

## Chapter 3

# Man as Sinner

### 1. The Task

As the message of redemption is the centre of the Biblical message so also it contains, as a negative presupposition, the knowledge of sin. In the Bible “sin” does not mean something moral, but it denotes man’s need of redemption, the state of the “natural man”, seen in the light of his divine destiny. Just as man can only be understood in the light of the divine Creation, so also sin can only be rightly understood in the light of the Christian revelation. Here too we must make a clear distinction between the fact itself and the light in which it is perceived. We can only see what sin is, what man is as sinner, in the light of the Christian revelation, which effects the transition from the state of “being-a-sinner” to that of “being redeemed”; here, however, we are not dealing with *this* change, because we are not thinking (at the moment) of the justified sinner, but of the sinner in need of redemption. Only thus can we go further, and understand that “justification” is both a divine gift and a new creation. We are here concerned with the sinner as he is before the process of justification, even though we can only understand this truth because we have already been “justified”, so that in its light we can see what man is without this light.

Here once more we take our stand on the theological principle that we must start from the witness of the New Testament, and not from that of the Old. There is perhaps no part of the Old Testament which impresses us so directly as a divine revelation as the story of the Fall in Gen. 3. We can never brood long enough over this marvellous story, in order to learn what sin is. In spite of this, however, we are not tied to this narrative, and we must not make it our starting-point, any more than when we were considering the Doctrine of Creation we had to start from the idea of the “Six Days” of Creation. In principle we learn what sin is and what the Fall means, from the *New Testament*; not first of all from the Old Testament narrative, which, like the whole story of Adam, implies a view of time and space which has passed away, and therefore cannot be utilized without falsifying the whole of our present view

of time and space. If we take our stand on the principle that Christ, the Incarnate Word of God, is *the principium cognoscendi* of the whole work of dogmatics, then in our understanding of Sin and the Fall—regardless of the whole question of the scientific view of the universe—we are quite naturally set free from bondage to the Old Testament narrative, without having to abandon any truth we can learn from it. Two things will then become evident: (a) that the narrative contained in the third chapter of Genesis has had very little influence upon the *doctrine* of Sin in the Bible—whether in the Old Testament or the New; (b) that so many of the intellectual and theological difficulties connected with this question have been caused—inevitably—by its mistaken relation with the myth-narrative in Genesis.

On the other hand, only when we accept this strictly Christocentric basis of the doctrine of the Fall, do we see what a mistake it is to think that because the concept of the Fall is traditionally connected with this myth, we must therefore renounce this concept itself; we also see that this renunciation has had a most disastrous effect on Christian doctrine as a whole. Apart from the doctrine of the Fall it is impossible to understand Sin as the presupposition of the New Testament message of Redemption. Only a *fallen* humanity needs a Redeemer. The statements of the New Testament only apply to a fallen humanity; for these statements describe the human situation before, and apart from, the redeeming Act of Jesus Christ. Every conception of Sin which tries to establish itself without this mythical idea of a Fall, proves, on closer examination, to be an optimistic re-interpretation of the actual fact of sin, which makes sin either a fact of nature, or merely the moral concern of the individual.

## 2. Sin as Rebellion

Even if we had never heard of the *story* of the Fall of Man, and if we could leave out the few passages in the Bible in which reference is made to this narrative, still the truth would dawn upon us that sin is apostasy, rebellion. The story of the Fall is nowhere else mentioned in the whole of the Old Testament, and in the whole of the New Testament it is only mentioned twice: in Rom. 5: 12 ff. where it is dealt with in detail, and in 1 Tim. 2:14, where it

is only mentioned casually, without any theological explanation. On the other hand, in many passages in the Bible we come upon the idea that sin is a “falling-away” from God, or rebellion. At the basis of this conception of sin there is always the idea of an event which *reversed* something. What this means comes out most clearly by way of contrast.

