

OUR STRUGGLE: THE POWER OF SIN

Jerry Truex; January 9, 2011

A. Introduction

We continue our series on human beings in theological and biblical perspective. Today we will focus on humanity's struggle with sin.

B. Original Sin

1. Protestant view

First, I'd like to address what is called "original sin" from a Protestant perspective. Following Augustine (345-430), Protestants have taught that humans inherit the sin nature, which is called, "original sin."

It goes like this:

- 1) God created perfect human beings.
- 2) However, Adam, the first person, sinned. He disobeyed God.
- 3) Adam's sin affected the entire human race. From that point on, all humans were born with a corrupt nature or "total depravity," meaning that every aspect of a person—body, soul, intellect, etc.—was fallen including the will to respond to God.
- 4) This means that all humans not only inherited the sin from Adam, but also Adam's guilt so that all humans were under condemnation.
- 5) Calvin wrote: "Even infants ... carry their condemnation along with them from the mother's womb ... they have the seed enclosed within them."¹

If we follow this line of thought—that all are born with inherited sin—you can see why traditional protestant anthropology centers on the idea of sin and Christ's atonement for sin. To the question, "What does it mean to be human?" Protestants answer, "Humans are sinners!"

2. Anabaptist view

When we look at the Anabaptist view, there is a sharp contrast. Anabaptists generally rejected the notion of "original sin" as articulated by the Reformers. If you recall, last week I argued that the structure of human beings was a holistic unity with three aspects—body, soul, and spirit.

¹John Calvin, *Institutes*, Book II, Ch. 1, 8.

Key Anabaptist thinkers of the sixteenth century, including Balthasar Hubmairer and Leonhard Schiemer,² taught that people have body, soul, and spirit.

In their view, the flesh/body was fallen and worthless. The soul was caught between the flesh/body and the spirit, and was, in the natural state, blind and uncomprehending about God and divine things. So the Fall affected the flesh and the soul. However, the spirit of a person, according to Hubmairer, “has remained utterly upright and intact before, during, and after the Fall.”³

This means that Anabaptist accepted a limited view of “original sin”—we all have an inclination to sin. But generally, Anabaptists rejected the term and certainly rejected the Protestant view of “total depravity”—that every aspect of a person, body, soul, emotions, and intellect was fallen. Like Eastern Orthodox Christians, Anabaptists believed that they retained the “image of God” (freedom and reason), but they needed to recover the “likeness of God” (holiness and immortality) through the process of sanctification or deification (*theōsis*).

Of course, Anabaptists believed that even humans are poor and miserable sinners, but that each person inevitably and invariably sinned. But each person was responsible for his or her own sin and not the sin of parents or ancestors (Ezek. 18:20). Moreover, humans are not “total depraved,” because their spirit was able to cooperate with God’s grace.

“If we surrender ourselves to God in childlike obedience, then we are truly free and able to do God’s will, and thus we become disciples of Christ.”⁴

According to Friedmann, this is the general Anabaptist teaching found nearly everywhere in Anabaptist writings, including Grebel, Marpeck, Hutter, Menno Simons, and many others.⁵

The spirit of a person has not been spoiled by sin, and the soul can be revived or restored through the Law/Word of God.

² Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004) 468-75.

³ Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism: An Interpretation* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1973) 59.

⁴ Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism: An Interpretation* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1973) 60.

⁵ *Idid.*

Psalm 19:7. The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving [restoring] the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple. (NRSV)

James 1:18 In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. (NRSV)

This is not Pelagianism. A British monk, Pelagius (354-440) taught that humans were not affected by Adam's sin and therefore were perfectly able to fulfill the divine law without any help from God. No grace was needed. Pelagianism was considered a heresy and Anabaptists have been accused of Pelagianism.

However, Anabaptists are not Pelagian. Anabaptists affirm the need for divine grace. The spirit and will of a person depend on God's power or grace. Grace and human freedom are manifested simultaneously and cannot be conceived apart from each other. Like Eastern Orthodox Christians, Anabaptists have assumed a co-operation between the divine and human, "a synergy of two wills."⁶

This is why Anabaptists have not seen it necessary to baptize infants. Infants are not born with original guilt. They are born into sinful human social structures. Inevitably and invariably humans all sin. But they are not born as condemned sinners. Children are born innocent.

