

SIN

In two thousand years of Christian history, only four tenets of eschatology (last things) survive which are universally believed by all fundamental and evangelical Christians: 1) Christ will return to earth. 2) There will be a resurrection of the dead, both just and unjust. 3) All will give account to God in a final judgment for their life on earth. 4) The final state of all persons will be eternal bliss or eternal damnation.

Belief in these four points survive alone because they are the only ones that will stand the test of sound Biblical teachings according to sound scriptural exegesis. None of the great historical confessions of faith go any further.

There have always been some peculiar views held by groups of evangelical believers that are not anti-biblical. Some of these revolve around the "millennium". Will there be a literal thousand year reign of Christ on earth? Will it be before or after the "rapture"? Will there be a great "tribulation"? How long will it last? Will the saint go through it? Most of these views can be held without doing violence to the gospel, and Christians have always tolerated varying views on these matters. But there has never been any solid Christian consensus on them simply because sound doctrine will not permit it. Bible scholars have equally valid reasons for holding opposing views about them.

We do have today, as there has always been in church history, some cockeyed, wild speculative fabrications of men and demons that build an elaborate and exhaustive schedule of end-time events, some of which get everyone saved including the devil, put people in a temporary hell, divide the redeemed into first and second class saints (overcomers and undergoers), reestablish Judaism in an earthly political government, and scores of other unbiblical aberrations.

Biblical eschatology arises properly from Biblical soteriology (the doctrine of salvation). Biblical soteriology arises from Biblical theology (the doctrine of God) and Biblical anthropology (the doctrine of man). The key problem that surfaces, when the true doctrine of God and of man is revealed which makes salvation the central message of the Bible, is sin. That is what makes last things to be man's ultimate concern. He has a sin problem that must be resolved with God. Death will not absolve him from it. He must still face God in judgment.

Therefore, we can observe that bad eschatology arises from bad soteriology. Bad soteriology comes from bad theology and bad anthropology. And this bad soteriology always comes up with a defective view of sin.

Up to less than 150 years ago, theologians and Bible teachers concerned themselves primarily with soteriology. Bad eschatology, when it appeared, was the outworking of erroneous views of salvation. But today, we have something relatively new. Because of a widespread, unholy, carnal interest in prophesy, which is totally divorced from any interest in God or salvation, many teachers are studying and devising systems of eschatology for the sake of eschatology alone. This is the central thrust and whole objective of their "ministry": a sensational, impressive revelation of last things. Soteriology, then, has to be fitted into their system of last things. What an unholy, illogical, unscriptural, blasphemous mess *that is!*

But this is not another paper attacking some system of eschatology. Our one concern is the gospel of Jesus Christ and the salvation it brings to ruined mankind. I am persuaded that every aberration from that gospel is rooted in an unbiblical view of sin. Therefore, if we can in some way put this back into scriptural perspective, nothing less than Bible salvation can be seen as its remedy.

A wide variety of usages prohibit a single narrow definition of the word "sin". In the Old Testament it is used for such differing things as "a missing or failing"; "Wickedness, confusion"; "iniquity, perversion, guilt"; "transgression, rebellion"; "wrongness, vanity"; "lying, deceit"; "evil"; "trespass"; "injustice"; "to disobey"; "to transgress". Sometimes it means the guilt of these things and sometimes the removal of such guilt. In the New Testament it is used for "a missing of the mark"; "lawlessness"; "impropriety"; "transgression"; "a fall"; "depravity"; "desire, lust"; "disobedience".

Aggravating the problem even further is the usage of the same word *hamartia*, a missing of the mark, in a seeming contradictory sense: John tells us in his first epistle, chapter 1, verse 8, "*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*" Again, in verse 10, "*If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.*" Then the same John in the same epistle in chapter 3 tells us, "*Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.*"

Such problem passages cannot be resolved with word studies; they yield only to contextual scriptural exegesis. Contrary to most commentaries and paraphrases of 1 John 3:9, it cannot be translated "Whosoever is born of God doth not *practice* sin habitually." The word translated "commit" is *poieo*, which means a single deed. It is never used in the sense of a habitual practice as is the word *prasso*. Over 350 times it is simply translated "do". The word "sin" used here can only mean a particular sin, a sin that a real Christian, predestined to glory, cannot commit. It is the same sin (same word) that is spoken of in Hebrews 10:26, and in 1 John 5:16, the sin of apostasy. That is the only sin for which the blood of Christ will not avail because it is a sin of determined and deliberate turning back in unbelief. Although the same word is used, this sin cannot be the same sin that John spoke of in 1 John 2:1, "*... And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.*"

As for the theory that 1 John 5:16 speaks of a sin which a Christian commits that occasions his physical death, none who hold that theory can tell you what the sin is. But the text indicates that such a sin would be recognized. Only manifest apostasy is recognizable; and for it there is no remedy. Not only physical death, but eternal death is the consequence.

