

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE SINFULNESS OF SIN AND THE ATONEMENT OF CHRIST

G. C. Berkouwer observed that, “The man who listens to the biblical indictment of sin as enmity and rebellion against God – as transgression, pride and apostasy – can only take seriously what Scripture says concerning the wrath of God. But we must not forget that this subject has been the occasion for an animated and even emotional debate. Is there any reason to speak of God’s *wrath*; or does this very subject do violence to the concept of *God*? Should we set the Old Testament against the New and find in the Old the traits of a *wrathful God* while preserving for the New the *God of love*? This approach has quite frequently been made. Men have discovered the reality of God’s wrath by pointing to Jesus Christ as the *revelation of his love*. The purpose of the advent is then seen as the elimination of all human misconceptions concerning the reality of God’s wrath and the disclosure of the love of God as diffused among all men. Thus the wrath of God is preempted by his love. The strongest *proof* of this idea is found in the first letter of John: *God is love* (4:9, 16). Now it is striking how many difficulties and problems remain when we go in this direction. All of these are tied together with the fact that the biblical witness warns us so emphatically of God’s wrath. In the Old Testament, but also in the New, we find this unassailable accent. If we look at the very heart of the Gospel (the Gospel of *joy!*) and the very context of an invitation to faith, we already hear the piercing ring of Christ’s words: *He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him* (John 3:36). Here the Gospel does not shift its course and flow in a different direction. John the Baptist already, pointing to the Lamb of God, specifically mentioned in his preaching of the Kingdom the reality of *wrath*. When he saw the Pharisees with their tainted motives presenting themselves for baptism he reprimanded them: *You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?* (Matt. 3:7). He who refuses to reckon with God’s wrath must find the New Testament completely incomprehensible. But more than that; for the scriptural injunctions on God’s wrath do not suggest an original or primitive conception which may soon be overcome. They indicate, instead, the relation between the sin of man and the wrath of God. Man, in his intransigence and impenitence, *stores up wrath* for the *day of wrath* and the final revelation of the righteous judgment of God (Rom. 2:5; cf. 2 Pet. 3:7). Yet there is also the sound of jubilee: *Jesus delivers us from the wrath to come* (1 Thess. 1:10). The Gospel neither eliminates our human *ignorance* nor takes away our human *misunderstanding*; at the same time, our broken communion is restored and our lostness is reversed in a new and surprising *being found*. Divine forgiveness is never, in Scripture, an indifferent love or a matter of God’s *being blind*. It is rather a turning from real *wrath* to real *grace*.”¹

- I. **THE REALITY OF SIN.** The Bible presents sin by way of major concepts, principally lawlessness and faithlessness, expressed in an array of images: sin is the missing of a target, a wandering from the path, a straying from the fold. Sin is a hard heart and a stiff neck. Sin is blindness and deafness. It is both the overstepping of a line and the failure to reach it – both transgression and shortcoming. Sin is a beast crouching at the door. In sin, people attack or evade or neglect their divine calling. These and other images suggest deviance: even when it is familiar, sin is never normal. Sin is disruption of created harmony and then

resistance to divine restoration of that harmony. Above all, sin disrupts and resists the vital human relation to God, and it does all this disrupting and resisting in a number of intertwined ways. Sinful life, as Geoffrey Bromiley observes, is a partly depressing, partly ludicrous caricature of genuine human life.²

