

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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LOOKING BACK: THE WAY WE WERE

Whatever Became of Sin? This was the intriguing title of a book written in 1973 by noted psychologist Karl Menninger. He complained that the loss of the sense of sin was undermining all sense of moral responsibility. The last two decades have demonstrated that Menninger's concerns were well-founded. More recently, Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., has perceptibly written that this same loss of the sinfulness of sin has permeated the church. Contrasting the older (and biblical) view of sin with the contemporary therapeutic one, he writes: "The newer language of Zion fudges: *Let us confess our problem with human relational adjustment dynamics, and especially our feebleness in networking. Or, I'd just like to share that we just need to target holiness as a growth area.*"¹ Where sin is concerned, people mumble now. Why should we speak up? Why retrieve the awareness of sin? Why restate the Christian *doctrine* of sin? The reason is that although traditional Christianity is true, its truth saws against the grain of much in contemporary culture and therefore needs constant sharpening. Christianity's major doctrines need regular restatement so that people may believe them, or believe them anew. Its classic awarenesses need to be evoked so that people may have them, or have them again. Recalling and confessing our sin is like taking out the garbage: once is not enough. But anyone who tries to recover the knowledge of sin these days must overcome long odds. To put it mildly, modern consciousness does not encourage moral reproach; in particular, it does not encourage self-reproach. Preachers mumble about sin. The other traditional custodians of moral awareness often ignore, trivialize, or evade it."² Calvin captured the issue by declaring: "And the reason why men cannot humble themselves before God as is necessary, is that they flatter themselves, until they are convicted and compelled to stoop and to bow their heads despite their big talk. For we see what hypocrisy is in us, since we would make ourselves believe that black was white, and never find ourselves at fault, as long as our misdeeds are not exposed to our faces, and as long as nobody pronounces testimony so clear that it closes our mouth. To have many wicked thoughts, or to be tempted to this or that evil, we do not think to be sin at all. Briefly, St. Paul has justly set down that the Ephesians walked in their sins, in order to show that he does not speak of a thing which ought to be unknown to them. For in beholding their own lives and in beholding what they had been and what course they had followed, they must needs be driven to confess that they were utterly lost and cursed before God. Therefore, whenever our hypocrisy hinders us from submitting ourselves to God, and from abasing ourselves by acknowledging our sins, let us learn to look into our life. Truly, although we perceived a whole million of faults which we have committed, yet it is nothing in comparison with that which God knows. But yet, to awaken us the better, that we may not be deceived by our own self-congratulation, as we have been accustomed to be, let us always judge the root by the fruit it bears."³

- I. **CONDITION OF MEN (Eph. 2:1).** Verse one opens with the conjunction *kai*, translated "and." It serves to connect this section with the preceding. The power that quickened Christ from the dead has quickened you who were likewise dead in the sphere of sin. **Note:** The words "hath he quickened" (as in the KJV) are not in the Greek text at this point. The idea of "quickening" does not come into view until v. 5.