The conception of sin in Greek philosophy, which accompanies the whole of the development of Western thought, and to a large extent influences it, is this: that evil is due to the life of the senses; that is, it is based upon the fact that the sense instincts of man paralyse the will, or at least hinder or suppress it. Evil is thus due to the dual nature of man; it springs, from the outset, from his twofold constitution. It is indeed the fault of the spirit that it cannot master the natural instincts, that it cannot bring them under better control, that the higher element in man proves too weak to keep the lower element in hand; but evil itself is this “lower” element, the natural “double” of the spirit. If this evil is to be brought into relation to time it has to be described as that which is “not yet good”, or has “not yet reached the plane of spirit”, or is “not yet” dominated by spirit.

The Biblical view of sin, however, replaces the phrase “not yet” by “no longer”. Sin is not the primary phenomenon, it is not the beginning, but it is a turning-away from the beginning, the abandonment of the origin, the break with that which God had given and established. Wherever the Prophets reproach Israel for its sin, this is the decisive conception: “You have fallen away, you have strayed, you have been unfaithful. You have forsaken God; you have broken the Covenant, you have left Him for other gods. You have turned your backs upon Him!” Similarly, the Parables of Jesus speak of sin as rebellion, as leaving God. The Prodigal Son leaves home, goes away from the Father, turns his back upon him. The Wicked Husbandmen usurp the master’s rights and wrongly seize the land which they only held on a rental. They are actually rebels, usurpers. The Lost Sheep has strayed away from the flock and from the Shepherd; it has gone astray. We might of course reply that here there is always the presupposition of an historical covenant which had been made between God and His people, and that the “falling away” really refers to this historical beginning, and therefore applies to Israel alone.

This view is so far correct in that the prophetic summons

to repentance does apply to Israel first of all, and even Jesus is primarily appealing to the people of Israel. But behind all this lies the view that the situation is the same for all other peoples, excepting that possibly their guilt is less, because, in point of fact, they have never known God in the way that Israel has known Him. Hence it is not surprising that in the passage where Paul proclaims his own doctrine of the Fall (Rom. 1: 19 ff.) without mentioning the well-known story of the Fall he describes the Fall of all men as a kind of blasphemy, an act in which that which belongs to God is given to others; nor is it surprising that (equally without reference to Gen. 3) he takes an Old Testament statement and intensifies it, in order to express the truth that the “mind” of the flesh is enmity against God.<sup>1</sup> Sin is apostasy, rebellion, because it is not the primary element, but the reversal of the primary element. The primary element is the creation in the Word of God, but the second is the contradiction of this creation. Sin is not a “not yet”, but a “no longer”. Therefore it is not sensuality, nor weakness, but defiance, rebellion.

### **3. Sin as Apostasy**

Almost all non-Biblical definitions of sin—if not all—are impersonal. Evil is “something”. It is a part of our being, of our nature, or it is a negatively moral act—that is, a non-moral act, an injury committed by something or someone. It may be the transgression of a law. But in any case it is not directly, and above all not exclusively, related to God. “Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned”<sup>2</sup>—that is the essential, and the exclusive view of the Bible. It is thus that sin is described in the story of the Fall. Sin is disobedience to God, and is due to distrust. Evil, understood as sin, is a change in man’s relation to God: it is the break in communion with God, due to distrust and defiance. The story of the Fall reveals the fundamental cause for this breach in communion: the desire to be “as God”. Man wants to be on a level with God, and in so doing to become independent of Him.

Sin is like a fire which is kindled by the divine destiny of man. Actually, man’s divine destiny means being “like God”, freedom. Man is intended to be free, to be like God; but now man wants to have both apart from dependence upon God.

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1. Rom. 8: 7; Gen. 6: 5.      2. Ps. 51: 4f..

The deepest root of sin therefore is not the senses—they are, at most, occasions of sin—but the spiritual defiance of one who understands freedom as independence, and thus only regards himself as free when he “feels that he owes his existence to himself alone” (Marx). Sin is emancipation from God, giving up the attitude of dependence, in order to try to win full independence, which makes man equal with God. The nature of sin is shown by Jesus in the son who asks his father for his inheritance in order that he may leave home and become “independent”.

