

Why Don't You Just Be Yourself?

The Doctrine of Sin

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that. I'm just not myself today."

"She's not really a bad girl. She's just trying to find herself."

"Why don't you stop pretending you are something you aren't and just be yourself?"

"He's not even human; he's just an animal."

"You'll go to pieces if you don't pull yourself together."

"That guy thinks he's God Almighty."

All these everyday expressions we use to talk about ourselves and other people acknowledge the self-contradiction that plagues all our lives. "I am not myself" says illogically but realistically, "I am not what I am." Trying to "find" or "be" or "get hold of" myself is admitting the illogical but true predicament we are all in: I am somehow separated from my inmost, truest self. A human being by definition is not and cannot be an animal or God, yet all of us sometimes act as if we were what we are not and cannot be.

This self-contradiction that makes life so hard to understand and live is the symptom of what Christian theology calls *sin*. That is what we are going to consider in this chapter.

We have already indirectly defined what sin is. In the last chapter we learned that to be a human being means to be created in the image of God. That means: (1) life received from and lived for God in a relationship of thankful dependence and active obedience; (2) life with and for our fellow human beings in a relationship of mutual openness and help; (3) life that is self-affirming and self-fulfilling when we live in commu-

nity with God and other people. But the more concrete we become about what it means to live as human beings in the image of God, the clearer it becomes that no one (with one exception) has ever lived such a life. In various ways all of us try to live without or against God and our fellow human beings, and in so doing deny our own humanity. That is what lies behind the self-contradiction expressed in our daily recognition that we need to "be" or "find" or "get hold of" ourselves. Our basic problem, to use the strong language of the Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 5), is that though we are our true selves only in community with them we are prone to *hate* God and our neighbor.

Why do we have such trouble being ourselves—or even knowing for sure what we would be if we were? Why do we so stupidly keep trying to get loose from God and other people when our own humanity depends on living in community with them? Why do we sometimes try to live as if we were animals or to play God? These are the specific questions that concern us now.

Before we begin, we must be clear about where we stand when we speak of sin from a Christian point of view. We must take sin very seriously, but not too seriously. Contrary to the impression we are sometimes given, sin is not the main theme and central emphasis of the Christian faith. We see this both when we look at the doctrine of human beings in the image of God and when we look at the doctrine of Christ.

In the first place, from the point of view of the doctrine of human beings, we must talk with dead seriousness about ourselves as sinners, but we must not suggest that our sinfulness is the basic truth about what we are. The basic truth is not that we are sinners but that we are human beings created in God's image. Sin distorts, twists, corrupts, and contradicts this truth, but it does not change us into something other than what God created us to be. Sin is not stronger than God. In the Bible, even sinful people are still recognized as people in the image of God (Gen. 9:6; James 3:9). We may disobey God and turn against other people, but we cannot really escape them. By our very nature we are dependent upon and responsible to them. We may refuse to acknowledge, but we cannot escape, the relatedness of our lives as human beings. Sin may become "second nature" to us, but it is never really "natural." What we are "naturally" is what God created us to be. All of us are sinners, but our sinfulness is something *unnatural*.¹ That is why it is such a problem. We keep trying to be what we are not, but we can never bring it off. No matter how hard we try, no matter how we ruin our own and others' lives in the attempt, we can no more really live without God and our neighbor

than a chicken can turn itself into a duck and learn to swim. We may kill ourselves (and other people) trying, but we cannot turn ourselves from the human beings God made us into animals or substitute gods.

We can express the same thing by pointing out that in the Bible the word *sin* itself has only a negative meaning. It means departure from what is normal, to miss the real and true way, to get lost or miss the goal. Dangerous and destructive as it is, sin is not the truth about us but the distortion or denial of the truth. (It would be helpful here to look up the word *sin* in one of the theological word books.) Humanity and not inhumanity, the meaning and realization of a *right* relationship with God and fellow human beings—that is what Christians are primarily interested in.