- A. **The Fact** – *Dead (nekros, dead, lifeless, without life)*. The death spoken of here is not physical death (it will lead to physical death). Men are said to be “dead” in sin. They are dead while they live, because they live in sin (cf. Colossians 2:13, 14). In Scripture, the term “life” is often used to express union with God, while “death” expresses alienation from God with the accompanying conditions of corruption, misery, and helplessness. Ezekiel Hopkins, one of the great Puritan preachers, made this obvious point: “Look, how impossible it is, for a dead man, that is shut down under the bars of the grave, that is crumbled away into dust and ashes, to pick up again every scattered dust, and form them again into the same members; and how impossible it is for him to breathe without a soul, or to breathe that soul into himself: alike impossible is it, for a natural man, who hath lain many years in the death of sin, to shake off from himself that spiritual death; or to breathe into himself that spiritual and heavenly life, that may make him a living soul before God.”⁴
- B. **The Sphere** – *Transgressions (paraptōmasin) and sins (hamartiais)*. The words are closely related in meaning, but there is a distinction. *Transgressions* refer to “falling” and may refer to overt actions of disobedience, while *sins* (the classic term) “to miss the mark” and may designate the sins of heart and thought and the inclination of the will (cf. Psalm 29:13, 14, where both are used). Both terms are no doubt used to express the fullness of man’s rebellion against God. Each word carries the definite article which declares the strong awareness of personal wrongdoing.⁵
- II. **THE CONVERSATION OF MEN (v. 2a)**. I am resorting to the old KJV expression, “conversation,” to denote manner of life. Paul now describes more particularly the lifestyle of those who lived in transgressions and sins.
- A. **The Manner** – *You followed* (Greek *periepatēsate*, literally to walk about). It is used to denote a manner or course of life. That which characterizes a person’s behavior. Thus living and walking are synonymous. Unregenerate men literally are “death-walkers.”
- B. **The Pattern** – *The Ways of the world (ton aiōna tou kosmou, literally the age of this world)*. The expression is Hebraic and is often found in Rabbinic writings where it stands in contrast to the glorious age to come (i.e., the Messiah’s advent). It is a favorite expression of the Apostle Paul (cf. Romans 12:2; Galatians 1:4; 1 Corinthians 7:31) and is used to express the evil and transitory nature of the present world.
- III. **THE CONTROLLER OF MEN (v. 2b)**. If things were not bad enough, what with man being dead in sin, we learn that the actual situation of man entails the active agency of the most wicked being in the entire universe: Satan.
- A. **His Domain** – *The ruler of the power of the air (ton archonta tēs exousias tou aeros)*. The picture presented here is that Satan is the ruler of the demons and other agencies of evil (cf. Colossians 1:13; Acts 26:18; Matthew 12:26; Mark 3:22; esp. Ephesians 6:12). Although not seen, Satan and his forces actively control and exert an evil influence on the lives of men, primarily in blinding men to the truth of the Word of God (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:4).
- B. **His Function** – *He works (energountos, literally energizes) in the lives of men*. “The phrase,” comments J. A. Robinson, “is carefully chosen so as to suggest that the world-power as a whole stands in sharp contrast to God. It is a spirit, and it worketh – the same forcible word which has been used twice already of the Divine working.”⁶

- C. **His Subjects** – *The sons of disobedience (tou huiois tēs apeitheias)*. This also is a Hebraic expression indicating their chief characteristic. This disobedience is unbelief (cf. Hebrews 4:6, compare with 2 Thessalonians 2:3).

IV. **THE CONDEMNATION OF MEN (v. 3)**. Not only are men dead in sin and under the controlling influence of Satan, but they are subject to the wrath of a holy God. “The result is that all people are *by nature objects of wrath*. *Objects of wrath* is literally *children of wrath*. *Children of* (or *son of*) is a Semitic way of saying *characterized by* or *described by*. These people are under God’s wrath, both his present wrath (cf. John 3:26; Rom. 1:18), and his future wrath (cf. Rom. 5:9; Eph. 5:4). Both are implied here. Paul is not thinking of uncontrolled outbursts of angry passion on God’s part nor of some impersonal wrath; rather, wrath points to God’s constant displeasure and reaction against sin.”⁷

- A. **Man’s Habitation** – Paul declares that *all of us* (without exception) *lived (anestraphēmen, literally to conduct one’s life)*. The word has special reference to man’s social behavior, whereas the word used in verse 2, *peripateō*, is used more of personal conduct.
- B. **Man’s Actions** – Men live in the sphere of the flesh. They are controlled by *cravings of the flesh (tais epithuymiais tēs sarkos)*. Men live according to the dictates of their nature; they are “sons of disobedience” and behave as such. Furthermore, their sinful impulses are geared in accordance with the evil desires *of the mind (tōn dianoion)*. Man’s nature controls his thought patterns. An unregenerate person will *only* choose and think in harmony with his nature. He will not do otherwise. To expect him to do so is like expecting a tiger to choose to become a vegetarian.
- C. **Man’s Dessert** – Men are *by nature children of wrath*. Paul declares that *all* are in this dilemma, elect as well as non-elect. It is only by grace that the elect are delivered from *wrath (orgēs, a very strong word that declares God’s just anger and judgment, compare with Romans 1:18ff)* and only because another has taken their place in receiving God’s wrath.