Sometimes sin is referred to as a spiritual dynamic personified, as an indwelling alien apart from the man himself or his mortal flesh (Romans 7:14-20). It is called a law with power to enforce and impose itself upon a person who struggles against it (Romans 7:23).

There is, however, a central Biblical sense that threads itself all the way through all these meanings and usages. Sin is that which misses the mark of divine perfection. It is that which comes up short of God's glory, the original image in which man was created. Therefore, it is that which is unspeakably offensive to God and necessitates our reconciliation by its removal. That is the aim and end of redemption.

The moral law was given to put this "missing of the mark" before our eyes, but knowledge of that law is not necessary for sin. Law is based upon the perfection of God's character, and although the moral law was not verbalized before Moses, law existed in the person of God; and sin was imputed since the fall of Adam because man lived in violation of God's perfection (Romans 5:12-14). Death, which alone is the penalty for sin, bears mute but indisputable evidence of this.

Sin, therefore, does not depend upon our knowing that we are doing wrong. Wrong is wrong regardless of the intelligent state of its doer. Nor is sin conditioned on ability to do good. The fact that a man does something that he cannot help does not change the evil of what he does. Supposed "good" motives in a sinful act do not make it less sin. Bad motives may compound the sin, but good ones can not make the deed less than sin.

Some make too much of the difference between ignorant sins and presumptuous sins, drawing from Numbers 15:27-35. It should be observed, however, that the death penalty was exacted for the ignorant as well as the presumptuous sin, the only difference being a substitute was provided in the former case. Applying this to the New Testament, it can well be argued that a non-Christian, a person without a Substitute will suffer more for his willful sins. But it certainly cannot be set forth that the justified believer who has Christ for his Substitute must pay for a sin which he commits knowingly. That would make Christ's sacrifice too cheap to satisfy the requirements of an expensive sin, the costlier one being taken care of in the more valuable sufferings of the sinner. How utterly absurd!

The above is the idea embodied in the Roman Catholic distinction between venial and mortal sins. Venial sins are not too serious and may be forgiven sometimes even without confession. They are covered by the blood of Jesus Christ. Mortal sins, however, are much worse, and must be confessed. Even then, they may not be removed without the sacrament of penance, and possibly some time in purgatory. The offering of Christ is not enough in itself. Human punishment must be added. It solves nothing to explain that this punishment endured or penalty paid is the means whereby the merits of the atonement is applied. There is no scripture whatever for such nonsense. Biblical justification is by faith alone. *"But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness"* (Romans 4:5). All such distinctions are wholly unscriptural, for all sin is unrighteousness and merits eternal punishment.

Nor can sin be confined to overt acts performed outwardly alone. Fallen man's heart condition is sinful. His whole demeanor is at enmity with God (Romans 3:10-18; Ephesians 2:2). We are charged with sin for our thoughts and attitudes that are not in compliance with divine perfection (Matthew 5:22, 28; Romans 7:7; Galatians 5:19-21).

Over against the Biblical truth stands the Pelagian view of sin, consisting only in separate acts of the will. Pelagius taught that man inherited no sinful inclinations from Adam and that there is, therefore, no such thing as a sinful nature. Man is totally morally free. He is just as able to do right as to do wrong. He sins only when he freely chooses to do wrong rather than good. According to him, there are no sinners and no saints, none holy and none wicked; only individual acts of sin.

According to this erroneous view, man has no moral character at all. He is reduced to the level of an animal, yet without restraining instinct. This view is defective because it fails to give a cause for men's persistent bent to evil. The will is not autonomous. Our choices are dictated by what we are. Evil works proceed from an evil choice that flows from a polluted fountain. If there are no wicked men, then God has no one to punish, only an abstract called acts of sin.

A Semi-Pelagian view of sin allowed that all humanity inherited a polluted nature from Adam, and that sin did exist in thoughts and attitudes. But this view contended that although the whole nature of man was bad, it was not so bad as to be without human ability to life oneself out of such a state aided by the grace of God.

Such views were essential to the development of Wesleyan perfectionism . . . the idea that a Christian could obtain a state of "perfect love" in which all the inward sin was gone, and all his thoughts and deeds were ordered by perfect love. He was therefore no longer capable of sin. This doctrine was embraced by Charles Finney and carried on into modern Pentecostalism.

