

THE ORIGIN AND NATURE OF SIN

by

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"When He comes He will convict the world of sin. . . ." This was Jesus' promise as he told of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The world of our day is strangely unconvicted, unconvinced, and unconcerned, yet where Spirit-filled men faithfully present the Spirit-inspired Word of God, conviction of sin comes. The great need of the world today is for consecrated channels for the convicting work of the Holy Spirit. Only so can there be a genuine turning to the Lord and acceptance of the Gospel.

THE NATURE OF SIN

There is very wide divergence of opinion among philosophers as to the criterion of what ought, or ought not, to be. Thus, when it comes to the question of what is good and what is evil, we come across several major schools of thought.

The Christian answer is that God has given us the sense of *oughtness*, and that he has revealed the criterion and the substance of what is good and what is evil. The mere fact that we have a sense of what ought or ought not to be, a sense quite different from the sense of pleasure or desire, is inexplicable on a merely naturalistic basis. Let us turn then to the Christian view.

"Sin is any want [lack] of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God." These words from the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* are based upon I John 3:4, "missing the mark [that is, want of conformity] is breaking the law."¹ The biblical view of sin, however, does not depend wholly upon the concept of law, for the biblical writers appeal to the holy character of God as the basis of the law. "Ye shall be holy for I, Jehovah, your God, am holy"² is the constant presupposition. It was the revelation of the holy character of God³ which caused Isaiah to recognize his own sinful corruption. Thus, sin is not only violation of the divine law, which is an expression of God's will;

1 Bible quotations, when not from the King James Version, are the author's own translation.

2 Lev. 19:2.

3 Isa. 6:1-6.

more profoundly, it is violation of the expression of God's holy character. It is corruption of the goodness which the Creator originally imparted to his creatures; and, especially, it is the corruption of the godliness with which God originally endowed man when he created him in his own image.

The divine character is expressed by the divine will in the divine law. Christians generally understand that the Ten Commandments and the law of love⁴ constitute a brief summary of God's holy moral law for man. And this is all based upon God's holy character.

Sin may then be defined ultimately as anything in the creature which does not express, or which is contrary to, the holy character of the Creator.

THE ORIGIN OF SIN

The origin of human sin, according to the Bible, is very simply ascribed to the willful self-corruption of the creature under temptation. The record is given in the third chapter of Genesis, and the fact of the original human sin is expounded in Romans 5:12-21 and elsewhere.

According to the account of Genesis 3, man was created with a holy nature, in fellowship with God, and placed in an environment which was "all very good"; but man was tempted to sin by a personal being of another kind, or order, who had previously sinned against God. This fact indicates that the record of the original sin of man is not intended as an account of the absolute origin of sin in the universe.

The record of the original human sin is of more value to us because this sin was induced by the tempter. Aside from the doctrine that Adam was our representative, the "federal" head of the human race, and we, representatively, sinned in him, the fact is that in our common experience sin is induced by previous sin. We are in Adam and individually guilty and corrupt sinners; but no human being has brought about the absolute origin of sin in the universe. We must therefore search for the origin of sin in the tempter.

The tempter in the Genesis record is an evil personal intelligence. The words "the Serpent," I suggest, should be read as a proper name.⁵ The Genesis account has nothing to say about a biological reptile. "The Serpent" is not said to be one of the "beasts of the field" but to be more subtle than any of them,⁶ and destined for a greater curse than any.⁷ Snakes do not literally eat dirt,⁸ but to be prostrated and to eat dust constitute an ancient metaphor for the humiliation of an enemy. There is no natural antipathy between human beings and snakes,⁹ not as much as between humans and insects. Children have to be taught to avoid poisonous reptiles. The whole meaning of the "enmity" of verse 15 is the enmity between "the Serpent" and the promised Redeemer. "The Serpent" is Satan, and figures throughout the Bible as the archenemy of God and man, the instigator of all kinds of evil.

What does the Bible say about the primeval origin of sin, before the fall of man? There is

4 Cf. Exod. 20:1-17 and Luke 1:27.

5 Cf. Isa. 65:25 and Rev. 12:9, where the "Serpent" is a person.

6 Gen. 3:1.

7 Gen. 3:14.

8 Gen. 3:14; Isa. 65:25.

9 Gen. 3:15.

definite indication in the Bible that mankind is not the only order of created personal beings among whom sin has become an actuality. In Jude, verse 6, there is reference to "the angels that did not keep their own realm [*arche*] but left their proper dwelling." The parallel verse, II Peter 2:4, speaks of "the angels that sinned." The biblical writers assume that Satan is the chief of the fallen angels. In I John 3:8 we read, "the devil sins from the beginning." From I Timothy 3:6 it is suggested that Satan's root or basic sin was pride. The words of Jesus are more explicit: "He [the devil] was a murderer from the beginning. He did not take his stand in the truth. [This is evident] because truth is not in him. When he speaks falsehood he speaks out of his own things, for he is a falsifier and the father of falsehood."¹⁰

Jesus' statement that the devil is, from the beginning, a murderer and a falsifier is probably based upon the fact that by falsehood Satan brought about the fall of man, in which man (1) became liable to physical death, (2) became liable to eternal punishment, "the second death," and (3) became spiritually dead, that is, alienated from fellowship with God.

There are expositors who hold that, aside from the rather clear references given above to the fall of Satan, the prophetic denunciations of Babylon¹¹ and of the king of Tyre¹² contain references to Satan's original status and his fall. It is not unreasonable to hold that certain sentences in these prophecies may contain analogies which would throw light upon Satan's probable original status and his fall.