II. **DEFINITIONS AND STATEMENT OF THE ISSUE.** Robert Lewis Dabney, one of the noted Presbyterian theologians of the 19th century, noted: “The standard which distinguishes between righteousness and sin is the perceptive will of a holy God. This legislative prerogative belongs to him by right of his moral perfections, omniscience and righteous ownership of us as our Maker, Preserver, and Redeemer. Our righteousness is our intelligent and hearty compliance with that will. Our sin is our conscious and spontaneous discrepancy therefrom (1 John iii. 4). The badness of evilness expressed in any sin (and usually increased by it) is the attribute or subjective quality of the sinning agent. **Potential guilt** is the ill-desert, or merit of punishment, attaching to the transgressor by reason of his sin. This concept is not identical with that judgment and sentiment of disapprobation which sin awakens in the conscience, though it springs immediately out of it. Where we judge that an agent has sinned, we also judge that he has made himself worthy of penalty; that his sin deserves suffering, and this is a necessary and universal part of the moral intuition whose rise he occasions in us. Such is potential guilt. **Actual guilt** (*reatus*) is *obligation ad poenam ex peccato*, the debt of penalty to law arising out of transgression. It is the penal enactment of the lawgiver which ascertains and fixes this guilt. Hence, under a lawgiver who was less than omniscient and all perfect, there might be sin, evil attribute and potential guilt, while yet the actual guilt was absent, because the penal statute defining it did not exist. It thus appears that while evilness or sinfulness is an attribute, actual guilt (*reatus*) is not an attribute but a relation. It is a personal relation between a sinning agent and the sovereign will which legislates the penal statute. Now, when the Scriptures and theology speak of penal imputation or substitution, it is this relation only which is transferred or counted over from the sinning person to his substitute. We do not dream of a similar transfer of personal acts, or of the personal attributes expressed in such acts. Now let none exclaim that these are the mere subtleties of abstraction. They are the most practical distinctions. They are recognized, and must be recognized, in the civil and criminal laws of men as much as in the government of God. Readers must observe that in sacred Scripture the word *sin* is often used by metonymy where the concept intended is that of actual guilt.”³

III. **THE MISSION OF THE SON** (Galatians 4:1-7). Paul has been arguing that the Law acted as a preparatory instrument. I want you to notice how the Apostle develops his case in light of God’s program. It has design and purpose. The expression, “when the time had fully come,” (verse 4, NIV), “when the fullness of time had come” (ESV), indicates that the divine program of the ages is ultimately under the sovereign oversight of God the Father. He *determines* the exact time and circumstances under which the Son shall enter human history to accomplish the Father’s will.

A. **He was Sent by Divine Commission.** The majestic statement *God sent forth His son* is filled with doctrinal content. The verb *sent forth* (*exapesteilen*) suggests the fact the Lord Jesus came out from God Himself and must, “in view of the apostle’s belief in the pre-existence of Jesus as set forth in 1 Corinthians 8:6; Philippians 2:6ff; Colossians 1:15, 16, and of the parallelism of verse 6, be interpreted as having reference to the sending of the Son from his preexistent state into the world.”⁴ Notice that He is called God’s Son (not His child); He was sent as *the Son* (Isaiah 9:6; John 1:1).

- B. ***The Manner in Which He Came.*** He was *made* (KJV) or *born* (ESV) of a woman. He possessed true humanity. In this one passage we therefore have a clear reference to the uniqueness of Christ. We have the preexistent Son sent forth from God, assuming true humanity in order to make redemption.
- C. ***The Condition in Which He Came.*** He was born under the Law. This relates Him to the Law of Moses (Luke 2:21, 22, 27; Matthew 3:15, 5:17). This pertains to Christ's *active* obedience to the Law. He perfectly fulfilled all that the Law required. "The obedience of Christ," wrote John Flavel, "hath a double relation, *relation legalis justitiae*, the relation of a legal righteousness, and adequate and exactly proportioned price. And it hath also in it *ratio superlegalis meriti*, the relation of a merit over and beyond the law."⁵
- D. ***The Purpose of His Coming.*** There are two stated purposes of His coming (note the two *hina* purpose clauses).
1. *Redemption.* He came to *redeem* (*exagorazo*, to buy back). Note that Paul does *not* speak of this in terms of *conditionality*. Christ did not come merely to make redemption a possibility, but He actually redeemed. Paul's language is that of *certainty* (cf. Galatians 1:4; 3:13).
 2. *Adoption.* Christ does more than just rescue slaves – He makes them sons! The verb *receive* in verse 5 (*apolabomen*, literally *to get from*) is an intensive one and describes the receiving in full of the status of Sonship.

IV. ***BLESSED OR CURSED?*** (Galatians 3:10-19). "?!*#?! Such is the popular conception of a curse –" writes Michael J. Glodo, "the mere utterance of profanities. While our world has perfected the art of profanity, cursing is unappreciated."⁶ In some parts of the country, hurling crude and profane epithets at people (and things) is colloquially called "cussing." Our English word *curse* comes down to us from an Anglo-French term, *curuz*, which meant *wrath*. Thus, to curse someone was to call down the wrath of God on them. It was the invoking of a divine imprecation. To curse someone meant that they were accursed by God. Cursing, as you can see, involved some theological understanding! I doubt if many people who flippantly use words like *hell* and *damn* (especially when this last word is divinely intensified) are self-consciously aware of the Biblical imagery their language actually involves. Paul's argument in the third chapter of Galatians graphically unfolds what is really involved when someone is said to be *curse*d by God. The Apostle is forcefully arguing his case for justification by faith alone by first pointing the Galatians back to their own salvation experience (3:1-5), and then by appealing to the case of Abraham (3:6-9), and finally by pointing to what the Law really does – curse.

