

CHAPTER 14: RECONSTRUCTION: SIN AND SALVATION

“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

“The Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.” (Psalm 100:5)

Now that we have laid out our common sense theology and Christology it is time to consider the effects of these on traditional Christian themes. In this chapter we will look at those which can be grouped under the general heading of “sin and salvation”.

I: Sin

Sin has generally been thought of in two different ways: as an action or as a condition. We will consider sin as a condition under the heading of “original sin” below. At this point we are concerned with sin in the sense of bad deeds.

What does it mean to call a human action a sin? To begin with we are saying that the action is morally wrong. And traditionally, it was to say that this action violated the will of God. This is what makes it a sin. To sin, then, meant betrayal of the God who loves you, the God who had “given his only son” on your behalf. Obviously, this added a degree of perniciousness: You not only have injured a fellow human being with your sin, but you have also transgressed against God Almighty. Furthermore, besides having an additional connotation of moral wrong, to sin was dangerous: it could wind you up in hell.

Nowadays, however, we are reluctant to take the step from calling an action morally wrong to calling it a sin.¹ Why is this? There are several factors involved:

¹Thus Karl Menninger's *Whatever Became of Sin?* (Hawthorn Books, 1973).

1. First, to call an act on the part of someone else a "sin" may be felt to imply an unattractive self-righteousness on our part. And a lot of us would rather be considered wishy-washy or even sinful rather than self-righteous. Self-righteousness, while sinful itself, is less socially acceptable than most other sins.

2. Second, to call a wrong action a "sin" is to bring in the religious dimension. Heaven forbid that we should cause our friends to think we're religious, of all things! They would surely consider us to be some sort of fanatic.

3. Third, to call something a "sin" is to imply that we do in fact know what is right and what is wrong, and for some people this further implies that we know the will of God in a particular situation. Both of these claims are very out of fashion in this day of no absolutes. Our resistance to such claims is further increased by the fact that those who are most likely to make them are equipped with nice, neat lists of what God disapproves of—lists that generally reflect the bias of a certain class and culture and that show a special interest in sexual mores, lists that all too often cannot distinguish between minor personal failings and major injustices. We are justifiably suspicious of such lists.

4. Finally, the traditional connotations of "sin" cause it to be perceived as language that is simply too strong. "Sin" brings with it connotations of the sacred, of dealing with a superior moral law, of having transgressed against the Absolute, of having offended the one eternal God and put oneself at risk. This is heavy stuff for people who have gotten unused to dealing with the sacred as a part of their lives. It has become a foreign element to many, and (as with much that is alien and unfamiliar to us) it is feared.

Now the question is: given our present aversion to the use of the word "sin" for all these reasons, and given our common sense view of God which does not encompass the divine giving of specific commandments on stone tablets or otherwise—what do we do with "sin"? What should we, what can we, mean by it? Or should we abandon it altogether? (The concept, I mean. I doubt we shall ever abandon the practice.)

No, we do not need to abandon the concept of sin. In fact, we *must* not abandon it. It makes the crucial point that our choices between right and wrong are not made in a vacuum. How we act, how we treat people, how we live, affects our relationship with the ultimate. We must not forget this.

But if we must keep (or resurrect) the concept of sin, how do we define it and how do we use it? To begin with, we state again that there is a right and a wrong. Even in complex situations there are generally some actions which clearly grow out of fear and hatred, and which lead to a continuation of the sad and vicious cycle of human unkindness. These are wrong. Likewise there are generally some actions which demonstrate a true concern for all involved, for love and justice, and which may lead to reconciliation and improvement. These are right.

And God, we have said, calls us into right relationship, calls us to do what is right. A sin, then, is an action that goes against this call. To give it a proper definition: a sin is an action by a mentally competent person that goes against or avoids the call of God to right relation.²

With this as the definition of sin, how do we use it? In fact, we find there are three important uses for the Christian concept of sin:

First, it gives us a way to say that morally wrong acts are just that: they are wrong. They are bad. They ought not to be done. The idea of "sin" carries with it this connotation and helps us to make a point which we are sometimes obligated to make. We do not need to make this point in those cases where a wrong has been acknowledged and repented of. Rather, it is when sins are socially acceptable, unrecognized, or a part of our cultural fabric that we need most to pronounce them as such.