We see the same thing from the point of view of Christian faith in Christ. It is no accident that when we confess our faith in the Apostles' Creed, sin is mentioned only when we say that we believe in the *forgiveness* of sin. Although he certainly reckoned with its reality, Jesus himself never speculated about sin as such or even explained what he understood by it. And the followers of Jesus do not "believe in" sin; we believe that "Christ died for our sins" (1 Cor. 15:3). Paul did not come preaching the bad news of sin but the good news of the Christ who loves and helps sinners (1 Cor. 2:2). We must talk about sin in order to understand the forgiveness of sin, Christ's death for our sins, and the good news that in him God was and is at work in the world to overcome and free us from sin. But sin itself is neither the first nor the last nor the most important word about who we are. We give sin too much honor when we give it such a central place in our thinking.

So if we have to talk about sin now, we do it only "in passing"—in passing from the humanity God gave us in creation to the new humanity God is restoring in us; in passing from the work of God the Creator who made us in God's own image to the work of God the Reconciler and Giver of new life who renews that image in us (Col. 3:10).

THREE BASIC FORMS OF SIN

We can best understand the meaning of sin as self-destructive breaking of relationship with God and other people by looking at some of the forms in which it appears.

Sin as Disobedience

Most Reformed confessions, following one emphasis in biblical thought,

2. This interpretation understands sin personally. It is an interpretation of Adam's and our relation to God and other people. It is the truth about us, not about an impersonal disease or defect.

3. This interpretation is also biblical. It maintains Paul's understanding of all people in connection with Adam without looking for an artificial, nonbiblical connection between us in terms of heredity. Moreover, we can accept this "representative" interpretation whether we think of Adam literally as the first man in history or as a parable about all human beings.

From one point of view, of course, the representative view of Adam has a big disadvantage. It does not explain, as does the biological view, *how or why* it is that all people, everywhere, always, do what Adam did. It simply states that this is the predicament we are all in: "You ain't got to. You can't help it." We can't blame Adam or anyone else for the fact that over and over again, in all the many variations we have discussed, we rebel against God, turn against our fellow human beings, and contradict our own true humanity. No one forces us to be Adam. But on the other hand, we can't help it. No matter how good our intentions, how often we "turn over a new leaf," we cannot love God with our whole being and our neighbor as ourselves, not even when we believe that it is the key to real self-fulfillment. As soon as we overcome sin in one form (immorality, for instance), it crops up in another (a self-righteous, unforgiving attitude toward those who are not as "good" as we).

"You ain't got to. You can't help it." That is an illogical, contradictory, impossible statement. But that's the way life is. That's the trap we are in. And the real problem is not how we can explain the intellectual puzzle of our responsibility for sin that is inevitable. The real problem is whether and how we can get out of this trap.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF SIN

We can summarize the results of this chapter and catch a glimpse of where we go from here by discussing two consequences of Adam's (our) sin: total depravity and death.

Total Depravity

According to the Reformed confessions, people who "fall" from their humanity in the image of God are "unable to do good, and prone to evil" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 7). They are "wicked, perverse and corrupt" in all their ways (Belgic Confession, Art. 14). They no longer have the

"free will" to do good but have become "slaves of sin" (Second Helvetic Confession, 9; Belgic Confession, Art. 14; Westminster Confession, 11). They are "utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil" (Westminster Confession, 6).

We must be very careful how we interpret such statements about this "total depravity" if we are not to confirm the idea of many people that Christians (especially Calvinists) are cynical, sour people who believe in sin more than in anything else, refuse to see any good anywhere, always look around suspiciously for the real evil under every apparent good, and especially denounce any good that non-Christians accomplish.

All people (including those who are moral and religious) are sinners. But that does not mean that there is no difference between a Martin Luther King Jr. or a Gandhi and an Adolf Hitler. It would be absurd to say that because according to Jesus a person who lusts is guilty of adultery, there is no difference between someone who fantasizes about it and someone who actually commits it, or that there is no difference between a man who is angry with his neighbor and a man who murders him. The extreme statements in the confessions or in Jesus' teaching do not mean that all people are monsters or devils, or that they are all equally "bad."

