

Book Review
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The Secret of Contentment by William B. Barclay., Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2010. 172 pp. paperback, \$11.95. ISBN: 978-1-59638-191-9.

William B. Barclay is currently serving the Sovereign Grace Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. He was previously Academic Dean at Reformed Theological Seminary where he is still an adjunct professor. He has also taught at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts.

Barclay addresses the problem of discontentment in his book by drawing upon several resources from which he compiled his book. Some of these are: Gregg Easterbrook's book, *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*. This book reveals that we live in an age of discontentment; John Piper's *Desiring God* which reflects contentment in Piper's famous line, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him" (p. 15); Jeremiah Burroughs' book, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*; Thomas Watson's work, *The Art of Divine Contentment*; and Kris Lundgaard's book, *The Enemy Within*. Barclay started his own work through the motivation of his own discontentment. Interacting with these authors helped him come to some important conclusions and resolve issues in his own heart.

The book is divided into two parts. Part one, containing three chapters, addresses *the pursuit of contentment*. Part two, containing six chapters, looks at *the mystery of contentment*. Barclay begins with an introduction and completes his book with a conclusion addressing *the riches of godliness with contentment*. Each chapter is followed by questions for the reader. Endnotes are included at the conclusion of the book.

Chapter one is titled, *The Nature of Christian Contentment*. Barclay addresses the problem of discontentment. He states, "Human beings always seem to want what they cannot have" (p. 21). The desire to have more is never satiated. Happiness is not found by indulging the flesh in pursuit of tangible objects. Happiness results from being satisfied in God's provisions for our lives or His grace. Appeal is made to Paul's statement in Philippians 4:10-13 as the basis for contentment. Real joy comes from the grace and peace of God. Barclay emphasizes that contentment is (1) attainable, (2) teachable, (3) all-encompassing, and (4) stabilizing. He relates Burroughs's definition of contentment, "Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition" (p. 34). Contentment results when the human heart fully delights in and absolutely trusts a sovereign God.

Chapter two discusses the *Necessity of Christian Contentment*. Barclay lists seven reasons why we should pursue contentment. They are: (1) God has commanded it; (2) Contentment is a priceless treasure; (3) A murmuring spirit is a great sin; (4) Discontent is at the root of much of our sin; (5) A contented spirit shows our humble submission to God's will; (6) Without contentment, we cannot experience the peace of God; and (7) The contented spirit is the worshipful spirit.

In chapter three, the author addresses *the dangers of a murmuring and discontented spirit*. Three specific dangers are mentioned: (1) murmuring reveals a corrupted heart; (2) murmuring is beneath the dignity of the children of God; and (3) murmuring affects our witness

for Christ. Murmuring and complaining are manifestations of unbelief and will bring the judgment of God.

Part II begins with chapter four and the author attempts to unravel *the mystery of contentment and discontentment*. There can be discontentment with spiritual pursuits and goals and yet an underlying contentment with what God has already done in our lives. When a Christian seeks to know God, the pursuit is endless. However, we can still enjoy the sweetness of communion with God. The contented Christian is single-minded. Paul spoke of one focus in Philippians 3:13,14. Keeping this focus establishes priorities and the result is contentment. While working toward the heavenly goal, a Christian can also know inward peace and salvation. This is spiritual contentment.

Chapter five explores how to find *contentment in the midst of affliction*. Barclay states, “Affliction is the greatest test of our contentment” (p. 79). Suffering comes in many forms. It can be sickness, persecution (Paul was in prison as he wrote Philippians), or some significant loss. We can see affliction as a blessing if we see the hand of God working in the moment. God works through hardship and tragedy. We must trust God. “The world says that contentment comes by finding release from affliction. The Christian finds contentment in the midst of afflictions, by turning them into mercies” (p. 83). Paul found contentment in fulfilling his mission for Christ. He preached the gospel while imprisoned. Contentment comes when we become one with Christ’s will for our lives. If Christ wills that we suffer with Him and for Him, then we must accept it and endure it. Our identification with Christ in His sufferings gives us satisfaction and brings contentment. Contentment also comes by seeking the good of others in the midst of our afflictions. This is expressed in the phrase “less of self and all of thee.” We serve Christ when we serve others. Selflessness is an aspect of loving others and loving God. We will never be content unless we learn to love selflessly.

Barclay examines *the mathematics of contentment* in chapter six. To begin with, he suggests that we must add a burden—the burden of our own sin. The point of this is to reflect inwardly on our own sinfulness in order to produce humility in the heart. Then, he argues that we need to subtract unacceptable desires. Improper desires breed discontentment. Guard your heart and keep out unwanted enticements. Purge anything that displeases God.

In chapter seven, the author writes about *the contentment of longing for heaven*. The contented Christian recognizes that his citizenship is in heaven. Earthly ties and longings are diminished. *The more heaven-minded we are the more useful we become to God*. Hope of heaven gives us confidence and contentment. If we have a sure promise of life with God, everything else pales in significance. Any present affliction is only temporary. All such fade in the face of eternal glory. Live for eternity and you will be content. Those who live life fully in Christ and who hope earnestly in Him find contentment. They have all they need in Christ.

Chapter eight takes up the quest of finding *contentment in the enjoyment of God*. What do you delight in? If you delight in the Lord, you will not be disappointed. You can find contentment in the covenant of grace. God’s grace is His infinite goodness freely bestowed upon man in order to lift him up. When believers know that they are in an unshakeable relationship with God, it gives them confidence and contentment (p. 130). God is the greatest benefactor in the universe. When we belong to God, we have everything that is important. God is faithful and keeps His covenant promises. When we live in covenant relationship with God, the promises belong to us. This gives us great contentment. Ultimately, contentment is found in God alone. When we become one with Him our soul can find tranquility and joy. This joy is delight in God and the things of God.

Finally, in chapter nine, Barclay discusses the *contentment of being conformed to the image of Christ*. Christians are called to be like Christ. They must bear His likeness in mind, word, deed, and character. Spiritual maturity brings contentment. Spiritual pursuits and service conquer personal gratification (lusts of the flesh). Rivalry, strife and division are conquered through manifesting the spirit of Christ. This is the pathway to contentment.

In the conclusion, Barclay considers the biblical formula, “godliness with contentment is great gain.” Blaise Pascal wrote, “Happiness can be found neither in ourselves nor in external things, but in God and in ourselves as united to him” (p. 159). Barclay reveals that false teachers cannot obtain contentment. Bad theology, bad ethics and bad motives rob them of peace and contentment. They are doomed to restlessness of spirit and they produce restlessness by encouraging strife and division. Only truth can bring contentment. Godliness is the pursuit of God. It is piety before God. Christians are strangers and pilgrims in this world. The world and the things that are therein will be destroyed. Forming strong attachments to the world breeds discontentment. Develop the capacity to enjoy the things God has provided in this life while refusing to develop an affection for them or attachment to them. A Christian must be able to say that he/she is satisfied with God’s provisions for his/her life. This is contentment, i.e. *to be satisfied with God’s sufficiency* (His grace is sufficient).

Barclay’s work exposes us to a special topic in the Scriptures, i.e. *contentment*. Special studies like this are valuable and he puts us in touch with authors and works of the past that explore the meaning of life by the simple formula, “godliness with contentment is great gain.” At the same time, he gives us insights into Philippians 4:10-13. While one may not share every one of his viewpoints, he can benefit from the author’s perspective. In that respect, Barclay has added something important to our understanding of what it means to be content.