to mind. Many years after they had out of envy sold their younger brother Joseph into slavery, and after Joseph had through the favour of God been exalted to a very high position in the kingdom of Egypt, they were driven by famine to go to Egypt to look for corn. There they met Joseph who immediately recognized them, but they no longer knew him.

Joseph was a man who feared God as he rightly told his brothers. (Genesis 42:18) He was ready to let them have what they came for, but he chose first to put them to the test. And in the face of the difficulties which they experienced in getting what they wanted, they reflected on their past misdeeds and acknowledged that their sufferings were of their own making. As it is written: "And they said one to another, *We are* verily guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the anguish of his soul, when he besought us, and we would not hear; therefore is this distress come upon us. And Reuben answered them, saying, Spake I not unto you, saying, Do not sin against the child; and ye would not hear? therefore, behold, also his blood is required." – Genesis 42:21, 22

It should be noted, however, that some people experience some misfortunes in life, not because they are wicked but because of the oppression of the devil. For as King Solomon observed: "There is a vanity which is done upon the earth; that there be just *men*, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there be wicked *men*, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous: I said that this also *is* vanity." – Ecclesiastes 8:14.
Compare Luke 13:1-5

Doctrines

Apart from the aspects of behavior and dealings with men, it is of vital importance that we examine ourselves in regard to what we believe, teach or do in the service of God as to whether they are in accord with the will of God. Otherwise we worship Him in vain. Doctrines are the very basis of the Christian Faith and so should not be taken for granted. If they are false there is danger in that they cannot lead one to salvation. St. Paul warned: "If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, *even* the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; He is proud, knowing nothing... and destitute of the truth..." – 1 Timothy 6:3-5

We should therefore examine the teachings of the various religious organisations with a view to ensuring that we are not being misled. The true organization of God is the one that preaches the truth of His word without mixing it with lies. St. Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica: "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good." (1 Thessalonians 5:21) And John the apostles admonished: "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world." – 1 John 4:1

Self-examination is very necessary in order that one may not continue to deceive oneself or be a victim of deceit at the instance of false prophets. St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthian Christians, wrote: "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates? " – 2 Corinthians 13:5

A person who professes Christianity but does not keep the tenets of the faith is not a true Christian. So too, a person can honestly claim to be worshipping God without indeed being “in the faith” or without knowing that he is not in the true faith. Truly, King Solomon did say: “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof *are* the ways of death.” – Proverbs 14:12

It is on the strength of the foregoing that we call on all religious leaders to examine themselves in regard to what they teach their followers. So too, the followers should be circumspect over the teachings they accept, ensuring that they are in consonance with the Scriptures. It could be recalled that St. Paul commended the Jews in Berea, saying that they “...were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.” – Acts 17:10-11

Where, for instance, are the scriptural authorities for the following teachings and practices?

- That Jesus is God Almighty
- That all the righteous go to heaven when they die
- That the soul can never die
- That there is fire in hell
- The baptism of infants
- Preaching from house to house, and
- The ordination of women pastors

Another area in which worshippers should constantly examine themselves in accordance with the admonition of St. Paul (2 Corinthians 13:5) is in regard to works of righteousness. As the same apostles wrote to the Galatian Christians “...Let each one examine his own work, and then he will have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another.” – Galatians 6:4 New King James Bible

Those who claim to worship God but who indulge in stealing, murder, bribery and corruption, witchcraft, immorality, envy, hypocrisy, hatred, malice, idolatry and so on; are deceiving themselves. Such ones should rather examine themselves in the light of the word of God just as a man looks at himself in a mirror. They should then correct whatever is wrong in their lives and do the will of God for their own blessings. As it is written: “But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth *therein*, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.” – James 1:22-25

What is expected of a person who engages in self-examination and finds himself wanting is repentance and a determination to do the will of God by His grace. The Psalmist stated: "I thought on my ways, and turned my feet unto thy testimonies. I made haste, and delayed not to keep thy commandments." – Psalm 119:59, 60

What is more, St. Paul said: "For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world." – 1 Corinthians 11:31, 32