I don’t know about you, but there seems to be a spirit of apathy, complacency, and a bad kind of spiritual contentment almost omnipresent in the church. Granted, there are places where the environment is saturated with the work and filling of the Spirit, but they seem to be the exception rather than the rule, especially in the western world where we are not experiencing much persecution.

But my reason for writing is not to argue that nominalism is a problem (though it is), but rather to ask the question, “How do we avoid being pulled into nominalism ourselves?” Before I answer that, I had better define nominalism. Nominalism is a state of one’s spiritual life that is characterized by a mediocre faith, a subpar holiness, and a habitual indulgence in walking according to the flesh. Practically, this means that a person tends to let areas of sin go unconfessed, he tends to not envision what God could do by faith, and he enjoys things that don’t make him confront the holiness of God. Such a person does not want to hear about obedience, Lordship, submission, surrender, the fear of God, and trembling before His Word. Such truths would make him feel uncomfortable. He would rather sit back and enjoy good music on Sunday and a message that is Bible-based (hopefully) but very entertaining all the way. There is no grieving over sin, there is no burden for evangelism, and there is no passion for being in the presence of God. There might be worshipful feelings, but there is a lack of a true surrender of the heart. The nominal Christian may or may not read the Bible daily. He likely does not pray except for mealtimes and maybe before bed. He very likely does not meditate on the Scripture, certainly not to the extent of day and night, as the Scripture calls us to (Joshua 1:8). In other words, the Scripture is nice, but its authority and gravity is minimized. It doesn’t affect and permeate all areas of life.

So how can we keep this from happening to us? If it has already happened to us, how do we get free? We avoid being pulled into nominalism by faith. We continue to believe that God enables us to live in victory over sin, we believe that God is holy, we tremble before His Word because we believe in its transforming power, and we commit ourselves to a study of God’s Word and to prayer because we believe it is our daily bread and food. We do what James says in drawing near to God so that He will draw near to us (James 4:8). God calls us to make the first move in terms of drawing near to Him in faith and obedience. When a person does this, Satan will attack him aggressively, trying to thrust him back into spiritual “contentment” and nominalism. The attack is always against our faith, trying to make us doubt, grow weak in belief, and ignore Biblical absolute truth.

Thus, this brings us to one final question. What causes nominalism in the first place? In some part, we have already answered this, but let’s be more specific. When a fear of God is absent among the people of God, sin breaks out like cancer. When the fear of God is present, a thorough self-examination and self-restraint by faith works its way through the people of God as in the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 where God executed them both publicly for not giving what they were supposed to give to God. Acts 5:5 says that “great fear came over all who heard it.” We tend to forget that God disciplines those whom He loves (Hebrews 12:6). When I was a child and I disobeyed my mother, I knew
that I was going to be disciplined when my father returned home. I knew it would hurt, but I knew I deserved it. I also understood that my loving father would be compelled to discipline me because of love for me and for my well-being. I feared Him, not because he was going to pour out his wrath upon me but because I needed a dose of admonishing love. I knew his heart toward me was good, and the fact that he would discipline me would serve to motivate me to please Him in my behavior in the future. The same is true with our Heavenly Father. It is a fear of God because of His great love for us that guides us into godly living and behavior. His discipline is not wrath but kindness toward us, which leads us to repentance. The love of God is not properly understood unless we understand that our loving Father is in the process of training us in holiness. When we sin, we hurt Him, ourselves, and others. Thus, He will discipline us, call to us, and bring us back on the path of righteousness. He is our authority figure, and He is to be feared. Fear of God and being consumed with His love go hand in hand. Such is the refining power of trembling before our divine Authority Who we know loves us and Who will, because of His great love, discipline His children Whom He loves.

So problem #1 is that we don’t fear God’s discipline, and secondly, we don’t tremble before His Word. God says in Isaiah 66:2, “But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word.” Such a person understands his helplessness apart from God through Christ, he takes sin seriously, and he values the Word of God above all other knowledge and information. God’s Word is not approached casually but as the authoritative and life sustaining truth that it is. A casual confession leads to casual living which leads to casual worship which leads to a casual confession which leads to casual living and the nasty cycle goes on and on and over and over again and again. At some point, God’s people need to revere, tremble, and bow in the presence of God and before His Word. Nominalism is just too casual. The only way to reverse nominalism is to live as an example and lead in such a way that others see how God is to be honored, revered, and worshipped. Others must learn how to approach God’s Word as that which is necessary for instruction. The problem is that nominalism doesn’t like being instructed, for instruction is convicting. Regardless, we must preach the Word with gravity and authority, trembling before every word, phrase, and verse. If we preach it in a once over “surfacy” manner, we will tend to live in such a lazy, careless, and disrespectful way. When our Father speaks, we need to pay attention, listen, and obey.

Yet nominalism may have even deeper, more serious roots. How did submission and surrender get lost from the gospel? It got lost when we minimized the gospel to be God loving us as we are, wanting to give us all joy and peace (and a wonderful life to top it off), and our only response being to receive His forgiveness for our sins. It sounds like a great deal to the carnal man. But when we don’t talk about being broken over sin, when we forget to mention that we must repent in order to enter the kingdom (Luke 13:5), and when we neglect to mention that God calls us to receive Christ as Savior and Lord, we leave a lot out. Maybe we give people enough to get saved in our half truths because they are half true. But we need to give people the whole truth. We need to teach the full implications and ramifications of being dead to sin and alive to God in Christ. We need to show people that how we live in this life dictates our rewards in the next. Grace is not license to sin, it is freedom from sin. If we miss this, we may have missed the gospel for
we have interpreted it to mean only that Christ is out “get out of hell free” card. We need to understand the full gospel of life change which is evidence of a heart change. As James says, “Faith without works is dead.” And as John says in 1 John 3:9, “No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.” Of course the Christian stumbles, but to live and make a lifestyle of enjoying and indulging sin? This does not square with true salvation. Some nominalism is a result of a half-true gospel while other elements are a result of a lack of a complete teaching from the Word of God that is authoritative, resulting in a lack of the fear of God in the life of the believer. If we do not change these things, we will be mired in chaos, worldly comforts, and a casual Christianity. It is time we make the move to draw near to God…His way.

Written by Brent Barnett of www.relevantbibleteaching.com
Please copy as you need; just be sure to give proper credit.