- A. ***The Condemnation of the Law*** (3:10-12). Suppose the Judaizers had responded to Paul's appeal to Abraham by saying, "Well, Abraham's case is different. He came *before* the Law. Now that we have the Law, things are different." No, declares Paul, it is *impossible* to be justified by the Law. He supports his case by appealing to Deuteronomy 27:6; 21:23, and Habakkuk. There are *four* specific things that should drive every legalist out of his false sense of security:
1. The Law must be *continually* kept.
 2. *Every* aspect of the Law must be kept (cf. James 2:10).
 3. *All* of the Law (moral, civil and ceremonial) must be kept.
 4. The Law must be *done*. There is no stopping short of 100% doing (cf. Acts 15:10).

B. *The Curse of Christ* (3:13). If the Law brings only a curse, how can faith lift the curse? How can the blessing of Abraham be obtained? Paul returns again to the redeeming work of Christ (cf. 1:4; 3:1). It is Christ, not our faith, that saves, and He does this by bearing the curse of the law.

1. The term “redeemed” is from the word *exagorazō*, commonly used in buying a slave’s freedom (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23; Revelation 5:9). He delivers us from the penalty of the broken law. “At issue here is satisfaction of violated justice, as is evident from the phrase: *from the curse of the law.*”⁷
2. The method of redemption is *substitution*. He became a curse *for* us, that is *in our stead*.

NOTE: There is in the Greek text a graphic picture of what Christ has done as captured in Paul’s use of prepositions. We were *under* (*hupo*) a curse (cf. Romans 3:9, *under* sin). Christ purchased us *out from under* (*ek hupo*) the curse of the law. He did this by becoming a curse *over* (*huper*) us, and so between us and the overhanging curse which fell on Him.⁸ That Christ became a curse is inferred from Deuteronomy 21:23.

CONCLUSION: The Lord Jesus became accursed for His people. He hung on the cross as a condemned criminal (Philippians 2:5-11). The cross emphasizes the curse of God, and so a curse becomes a blessing. Christ Jesus has secured the blessing of heaven to earth, and this includes justification (3:8), life (3:11), and the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 9:15). The last three words of 3:14 are emphatic. The blessing comes by faith alone, quite apart from the Law. Philip Bliss’ great hymn, *Man of Sorrows! What a Name*, captures the essence of this glorious truth with these words, “Bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place condemned he stood, sealed my pardon with his blood: Hallelujah! what a Savior!”

ENDNOTES

¹ G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies In Dogmatics: Sin* (Eerdmans, 1971), p. 354.

² Cornelius Plantings, *Not The Way It’s Supposed to be: A Breviary of Sin* (Eerdmans, 1995), p. 5.

³ R. L. Dabney, *Christ Our Penal Substitute* (rpt. Sprinkle Publications, 1978), p. 10.

⁴ E. DeWitt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (T&T Clark, 1977), p. 217.

⁵ *The Works of John Flavel* I (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), p. 189. Norman Shepherd rejects any notion of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ, contending that this reduces or diminishes the need for repentance and obedience on our part! Notice that our imperfect obedience is considered instrumental in Shepherd’s scheme. He argues that it is our faithfulness (and obedience), rather than the righteous obedience of Christ, that is the basis for our justification. His objective is to give substantial weight to the obedient life of the Christian (sanctification) and thereby satisfy the concerns that Roman Catholicism had with the Reformer’s doctrine of SOLA FIDE. Cf. his “Justification by Works in Reformed Theology” in *Backbone of The Bible: Covenant in Contemporary Perspective*, ed. P. A. Sandlin (Covenant Media Press, 2004), p. 119.

⁶ M. J. Glodo, “The Blessings and Cursings: Deuteronomy Chapter 28,” *Tabletalk*, May, 1995, p. 12.

⁷ H. N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), p. 126.

⁸ Cf. the excellent discussion by A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures In the New Testament* IV (Nashville: Broadman, 1931), p. 294.