Second, since sin carries with it the connotation of danger to the sinner, to identify certain actions as sins is to call attention in a strong way to the need for repentance and change for the good of the sinner. In order to do this we do not need to postulate a God standing in judgment and threatening damnation in response to particular acts. It fits better with our common sense to adopt a view not unlike that found in parts of the Old Testament: sin will have its harmful consequences for the person doing as well as for the person done to, not as a result of a special interventionist act of God but as a natural result of the sin itself. And a natural result of sin is a warping of our character.

What is at stake here in deciding between right and wrong is nothing less than the shape and the depth of our selves. We can carve our selves shallow and narrow and crooked by opting for the selfish and the vengeful and the wrong, by selling out our human integrity. Or we can hew a broad and solid foundation for our selves by making hard choices for the loving and the right. In deciding between right and wrong we are not only choosing what actions to take. We are choosing as well the shape and the nature of our only true possession, our self.

Third, when we say that a wrong act is a sin, even if we do not conceive of God as standing in judgment we are still pointing out that there is another dimension involved in our choices between right and wrong. When we make a moral decision we are also determining the nature of our relationship with God. It is not that God rewards or damns us in response: rather, it is we ourselves turning towards or turning away from God.

Because it is so vitally important to point out that doing the wrong thing is bad in the first place, is damaging to our selves, and harms our relationship with God, we can and must continue to speak about sin.

²To satisfy the ethical philosopher, we can add the usual stipulations: that one acted according to reasonably expected consequences consistent with the available information, and that one made efforts to assure adequate information proportionate to the importance of the potential effects.

II: Original Sin

Now we must consider sin as a condition, the human tendency toward sinning that is traditionally called “original sin”. This two-word phrase has more unchristian implications to it than any other I can think of—a remarkable achievement for a concept that is such an integral part of Christian tradition. For theologians from Augustine to Luther (and all too many since) the concept of “original sin” has included the following tenets:

(1) That we are born in a state of sinfulness. That is, because of our human nature it is inevitable that we will in the course of our lives commit sins. Some theologians put it more strongly than this and say that we are born with a human nature such that, without the action of God’s grace, we are bound to be dominated by the motivations that lead to sinning.

(2) That this state of sin or tendency to commit sins is somehow or other our own fault. Even though we are born with it without anyone so much as asking our preference in the matter, it is our fault. It is certainly *not* God’s fault. After all, we were created by God in a state of perfection. And we blew it, thanks to Adam and Eve and the serpent. And the responsibility for our sinfulness is passed down to us along with the condition itself.

(3) That, being guilty of sinfulness in this way, we are therefore unworthy of God’s love, to the point that God could forgive us for this sinfulness—and thereby save us from the damnation that would otherwise be its natural and deserved consequence—only if someone free from this sinfulness were to offer himself or herself as a sacrifice in our stead and thus atone for our guilt.

(4) That in order for our forgiveness to be effected by this atonement we must “believe in” Jesus Christ, which allows God to pretend that we are not sinful after all. This is justification by faith, or by grace through faith.

The unchristian implications of these are:

(1) That we humans are in and of ourselves unworthy of God’s love.

(2) That a newborn infant is guilty of sinfulness and would presumably not qualify for salvation without a special act of grace.

(3) That however much good a person may do with their life, however much faith they may have, they still need God’s forgiveness in order to receive salvation, which God either could not or would not grant until innocent blood was shed in the crucifixion.

(4) That God still cannot or will not grant this forgiveness unless a person believes in Jesus Christ; and therefore that it is a belief or doctrine that is necessary for salvation, not a life lived in love and faith.

These implications of the traditional idea of “original sin” stand in direct opposition to the whole of Jesus’ life and teaching. The God of Jesus Christ loved the world, sought out sinners, and forgave those who

repented. Anyone who shares the Christian understanding of God cannot help but find these ideas—humans as unworthy of God's love, babies as evil, and God not forgiving anyone until innocent blood has been shed—to be repugnant and blasphemous.