Inevitably this sort of teaching evolves into a cultural legalism. If one is to attain such Christian perfection, some sort of visible standard is necessary to demonstrate it and distinguish between those who have attained and those who have not. Accordingly, codes of dress, food and drink, recreation, conversations, a multitude of dos and don'ts soon supplant the righteousness of Christ with the commandments of men. Intolerance generated by self-righteousness and "spiritual" pride leads to schisms, splits, splinters, and ceaseless "come-outing" in the futile quest for a pure and holy church.

But this low view of sin with its accompanying cheap concepts of grace and holiness is no longer confined to the Arminian-Wesleyan churches. It has spilled over and corrupted the soteriology of churches that have been traditionally Calvinistic or Reformed. The following statements were made recently by a nationally known Baptist pastor and extremely popular Bible conference teacher: "The idea that a Christian sins daily in thought, words and deeds is pure nonsense." "You have to intend to sin, in order to do it; you cannot sin without knowing it." "It is possible for a Christian to live for weeks and months without committing a single act of unrighteousness. "Everything that I do that I do not know is an act of willful sin is an act of righteousness."

What makes this sort of thing alarming as well as astounding is that it was preached before a national Bible conference, acclaimed as the highlight of the whole event, and the pastor claimed to have received more positive response from it than any message

he had ever preached in his entire life. If any degree of sinless perfection is to be claimed, there must be a corresponding low and unscriptural view of sin.

But now we come to the crux of the matter. What is to be the motivation for attaining this sinless state? The more sound Wesleyan-Arminians did not set this state as a criteria for salvation; they had too high a view of the grace of God for that. Some of the later Holiness people and a large number of contemporary Pentecostals, however, maintained that a state of sinless perfection was necessary for salvation. This was not too severe a requirement, however, because if a man did sin and fall from his state of justification, he could always get saved again.

This is where our views of sin ultimately involve our views of eschatology. Those who teach that sin in the believer's life does not cancel his salvation, yet must demand a penalty of some sort on his part, usually have him being punished for it in some way associated with the final judgment. Some teach that those who are not sinlessly perfect, or who have unconfessed sin in their lives, cannot go up in the first rapture, but must remain and be purified in the great tribulation. Others, like the Roman Church, teach that some sins must be paid for in purgatory. Still others teach that unconfessed sin must be absolved in some sort of penance at the "judgment seat of Christ". And there is at least one exotic fabrication which has those redeemed, but not purified saints, delivered from hell and constituting that horde of dogs, sorcerers, whoremongers, idolaters and liars who are not quite pure enough to get in the Holy City.

Supposed support for the idea of perpetual confession of individual sins as a basis for absolution is drawn from 1 John 1:9: "*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" The argument goes that the separate individual acts of sin of the Christian are unforgiven unless they are specifically confessed. This argument is based upon three defective premises:

The first has it that John is addressing exclusively only those who are certainly saved. This idea comes from the use of "we". Since John is a Christian and includes himself in the first person plural, then what he has to say is only to real believers. Actually, John is using the dramatic first person, a term that projects the speaker into a hypothetical situation that could include anyone. The same dramatic first person is used in Galatians 1:8,9: "*Though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.*" Paul certainly did not intend to preach another gospel, but if he did, it would be evidence that he was accursed. This is consistent with John's usage in verse 8, "*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*" John is certainly including himself, but he could not say that the truth was not in him. If he did, however, deny his sin, it would be evidence that the truth was not in him. The "we" simply means any and all of mankind.

The second erroneous premise is that we know all our sins. Again, this evidences an ignorance of the Bible usage of the word. Since sin is any and all shortcomings of divine perfection, and the heart of man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, it is utterly impossible for us to *know*, let alone confess, all our sins. If all unconfessed sins demand some sort of penalty on the sinner's part, then the blood of Christ is woefully inadequate to deliver us from *most* of our sins.

The third erroneous premise is that Christians are not wholly justified from all their sins when they believe. The atonement is applied to past sins only. We are progressively justified from future sins as we confess them. This flies in the face of so many passages of scripture it should be unnecessary to mention them. Hebrews 10:14: "*For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.*" Romans 5:1: "*being justified by faith we have . . .*" Romans 4:8: "*Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin.*" Romans 8:1: "*There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus . . .*" Romans 8:33: "*Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth.*"

Then, if 1 John 1:9 does not speak of perpetual confession for progressive justification, what does it mean? It means that all who confess their *sins*, not each individual sin (for that is utterly impossible), and look to Christ, will have their sins forgiven. God justifies only confessed sinners, not the professed righteous. This is the basis of the life, the joy, and the fellowship among the redeemed that John speaks of in the opening verses.

It is, of course, true that known sins should be confessed as they are known. Otherwise, we are denying our conscience and grieving the Holy Spirit. This is a condition of continual joy, not of justification.