Certainly, not everyone who sins is aware of this deepest motive. The ordinary man, and man in general, is not capable of such depths. This does not alter the fact, however, that this is the hidden root of what he does when he sins, although he is not aware of it. His sin is deeper than his awareness of it. The deepest wish that he has is deeper than his consciousness. He needs the revelation of Christ, and the knowledge which this gives of his divine destiny in creation, in order to be able to perceive this falling away from his true destiny; for the real heart of the question lies here: in man's falling away from God. In Jesus' parable the sinner is the rebellious husbandman, who plays the part of the owner, who thus denies his responsibility in order to gain for himself complete, unconditional freedom.<sup>3</sup> Sin is throwing off restraint, denial of responsibility, hence emancipation from that which makes us responsible, in whose Word we have both our freedom and our bondage. Sin is the desire for the autonomy of man, therefore, in the last resort, it is the denial of God and self-deification: it is getting rid of the Lord God, and the proclamation of self-sovereignty. The θεὸς παντοκράτωρ is replaced by Ἐγὼ αὐτοκράτωρ. Hence it is “enmity against God”.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4. Sin as a “Total Act”

When we regard sin—in the light of the divine destiny shown us in Christ—as the effort to achieve absolute freedom, this implies that we are here concerned with a decisive act, which determines the whole of existence. Sin then means the creation of a whole new conception of life, a new “state” of life. It means that man declares his whole existence to be “free”; the whole man shakes off all the bonds which tie him to God. The son severs his relation with his father, and “stands upon

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3. Matt. 21: 33 ff..

4. Rom. 8: 7.

his own feet”!<sup>5</sup> The meaning of sin, by its very nature, affects the whole, because it aims at making the whole man “free”. Once more we must make a distinction between the psychological and the concrete aspects. This totality, which is of the essence of sin, is rarely conscious, just as in a political revolution most of the revolutionaries are not altogether clear about what is going on. But the fact remains: it is with this total aspect that we are concerned; this is the meaning of sin.

That is one point: the *Telos* of sin is totality. But the other point is this: the *Origin* of sin. Sin is the total act of the person. This again we can see most plainly when we look at the opposite. The non-Christian understanding of sin is characterized by its partial nature. The “lower part” of man: the senses, the instincts—that is, not the whole man, the person, is made responsible for evil. This is particularly true where individual manifestations of evil are concerned. They are regarded as derived from some partial tendency or another, from some “qualities” or tendencies, from certain instincts. Evil has been disintegrated; it is no longer a whole.

We do not deny that this conception contains some elements of truth; we shall be returning later on to this aspect of individual, localized sin. First of all, however, we must establish the fact that just because we are here concerned with the *telos* of the whole person, the whole person must take responsibility. It is as a whole that the person *commits* sin; this is not due to some part of the personality. *I am a sinner*, not this or that aspect of my nature. Sin is falling away from God, therefore it is the act of the whole man. Again, this totality can only be perceived in the light of the revealed destiny of man through the divine Creation. Only from that point of view can man understand himself as a whole person, only from that standpoint does he see himself as a whole, as a unity of body, mind and spirit. The organ of the whole personality (seen as body-mind) is, as we have already seen, the heart. Hence sin comes from the heart. The *heart* of man is evil. Sin has its seat in the heart of man.<sup>6</sup> It is the Headquarters of the General Staff, not the office of some lesser official, it is the summit of the personality, the Self, which rebels against the Lord. The psychological, partial aspects of sin have a right to be considered separately, but this is only justified after the

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5. Cf. the work of André Gide entitled *L'enfant prodigue*, in which he re-tells the Parable of the Prodigal Son in the opposite sense: The son was quite right to sever his relation with his father, in order to become independent.

6. Matt. 5: 18 ff.; Rom. 1: 21; Acts 5: 3; Eph. 4: 18.

whole has been recognized. The whole is before the parts. The whole man rebels against God, *ego totus*, and in this rebellion all the individual powers of his body-mind economy are mobilized.

