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Sin, Redemption, and the Christian Response

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New Testament Theology, CHR 320

October 15th, 2007

The central theme of the New Testament is the struggle between the depravity of humankind and the God's desire to show mercy to all¹. This struggle is central to many of the events and themes of the New Testament, and can be found threading through the stories and events of the Bible since the Fall of humankind. Throughout the Old Testament, this paradox is dealt with through animal sacrifices² and a confidence in the mercy of God³. In the New Testament, a shift has been made that lays the the cancellation of our guilt upon the death (or eternal sacrifice) of Jesus on the cross. This struggle between human sin and God's redemption through Jesus' sacrifice forms the center of Christian theology. In order to adequately investigate sin and redemption and how it should affect the world view of those who profess to be Christians, a thorough definition of sin must first be formed.

What is Sin?

Before one can understand how redemption should affect the actions of the Christian, one must first develop an understanding of sin. Sin in the Bible but is closely associated with evil, depravity, and immorality, and in some passages is exemplified through lists of “right” or “wrong” behaviors and attitudes. However, an overall picture sees sin in black and white as a violation or rejection of the will of God.

From the opposite side of the coin, a secular definition of sin can be found in an encyclopedia or dictionary, where sin is simply defined as an “individual's failure to live up to external standards of conduct or with his violation of taboos, laws, or moral codes.”⁴ Thus, the definition of sin can vary from one society to the next, depending the moral code, taboos, or laws of the location. An even looser secular definition of sin was found amongst the ancient Greeks, who believed that sin was simply a

1 G. B. Caird, *New Testament Theology*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 74.

2 Leviticus 4:1-3

3 Caird, 145-6.

4 *Britannica Online Encyclopedia*. “sin.” (2007) <http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9067887> (October 13, 2007)

failure to achieve ones' true self-expression (or simply a consequence of ignorance).

While the secular view of sin makes light of the consequences of sin, the Bible paints a bleak picture of the effects that sin has on humanity. Sin a universal truth, whether acknowledged or ignored. According to Caird, sin is exacted in four ways upon the human psyche⁵.

The first experience of sin is guilt. This sense of guilt stems from the “acceptance of responsibility for an action and an admission that the action was wrong.” This sense of guilt is universal, though it is experienced to a greater or lesser extent in different people, depending on their backgrounds. Even non-believers are subjected to a sense of guilt despite their suppression of the truth⁶ through their innate conscience or sense of right and wrong. This guilt can grow into a paralyzing stigma when one realizes that the debt of their transgressions against God is impossible to repay.

The second experience of sin is that of a “stain.” According to Caird, a vital aspect of any ethical education lies in the “transference of [humans' instinctive aversion to dirt, disease, and death] from the physical world to the moral sphere” because the aversion to uncleanness is one of the greatest horrors to the subconscious human mind⁷. Throughout the Bible many terms are used to evoke this sense of uncleanness and the need for cleansing. This horrific feeling of having an unclean soul or conscience should create a sense of the need for moral or spiritual cleansing.

The third experience of sin is enmity. This can be seen as break in the fellowship of

5 Caird, 87-90

6 See Romans 1:18-24 and the note “Mankind's Guilty Knowledge of God” in the *Reformation Study Bible*, pg. 1767

7 Caird, pg. 88

God and humankind, as found in Matthew 6:24, which says “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.” Simply put, humankind cannot be in fellowship with God and live in sin.

The final experience of sin comes in the form of slavery. Jesus states in John 8:34, “whoever commits sin is a slave of sin.” In the sense used, this takes the form of a slavery to ones' passions, not necessarily the act of servitude that we commonly think of. This slavery prevents us from experiencing the true freedom that Jesus speaks of when he says “if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.”