Having established, we trust, what we are speaking of as sin, we want to now consider its penalty. God threatens in Genesis 2:17 certain death as the penalty for disobedience of His divine law. Romans 6:23 promises the wages of sin to be death.

Death, considered as punishment, cannot be an obliteration from existence. In such a case there would be no conscious suffering. And while the universe may be purged of the sinner, there would be no satisfaction of divine justice. Accounts will not have been balanced.

Punishment, therefore, entails some sort of suffering on the part of the transgressor. And human suffering is not wanting for example anywhere. Charles Hodge stated, "Suffering without any reference to the reason of its occurrence is calamity; if inflicted for the benefit of the sufferer, it is chastisement; if for the satisfaction of justice, it is punishment (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, pg. 474).

Without question, most human suffering falls into the first category mentioned above. Men cannot tell exactly why such calamities befall them. They are consistent with nothing. The good and diligent suffer as well as the evil and indolent. Yet it is not accurate to say that there is no reason for its occurrence. "*For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now*" (Romans 8:22). Everything on earth, all flesh, beast as well as man, suffers. Paul tells us that this creation was made subject to such by God (Romans 8:20). This can only mean that all such calamitous suffering now is a direct consequence of the sin of Adam and the corresponding corruption of all nature. As such, then, it may be argued that this suffering is part of the penalty of sin. That would, however, be stretching the proper definition of penalty. It is more accurate to say that creation's suffering is an immediate consequence of creation's alienation from its Creator. Its steward, man, has polluted it and left it bereft of its original order and beauty. In fact, much of the specific evil endured by men is simply a reaping of what is sown, the natural harvest of evil deeds and erroneous acts.

But in no sense can this sort of suffering be called a price paid for any particular sin. Nor can it be regarded as a satisfaction rendered to divine justice. *“Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” (Micah 7:7).*

The wages of sin is death in every sense of the word: Spiritual death, immediate separation from God, all His benefits in fellowship, light and joy of life. Physical death, the mortal corruption that immediately cursed all creation the moment of Adam’s sin. Eternal death, which is everlasting separation from God and all that is good and holy, in indescribable torment.

This brings us to our final question: What is the remedy for sin? Any remedy for sin of any kind at any time must contemplate two immutable facts: 1) God is perfectly holy, and nothing less than divine perfection can please Him. 2) Man is hopelessly ruined and incapable of a single act or service of any kind that is acceptable to God. Even his repentance and prayers are polluted and defiled with self. The offering of his whole body up in death would be worthless so far as removing sin, since that would be a marred and blemished sacrifice. How much less and “good” works or penal suffering on his part.

The remedy for sin must accomplish three things: 1) It must propitiate God’s wrath. He is infinitely offended and angry with the wicked every day. @) It must satisfy divine justice. The remedy must be equal to the crime. Law must be perfectly justified. 3) It must perfectly deliver the sinner. The end of God’s redemption is full and complete salvation. It does not brook any “half-salvation” or partial deliverance or uncompleted work. All of whom He justified He glorified (Romans 8:30).

In order to satisfy this third requirement, the sinner must be rendered sinlessly perfect before God, his communion with God must be restored, and he must ultimately be brought to conform to the image of God in the Lord Jesus Christ.

With these criteria in view, it is obvious that any work toward this end must be substitutionary. The sinner is incapable of performing anything effectual to the removal of his sin. His substitute can be no less than God Himself. Only a divine offering can satisfy divine justice. The work must be finished. What God does must be complete and perfect, since man cannot of himself supply anything lacking. We do not begin in the Spirit and finish in the flesh.

For all of this, Christ, and Christ alone, is sufficient. He has entered into covenant union with us as our representative Head. His perfect obedience to the Father’s will was reckoned to our account and counted as our own. His voluntary death on the Cross judicially brought our old man to death and satisfied the penalty assessed against us, past, present and future, for all eternity. None can ever charge God’s elect with a single sin, because they have *all* been laid on Christ. As our High Priest He is our Intercessor, representing us in God’s presence instantly so that our communion with God is perpetually maintained, giving us immediate access to the Throne and acceptability in His presence. Through regeneration, infusion of spiritual life, we are made to partake literally of His holy nature, and are being transformed through progressive sanctification into His glorious likeness.

That is the God-honoring salvation that is taught in the Bible and received by all who trust in God through Jesus Christ. Let us not have it cheapened to accommodate someone’s private theories of end time events.

- C. M.

Note: Any similarities of the errors and aberrations mentioned in the foregoing to some with which the reader may be acquainted is deliberate. Any suspicions that this article is designed to expose and correct any current heresy is not only justified, but totally accurate.

- C. M.