CONCLUSION: Paul has set forth in 2:1-3 the terrible situation that all men, whether Jew or Gentile, are in by nature. Humanity is not on trial before God; the verdict is in, and the sentence has been passed – **guilty**, one and all. No one deserves salvation; all need it, but none deserves it, nor even seeks it! (cf. Romans 3:11). Our condition is such that we surely cannot earn salvation. Sinners, living in sin and being controlled by “the ruler of the kingdom of this age” (and willing subjects at that), were by nature (*phusei, lit. “innate disposition,” comp. Galatians 2:15; 4:8*) “objects of God’s wrath.” Sinners therefore need mercy. But if the standard by which mercy is given is merit, we are doomed. As we saw from Romans 8:6-8, our natural condition is one characterized by disobedience and enmity towards God. Martin Lloyd-Jones declared: “All must surely recognize that that is nothing but a description of man as he is at the present time outside the Christian faith. He is utterly disobedient, and proud of it, and arrogant in it. He is asserting himself and his self-sufficiency. It is essential that the matter be pressed to that point. Disobedience is, as I have said, active, and it is active to the point of enmity. If we fail to realize that, we have not really understood this doctrine. So let me interpret what the apostle says here by what he says in the Epistle to the Romans in the eighth chapter and the seventh verse: *The natural mind, he says, is enmity against God; is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be*. What a statement, and what an important addition! Man disobeys because he is at enmity against God; he hates God. Ah, but you say, I know many people who are not Christians but who say that they believe in God. No, they do not! They believe in a figment of their own imagination; they do not believe in God. If they believed in God they would believe in his Christ, as our Lord Himself argues in John 8:30-45. But they do not. They believe simply in what they think and imagine God is, the god that they have manufactured themselves. That is not God! *The natural mind is enmity against God; is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.*”⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ Original sin is not a substance or a positive attribute, but a defect in human nature caused by the fall and consisting in the loss and consequent absence of original righteousness, *iustitia originalis* and of the *image Dei*. This *peatum originalis* is (1) the *culpa haereditaria*, or hereditary guilt, which is imputed to all mankind because of the sin and guilt of Adam – in Reformed theology this imputation rests on the federal headship of Adam. It is also (2) the *corruption haereditaria*, or hereditary corruption, which, because of the guilt and corruption of Adam and Eve, is transmitted to all their descendants by generation. Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Baker, 1985), p. 221.

² C. Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Eerdmans, 1996), p. x.

³ John Calvin, *Sermons On The Epistle To The Ephesians* (Banner of Truth, 1973), p. 131.

⁴ *The Works of Ezekiel Hopkins II* (rpt. Soli Dei Gloria, 1997), p. 242.

⁵ A “transgression (*paraptōma*) is generally the violation of a sanctioned statute or law (1:7; Ezek. 3:19-20 LXX; Rom. 5:15-20; BDAG, 770). The focus is on the act as bringing consequences of curse and punishment, which are absent when there is no law (so Rom. 4:15; 5:13-14; cf. Eph. 1:7; 2:5; Col. 2:13). “Sin,” on the other hand, is an act of traitorous rebellion (1 John 3:4; 5:17) and particularly offends God (BDAG, 50-51). In both cases, death is the consequence (Rom. 6:23), and hence these Ephesians were the walking dead “in transgressions and sins,” not those who made an unintended mistake or error of judgment (cf. *hamartia*; LSJ, 77) like Actaeon or Oedipus with terrible consequences in Greek mythology and tragedy.” M. Baugh, *Ephesians: Evangelical Exegetical Commentary* (Lexham Press, 2016), p. 148.

⁶ J. A. Robinson, *Commentary on Ephesians, Exposition of the Greek Text* (rpt. Kregel, 1979), p. 49.

⁷ K. Snodgrass, *Ephesians: The NIV Application Commentary* (Zondervan, 1996), p. 98.

⁸ M. Lloyd-Jones, *God's Way Reconciliation: Studies in Ephesians 2* (Baker, 1972), p. 28.