At this point it is instructive to look at Kant's theory of Radical Evil,<sup>7</sup> not because it is in complete agreement with the Christian view, but because it shows how an exact and unprejudiced analysis of evil comes very near to the Christian truth. Here—as elsewhere—Kant rejects the explanation of evil as due to man's nature as a sense-determined being. Evil does not consist in the fact that sense impulses are present but in the fact that man makes these into “maxims of his conduct”, by absorbing them into his will. The sense impulses as such are not evil. They only become evil when man allows himself to come under their control, when he surrenders to temptation, or rather, when he goes over to the Tempter. Hence, according to Kant, evil is the act of the whole man, that is, it is an act of the person. This is why Kant speaks of the “evil heart”. “This evil is radical because it destroys the basis of all maxims”.<sup>8</sup> Kant is able to conceive evil in its personal unity, because he understands man as a unified personality. He is able to do so, without starting from the Christian revelation, because, and in so far as, he starts from the idea of the divine Law; as soon as the idea of the divine Law gives place to the law of Reason, as soon as he once more regards the person as autonomous, as a self-legislator, then he also loses the view of radical evil.<sup>9</sup> This oscillation in Kant's thought is due to the fact that he connects the person and the freedom of man with the divine Law and not with the divine Revelation. The law is ambiguous, for it can be interpreted sometimes from the aspect of theonomy, and sometimes from that of autonomy, and for this reason the depths of evil cannot be perceived. The ultimate depth of radical evil has remained hidden from Kant. It is true that he comes as far as the statement: *ego totus*. It is true that he recognizes empirically a *nos toti*, but the unity of both has remained hidden from him. It can only be perceived from the standpoint of Christ.

## 5. Sin as Universal

It is not very difficult to admit that “all men are sinners”. We find statements of this kind everywhere, even in pre-Christian

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7. *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*, Pt. 1.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 37 (Reclam.).

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 47 ff..



paganism. The phrase of Horace *vitiis nemo sine nascitur* has several parallels. The universality of sin as a numerical totality, as *nos toti*, is far more acceptable than a theory of Radical Evil, in the sense just outlined. Yes, we can even go a step further, without meeting very serious opposition: Evil which individuals commit, forms a whole, a “kingdom of evil” (Ritschl). Even a complete Pelagian like Ritschl made this statement and commented on it with much seriousness and acuteness. Indeed experience shows us daily how evil “infects” society, spreading from one person to another, and perhaps involving them in it against their will. The power of the “infection” is as great in the moral sphere as it is in physical epidemics. We ought to be aware of the fact—and to remind others of it—that evil spreads to institutions and conditions, “infects” them, and then breeds further evil, which, in turn “re-infects” the lives of human beings as individuals. Further, it is evident that the evil which is incorporated in social institutions, and the evil which becomes a mass phenomenon, waxes great and assumes demonic forms, which, as a rule, are not found in any individual evil. Evil which takes the shape of social wrong, or is incorporated in institutions, or as a mass phenomenon, is worse than evil in any individual form, in isolation. All this may be summed up in the idea of a “kingdom of evil”; in saying this we acknowledge our debt to Ritschl’s contribution to our thought. But all this does not yet lead us into the mystery of the Biblical idea of the *solidarity* of sin. This conception is strictly connected with the truth of the Christian revelation.<sup>10</sup>

It is only through the Christian revelation that, as we have seen, the individual can be perceived, in the full sense, as an individual *person*. “I”, the individual, stand before God, “I”, the individual, must believe. “I”, the individual, am summoned by God to decision. But this is only one aspect of the truth. The other is this: that before God we men are all one in Christ: “Adam”, Man. Sin is not only something which affects us all in the same way, but it is something which concerns us all as a whole. The one divine revelation in Jesus Christ, in which we become aware of our divine destiny in the Creation, reveals our human sin to each of us in the very same way; we are each aware of the sin of humanity, as a whole. In the Presence of Christ we cease to particularize sin and to

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10. It is accordingly only hinted at in the Old Testament. Cf. Eichrodt: *Theol. d. A.T.*, 1, pp. 200 ff., 111, pp. 90 ff..