If the implications of the idea of "original sin" are absolutely unacceptable, what can we do with the concept itself? I fear that these traditional ramifications are so identified with the phrase "original sin" that there is no alternative but to heave it into the theological garbage dump.

However, connected with this concept is a pair of important Christian insights that need to be retained. They are much too important to lose sight of. The first of these is a well-developed appreciation for the finitude of each human being, for our imperfection and our separation from the eternal and the perfect. The second is the realization that humans are as a matter of fact capable of immense evil, not to mention an incredible number of entirely unnecessary petty cruelties.

These two insights certainly have the depth and the importance to stand on their own. There is no need to merge them with the rest of the complex that is associated with "original sin".

Furthermore, while we need to recognize the gravity of our human propensity to sin, we need to balance this with the recognition (demonstrated so vividly by Jesus of Nazareth) that each and every human being has the ability to turn to God and to do good, that each and every human being is intrinsically worthy of love. To speak of "original sin" without at the same time speaking of "original virtue" is to ignore precisely that potential that Jesus saw and reached for, precisely that aspect of humanity that is most relevant to the Christian message.³ If we ignore either the pull toward evil or the pull toward good we are holding a view that is unrealistic and will hamper our effectiveness in dealing with the real world.

To arrive at a balanced view we have to discard the traditional concept of "original sin". We need to replace it with a different concept, with a theme which is in keeping with the Christian message and which recognizes all our potential. We might say that humans have "bidirectional capabilities" or an "open orientation". However, I would prefer simply to say that human beings have within themselves the potential both for great evil and for great good. This observation, as simple as it is, constitutes one of the great basic understandings of Christianity, but is nonetheless disregarded in one way or another by great numbers of us.

III: Salvation

Is this not the central tenet of the Christian faith, that Jesus came and suffered "for us men and for our salvation"? Nevertheless, the traditional

³Matthew Fox addresses this in *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe: Bear and Company, 1983), in

concept of salvation has serious problems. It is very closely associated with the unchristian ideas just noted under "original sin". We must ask whether it has a useful meaning independent of the ideas of human unworthiness and blood sacrifice.

First of all: what do we mean by "salvation"? In general, of course, it means being saved from something, from some danger or evil. Additionally, as a part of being saved *from* something, one must be saved *to* something else, to a different place or state of affairs. In Christian theology in particular salvation is from sin or from the penalties of sin. There is a double aspect: one is saved by being brought into a state of grace (or forgiveness or justification or even sanctification) instead of bondage to sin in this life, and by being brought into heaven instead of hell in the next life.

For both of these aspects we can and must find a better term than "salvation". We must use concepts and phrases that are not so identified with "blood of the lamb" theology, concepts that emphasize the positive instead of the negative. We will approach this task by looking at each of these two aspects of salvation in turn, in this life and in the afterlife, to see just what it is we wish to be saying.

III A: Salvation In This Life

In the case of salvation from bondage to sin in this life, what we want to stress is the good news—the gospel—that we do not *have* to be enslaved by our fear and hatred and selfishness, that we *are* in fact free to love, free to be kind and generous and even great of soul. We can best communicate this message not by emphasizing our need to be rescued from negative possibilities, but rather by emphasizing our potential for living in a loving and faithful way. So instead of speaking of "salvation" we ought rather to speak of living in right relationship, of faithfulness and commitment and love. It's not so much that we need to be saved from sin as it is that we need to commit ourselves to a life of faith. (And truly we *cannot* do the first except by doing the second.) This is especially true in a society where the greatest temptation is not to murder or steal but is rather to orient your life toward your own self-satisfaction measured in terms of worldly success or possessions or pleasure.

"But," challenges the traditionalist, "as weak and imperfect human beings we are incapable of doing the right thing and living the right way until we have been saved from the power of sin, whether you view this power emanating from within us or from Satan."

which he criticizes "fall/redemption spirituality" and proposes "creation spirituality", a fascinating blend of panentheism, feminism, ecology-awareness, and Medieval mystics such as Meister Eckhart and Hildegard of Bingen. Unfortunately, he undergirds this positive approach to creation and spirituality with the ancient "Logos" Christology, thus basing it all on a divine and cosmic Christ.