To further delve into the Biblical stance on sin, a closer look at a few New Testament viewpoints on sin is helpful. In the Pauline doctrine, sin is based on a suppression of truth with unrighteousness⁸. According to Caird⁹, this is more than a simple mental ignorance of the truth, but a rejection of the truth based on ones' actions. The truth of God that we suppress is that which is “written in the fabric of the universe, and which requires from human beings obedience and gratitude, which are the tribute of dependence.” By ignoring this basic truth of life, humans are committing sin; thus sin implicitly extends to all humans, even those who haven't heard the good news of the Bible or been exposed to an Christian theology. All the requisite evidence can be found in the world that God has created. According to Paul, these intrinsic evidences of God's work are explained away by a great lie and this constitutes the basic sin of the world.

Sin is also seen in the New Testament as a “failure to be what God intended.” When

8 Romans 1:18

9 Caird, pg. 91

God created humans in his image, he also intended for humans to have his perfection. After the fall, humans no longer modeled the perfection of God, thus introducing sin into the world. By falling short of the high standard that God intends for the human race, we are missing his perfection and living in sin¹⁰. God is love, and Christians are admonished to be more like God by “[adding] to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love.” As Christians work to attain a Christ-like love, we slowly reacquire an essence of the perfection of God through Christ. A lack of this sense can be seen as sin.

What is Redemption?

If sin is the bane of the human race and the enemy of God, redemption is God's solution to the problem. Redemption can be simply stated as the forgiveness of sins as made possible through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. God, being a merciful God, wants to save human kind from their plight, but at the same time God is a just God and as such he must punish sin. In order to provide a solution to this paradox, the sacrifice of Christ was required. In giving his life of perfection for the sins of the world, Christ both fulfilled the requirement of God's justice and provided a way for all humankind to be saved from eternal damnation. While this offer of redemptive salvation was provided as a gift of no cost to the recipient (and at great cost to the giver), the process of accepting this salvation presents a few expectations upon the recipient¹¹. These expectations of salvation are 1) accepting the offer of salvation through

10 Caird, pg. 95

11 Caird, pg. 137-138

faith, 2) acknowledging Christ as the giver of salvation, 3) accepting the leadership of Christ, and 4) offering the example of Christian living and the promise of salvation to others. This redemption encompasses a release from the bondage and curse of the law, the power of sin and the grave, and evil in the world¹².

Through Christ's sacrifice, he has borne the guilt of sin, removed its' stain, and broken sin's power¹³, thereby allowing the person who has accepted the gift of salvation to be redeemed and released from the judgment of God. Christ, through his death upon the cross, broke the curse of the Law and the bondage that it brings. Through humans' faith in Christ's death and resurrection, Christians are also broken free from the bondage of the law. Because guilt is a byproduct of breaking the Law through sin, our new found freedom from the Law erases the guilt that we previously felt, thereby removing the guilt of sin and placing it squarely upon the Christ and the gift of the cross¹⁴.

Christ's sacrifice also serves to remove the stain of sin upon humankind's conscience. Under the Old Testament Laws, a “shadowy outline^{15”} of the cleansing of sins was provided by the blood of sacrificed animals. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross served as the ultimate blood sacrifice, providing eternal cleansing of all sin and allowing all to enter the temple unblemished. In this way, the cross served to eliminate the stain upon humankind's conscience.

Finally, the sacrifice of Christ broke the power of sin over our lives, freeing us from the slavery of sin and allowing the believer to enter into full reconciliation with God. By

12 See Galatians 4:5 and 3:13, Romans 6:18,22, Psalms 49:15, and others. From http://www.biblegateway.com/topical/topical_resource.php?source=2&tid=8012

13 Caird, pg. 145

14 Caird, pg. 148-150

15 Caird, pg. 153

conquering sin upon the cross, Christ has freed all slaves of sin from its bonds and reconciled us to our former state. In the New Testament, this is portrayed both as a victory over the Enemy and as a ransom payment. Under the imagery of a victory, sinners are seen as slaves freed from a defeated master¹⁶ and liberated into a life of freedom in Christ. Elsewhere in the New Testament, Christ's sacrifice is seen as a ransom payment that is exchanged for the lives of humans living in slavery to sin¹⁷. The mention of this exchange can be found referring to the contexts of “freedom for the many, freedom for the whole human race, for those who have been slaves to any kind of wickedness, or to the empty folly of their traditional way of life.¹⁸” Caird ties this into the Exodus background of the Israelites, where freedom was associated with escape from oppression. Caird alludes to this Exodus theme of redemption in several passages, including Colossians 1:13 and John 5:24-25.