Franck wrote: "Nearly all Anabaptists consider children to be of pure and innocent blood and they do not consider original sin as a sin which of itself condemns both children and adults."⁷ The only person who is condemned for Adam's sin is the one who accepts this sin and makes it his or her own!

C. The Struggle with Sin

1. OT: Sin as rebellion against God

In the OT, sin is primarily turning away from Yahweh toward other gods.⁸ Turning to other gods was inseparable from adopting the social patterns, values, and behaviors which these gods represented. The people of Israel frequently turned to Ba'al, Isis, and a host of other deities to meet their needs, rather than trusting Yahweh.

⁶ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (New York: St. Vladimir's Press, 1976) 198.

⁷ Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism: An Interpretation* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1973) 63.

⁸ Thomas N. Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, Vol. II (Scottsdale: Herald, 1987)150.

Similarly, we turn to the gods of entertainment, violence, pleasure, addictive substances and whatever else is salvific for us.

Thomas Finder writes: This type of sin is often called transgression (*chattath*) and rebellion (*peshar*), "it is not merely individual disobedience to Yahweh, nor is it simply against general, eternal statutes. Sin is participation in collective rejection of Yahweh's concrete covenant and adherence to opposed religious and social practices. Such adherence ... brings one under the dominion of forces which, while promising success and security, actually enslave their adherents."⁹

***Gelassenheit* (self-abandonment)**

If sin is rebellion against God, turning away from Yahweh to other gods that promise success and security to the fallen flesh and soul, then we have to learn one thing above all: The art of self-abandonment. The Anabaptists called it *Gelassenheit*, which can be translated "yieldedness," "resignation," "submission," and "non-attachment."

How can we stop sinning? Stop rebellion against God? The Anabaptists would answer, when we follow Christ by means of *Gelassenheit*; when we yield to God by imitating Christ. This is following Christ along the narrow path of (i) renouncing the false self and its attachments to pleasure, power, and security, and (ii) opening oneself to loving others as Christ loved. This is to "take up our cross daily" (Lk. 9:23).

2. Jesus: Sin as clinging to prestige, power, and security

I believe that Jesus' ministry exposed sin as clinging to prestige, power, and security. Think about it. Jesus' primary work was to establish the kingdom of God. The Gospels reveal the Kingdom of God as a sociopolitical entity where God sat on the throne and not Caesar. Unlike Caesar's Empire, the Kingdom of God includes people from different nations, races, classes, and sexes.

Inaugurating the Kingdom of God required two things:

- (i) Reversing the ordinary power structures of our world and

⁹ Thomas N. Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, Vol. II (Scottsdale: Herald, 1987)150-1.

(ii) Developing distinct social practices, such as worshiping God, sharing *agapē*-meals, fairly distributing the wealth, and caring for all people (including the marginalized) without distinction.

Of course, Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God aroused anger and resistance from the political and religious status quo. The way of Jesus threatened the prestige, power, and security of many people, but especially the ruling powers. This provides a clue for what constitutes sin in the face of the emerging Kingdom of God.

The desire and straining for visible prestige becomes a major dimension of sin, if the way of Jesus is service and humility, including his willingness to endure obscurity, shame, and misunderstanding.

The violent use of power to promote one's self, ethnic group, or nation, becomes a major dimension of sin, if the way of Jesus is *agapē*, the non-coercive energy of love for all people.

The obsession with attaining security, especially at the expense of other people, becomes a major dimension of sin, if the way of Jesus is dependence on God, an openness to God's future eschatological Kingdom.

Jesus' ministry suggests that "it is chiefly through strivings for prestige, power, and security that the demonic power of sin becomes operative among humans."¹⁰ This is not to say that all forms of prestige, power, and security are sinful. But they are sinful insofar as they lead to the adherence to institutions, ideologies, attitudes, or persons that conflict with the Reign of God.