The statements are not very full, yet the biblical account of the primeval origin of sin is clear enough: sin first became actual in an order of personal beings who are not a race.¹³ They do not have racial solidarity or racial representative responsibility. This order of beings, presumably having fully adequate understanding of the holy character of God and of God's impartation of his holy character to his creatures, was endowed with the power of ethical spiritual choice. Some of these beings, including Satan as the chief, deliberately chose to corrupt their God-given holy character, and chose further to spread their corruption as widely as possible in God's creation. Their sin was the act of a group of individuals as individuals, and does not involve the "federal" or representative principle. Since their sin was, we suppose, a deliberate act with fully adequate understanding, it is analogous to the fully conscious and responsible act subsequent to conviction by the Holy Spirit, in which act Jesus said that the sinner is "guilty of eternal sin."¹⁴ In other words, they sinned without remedy. (For a penetrating study in the psychology of a determinative act and a permanent attitude of sin, compare Milton's soliloquy of Satan in the early part of *Paradise Lost*. Satan is represented as refusing the very thought of repentance and settling in the attitude, "Evil, be thou my good!")

According to the Bible, then, sin originated in an act of free will in which the creature deliberately, responsibly, and with adequate understanding of the issues chose to corrupt the holy character of godliness with which God had endowed his creation.

QUESTIONS THAT REMAIN

Two philosophical questions remain: (1) How could there be a free responsible act from the

¹⁰ John 8:44.

¹¹ Isa. 13 and 14, especially 14:12-14.

¹² Ezek. 28:1-19, especially vv. 12-19.

¹³ Matt. 22:30; Mark 12:25; Luke 20:35,36.

¹⁴ Mark 3:19.

cosmic point of view? (2) How could a holy God permit sin?

The Christian determinist is usually driven to an inscrutable paradox. He may accept all that the Bible says about primeval sin as factually true, but the biblical statements afford no philosophical explanation. Satan sinned necessarily. God is rightly angry with all sin. So be it!

As for this writer's opinion, the denial of free will seems to be purely arbitrary philosophical dogmatism, contrary to the biblical view. If God is rightly angry with sin, then it follows that the sinner is blameworthy--cosmically, ultimately, absolutely.

We come now to the question: How could a good God permit sin?

Calvin and Calvinists generally (with the exception of certain supralapsarians) agree in denying that God is in any sense the author of sin.¹⁵ Nevertheless, we find that God "works all things after the counsel of his own will."¹⁶ We cannot deny that "whatever comes to pass" is within the eternal decrees of God. Sin must be within God's eternal decrees in some sense in which he is not the author of it.

In the ninth chapter of Romans, Paul gives two answers to the problem: "You will say to me, then, 'Why does He still blame anybody? Who ever stood up against His will?' Well now then, O man, you, who are you, answering back to God? Will the thing which is molded say to the one who molded it, 'Why did you make me this way?' Or does not the potter have a right to make from the same mass of clay a valuable dish, and one of no value?"¹⁷

Many persons never go beyond Paul's first, or preliminary, answer. God has a right to do what he chooses with his creation. Some devout minds still cling to the paradox. On the one hand, it is assumed that what ought not to be ought not to be permitted. On the other hand, God "works all things after the counsel of his own will."¹⁸

Some have even taken refuge in Pope's couplet:

Wrong is not wrong if rightly understood
And partial evil, universal good.

But the Christian answer cannot question "the exceeding sinfulness of sin." To do so would be to question the necessity of the atonement of Christ for the salvation of sinners.

Paul's answer clearly breaks one horn of the dilemma and does not leave us in a paradox; but Paul does not accomplish this by questioning the fact that sin absolutely ought not to be. The fallacy which leaves some minds in a state of contradiction is *the false assumption that what ought not to be, ought not to be permitted*. Those who have studied modern educational methods should be the last to criticize God's permission of sin. As parents we must, within the limits of our finite understanding, permit our children to experience the trying but inevitable assortment of bumps and bruises if they are ever to learn to walk.

¹⁵ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, I,i.

¹⁶ Eph. 1:11.

¹⁷ Rom. 9:19-21.

¹⁸ Eph. 1:11.

Paul does not merely leave the question with his reference to the potter and the clay. In previous verses¹⁹ he had pointed out that by allowing Pharaoh to be born, to come to the throne of Egypt, and to resist the salvation of Israel, and by forcing the issue with Pharaoh, God had demonstrated His *power* and caused His *name* to be reported in all the earth. "For this purpose I stirred you up."²⁰

After presenting God's rights, Paul continues. "What if God endured [Pharaoh] with much longsuffering," in order to demonstrate His *wrath* and make known His *ability* and the wealth of His *glory* in saving His people?

In the word "endured" we certainly have the suggestion of God's permission. We must conclude, then, that within the decrees of God there are decrees of the permission of those things of which God himself is not the author.

This is not *mere* permission of the unavoidable, a view against which Calvin often protests. It is God's permissive decrees for his own purposes of revelation. What would the history of God's redemptive program be without the revelation of God's "power," "name," "wrath," "ability," and "glory," as these were revealed by the events included in the decree in which he permitted Pharaoh's sin?

In the light of the ninth chapter of Romans, we may assume that God's decree permitting the primeval sin may be justified, even to our finite minds, on the analogy of Paul's justification of the permission of Pharaoh's sin. In terms of Joseph's words to his brethren,²¹ we may say to every sinner in cosmic history, "As for you, ye thought evil . . . but God meant it [that is, permitted it] for good."

The purpose of this study in the nature and origin of sin is to magnify the "amazing grace" of God in his redemptive program, as that program includes "even me," "the chief of sinners."

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21 Gen. 50:20.