Summarily, Christian redemption can be seen as God's divine plan to reconcile his divine mercy (the desire to save humankind) with his divine justice (the need to punish sin) through the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus. This sacrifice provides a complete answer to each facet of sin (the guilt, the stain, the slavery, and the separation from God) through the various aspects of the redemptive act. Finally, this sacrifice can be seen through the lens of a victory over sin, a ransom paid to free humans from the bondage of sin, or an escape from a state of oppression.

16 Caird, pg. 155

17 Caird, pg. 158

18 Caird, pg. 158. Refers to Mark 10:45, Matthew 20:28, 1 Timothy 2:6, Titus 2:14, and 1 Peter 1:18

The Christian Response

If sin is a universal fact inherited by all of humankind from Adam and redemption is God's way of reconciling the world with his divine righteousness, how should that affect the life and world view of the Christian or one who claims to believe in the sacrifice of the cross? Believers from all walks of life struggle with this question and thus it is no surprise that there are many diverse viewpoints on this topic. If we all agreed on a single interpretation of "the Christian response" there would be little to no need for the hundreds of different denominations and divisions found within the Christian church. However, as rational, thinking humans, we are prone to question, debate, and come up with diverse views for everything we can possibly imagine.

The question centers around how we live our lives after accepting the gift of Christ's salvation. On the extremely conservative side, believers tend to denounce everything that is not somehow related to things mentioned in the Bible and they tend to hold a very literal view of the Bible. On the other side of the coin, we find the liberal believers who hold scripture as a set of guidelines and tend to be more acceptive of new ideas and traditions. The effects of one's redemption must lie somewhere in this spectrum of beliefs. The answer to this question must be one that arises from personal beliefs attained through careful studies of the scripture and revelation of the holy spirit.

Many passages of scripture, both in the Old and New Testaments, provide the reader with guidelines and requirements for the people of that time. Many of these requirements are intended for a specific people and a specific time and are not applicable to the modern-day Christian. Instead, Christians should seek to find the underlying message of the Biblical

teachings and guidelines and then seek to apply these their world-view. This is the essence of a Biblical morality or Biblical theology. Through these guidelines and teachings or “lenses” Christians should observe the world and subsequently modify their world-view. However, the appreciation for the redemptive gift of God through the sacrifice of Jesus should be primary to all views on application of God's word to the Christian life. If we as Christians view the world through the lens of God's loving sacrifice for our lives and mold our actions to emulate Christ's, we will find ourselves on solid footing, both morally and theologically.

In Conclusion

To understand redemption, one must first understand sin and its effects and implications. At its core, sin is nothing more than a rejection of the will of God. This rejection evokes feelings (perhaps subconscious) of guilt, alienation, enslavement, and blemish. The scourge of sin upon the world is answered by God's redemptive plan as realized through the sacrifice of Jesus. This sacrifice solves the problems of sin through the elimination of the Law (freeing humankind from guilt), the restoration of communion with God, the absolution of mankind's bonds to sin, and the cleansing of the blemish of sin through the blood of Christ. This gift is offered to those who will accept it unconditionally, but the gift does come with an expected reaction of gratitude, resulting in a desire to follow the example of Christ, loving others, acknowledging Christ as Lord, and extending this offer to others. When we as Christians seek to develop a proper world-view, we should simply seek to find a way to apply Godly love and gratitude to our actions and interpretations of daily life.