

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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HOW THE CHURCH IS CONSTITUTED (Part II)

W *hatever 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.' 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."¹

I. CONDITION OF MEN (v.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 Kings James Version) 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. Col. 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.
- B. **The Sphere** - *Transgressions* (PARAPTOMASIN) 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 wrong doing.

II. THE CONVERSATION OF MEN (v.2a)

I am resorting to the Old King James Version 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 PERIEPATESATE, 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 AIONA 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 TES 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."²
- C. **His Subjects** - *The sons of disobedience* (TOIS HUIOIS TES 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.

- A. **Man's Habitation** - Paul declares that *all of us* (without exception) *lived* (ANESTRAPHEMEN, literally to conduct one's life). The word has special reference to man's social behavior, whereas the word used in verse 2, PERIPATEO, 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 EPITHUMIAIS TES 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* (TON 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* (ORGES, 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: "No man," said the saintly Robert Murray McCheyne, "ever yet knew the badness of his own heart. We are sailing over a sea the depths of which we have never fathomed."³ The Apostle's language here is not hyperbole. This is God's assessment of our natural condition, and it is one that renders every person hopelessly lost. We stand desperately in need of mercy (which we do not deserve). It is only by embracing the cross of Christ that we find mercy. It is because Christ underwent our judgment that we find mercy at the cross. This is the gospel and there is no other.⁴

ENDNOTES

1. C. Plantinga, Jr. *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Eerdmans, 1996), p.x
2. J.A. Robinson, *Commentary On Ephesians, Exposition of the Greek Text* (rpt. Kregel, 1979), p. 49
3. *Sermons of Robert Murray McCheyne* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1972), p. 34
4. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Chap. XI, sec. III) says, "Christ, by his obedience and death, did fully discharge the debt of all those that are thus justified, and did make a proper, real, and full satisfaction to his Father's justice in their behalf. "