3. Paul: Sin as Power

Rom. 6:12-13. ¹² Therefore, do not let sin (*hamartia*) exercise dominion in your mortal bodies (*soma*), to make you obey their passions. ¹³ No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. (NRSV)

Rom. 6:12-13. ¹² Μὴ οὖν βασιλευέτω ἡ ἁμαρτία ἐν τῷ θνητῷ ὑμῶν σώματι εἰς τὸ ὑπακούειν ταῖς ἐπιθυμίαις αὐτοῦ, ¹³ μηδὲ παριστάνετε τὰ μέλη ὑμῶν ὅπλα ἀδικίας τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ, ἀλλὰ παραστήσατε ἑαυτοὺς τῷ θεῷ ὡσεὶ ἐκ νεκρῶν ζῶντας καὶ τὰ μέλη ὑμῶν ὅπλα δικαιοσύνης τῷ θεῷ.

¹⁰ Thomas N. Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, Vol. II (Scottsdale: Herald, 1987)153.

For Paul, the fundamental choice lies between yielding one's body to SIN or to righteousness (Rom 6:12-13). Both SIN and righteousness are personified; for Paul, they are cosmic forces struggling for dominion. As SIN spreads its power through the human race, it brings people into bondage and under the reign of death (Rom. 5:12ff).

Romans 7 is very telling. In Romans 7, Paul uses the first person "I" to represent the struggle and bondage of every person. The "I" appears to be on both the side of SIN and on the side of righteousness. The "I" is actually doing evil, but the "I" is also disapproving of it. Paul is "body" (*sōma*) and is thus intrinsically incorporated in broad solidarity with SIN as power and the forces and structures that SIN dominates. However, he is also "soul" (*psychē*) which longs to transcend the limitations and bondage.

So, while sin is something that Paul as "body" (*soma*) yields to, it is also a power that holds him as "soul" (*psychē*) captive. Only when we get to Romans 8 do we find the way of salvation or deliverance from SIN as power—Union with Christ and the Spirit.

Rom. 8:3. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,

Rom. 8:10. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. (NRSV)

Rom. 8:3. Τὸ γὰρ ἀδύνατον τοῦ νόμου ἐν ᾧ ἠσθένει διὰ τῆς σαρκός, ὁ θεὸς τὸν ἑαυτοῦ υἱὸν πέμψας ἐν ὁμοιώματι σαρκὸς ἁμαρτίας καὶ περὶ ἁμαρτίας κατέκρινεν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν ἐν τῇ σαρκί,

Rom. 8:10. εἰ δὲ Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν, τὸ μὲν σῶμα νεκρὸν διὰ ἁμαρτίαν τὸ δὲ πνεῦμα ζωὴ διὰ δικαιοσύνην.

Paul claims that Christ defeated SIN as power in the flesh. Christ did what the law could not do. The law could not defeat SIN, but along with the flesh and the body, the law itself became enslaved to SIN. In contrast, Christ overcame SIN as power in a human body, in human flesh. In this way, Christ defeated the cosmic power of SIN and now that victory becomes the potential victory for all in whom Christ indwells and empowers. Christ indwells those who identify with him in baptism (Rom 6:1-11), present themselves as instruments of righteousness (Rom 6:12-13), and are united

with him in life (Gal 2:20). Victory over SIN as power is a real possibility for those who follow Christ.

C. Conclusions

Today I have argued four points:

1. Anabaptists generally believe that a person is free to respond to the Word and grace of God. Thus, the doctrines of "inherited sin" and "total depravity" are rejected.
2. Anabaptists generally believe infants are born innocent in grace without condemnation; thus infants do not need baptism. However, inevitably and invariably all people sin and make Adam's sin and his condemnation their own.
3. Sin is variously described in the Bible. In the OT, sin is transgression and rebellion against God and God's law, and this makes people miserable. In the Gospels, sin is clinging to prestige, power, and security instead of God, and this too makes people miserable. In Paul's letters, SIN is a cosmic power that enslaves human beings, the root of human misery.
4. "Thanks be to God" Christ overcame the power of SIN. When we submit to Christ (*Gelassenheit*) through faithful obedience and obedient faith, we are united to Christ and his power and released from SIN's bondage and sins condemnation (Rom 8:1). We move from misery to the joy of Christ.