Nor do such statements about the inability of sinful people to do any good mean that there is no progress in history and that it is useless for Christians to cooperate with attempts to make the world a better place to live in. The abolition of slavery, the gradual realization that women are human beings and not property, the achievement of democratic forms of government, reforms to make treatment of prisoners and the mentally ill more humane—such achievements are certainly progress. Sometimes progress is made by unbelievers and "mere humanists" without the help, even despite the opposition, of Christians who said that nothing good can be accomplished in this hopelessly sinful world!

Total depravity, correctly understood, means that although both Christians and non-Christians can do much good, nothing we do is free from the corruption of sinful self-interest. It means that although there may be all kinds of progress in history, human beings themselves are monotonously the same, repeating over and over again the little drama in the garden of Eden. (We are no longer savages who throw hundreds of our enemies to the crocodiles. Now we are savages who neatly kill hundreds of thousands with weapons developed through scientific "progress.")

We are obviously "free" to do many things: to go to church or stay

home, to be honest or dishonest in our business relations, to be moral or immoral in our sexual relations, to be just or unjust in our social and political relations. And it makes a great deal of difference how we use this freedom. But "total depravity" means that we are *not* free wholeheartedly, without reservation or qualification, to love and let ourselves be loved by God and the people with whom we live. In this sense, good and bad people alike, Christians and non-Christians, we are "slaves to sin"—slaves trapped by the anxiety, division within ourselves, and self-contradictions that result from the twisted relationships in which we all live. This is a trap from which we cannot free ourselves, no matter how hard we try.

Death

Death is the second consequence of sin. "In the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen. 2:17). "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). What is meant here is not just physical death, which in itself is only a sign of the fact that we are finite creatures who do not live forever. It is the death Paul speaks of when he speaks of being "dead through trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). It is the death John refers to when he says, "Whoever does not love abides in death" (1 John 3:14). Sinful human beings—that is, human beings who do not and cannot love—are *dead*. They are dead even though they may still be walking around and acting as if they were alive. They are "dead inside," as we express it in everyday language.

To say that sinners are dead in their sins is to say that just as dead people cannot make themselves alive again, neither can we help ourselves out of our self-contradictory inability to live in real community with God, our families, our associates, and people of other races, classes, and cultural heritages.

The point of saying that the "wages of sin" is death is not so much a warning about what God will do to us, as it is a warning about the self-destruction we bring on ourselves when we contradict our humanity in God's image. Moreover, the whole Bible bears witness to the truth that God still loves and is still faithful even to people who do not love and are not faithful to God. The Bible does not end with the Genesis story of sin and the death it brings. That is only the beginning!

Proneness by nature to hate, slavery to sin, separation and alienation, living death, inhumanity—such topics have been the main theme of this chapter. But this theme is not the main theme either of the Bible or of the Christian faith. The main theme is the story of the God who brings love, freedom, righteousness, real community—genuine *humanity*—

precisely to people who are dead in and as a consequence of their sinfulness. We cannot understand the joyful main theme apart from the tragic secondary theme. But we must not peer too long into the darkness, lest we come to love darkness rather than light. It is time now that we turn again to the light that shines in our darkness.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION AND STUDY

1. Is sin "doing what comes naturally"?
2. Read Ex. 20:1-17. Stop after you read each commandment and ask yourself whether you could honestly respond with the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, "By nature I am prone to hate God and my neighbor" (Q. 5).
3. Is it legitimate to be a Christian because it "pays off" in happiness, success, and peace of mind?
4. "My husband has been a Methodist all his life, but if it comes to choosing between being a Methodist and an American, he'll be an American every time."⁴ Do you consider this a sinful statement? Why? Why not?
5. Is a loveless marriage as sinful as adultery?
6. Read Rom. 14:1-23 and 1 Cor. 8:1-13. Do these passages give us any guidance about how Christians should deal with the problem of drinking? What about sex ethics?
7. Remembering the basic meaning of sin, do you think hard work motivated by greed is less sinful than laziness motivated by irresponsibility?
8. "Hell is the home of honor, duty, justice, and the rest of the seven deadly virtues. All the wickedness on earth is done in their name."⁵ Do you agree with George Bernard Shaw?
9. "You ain't got to. You can't help it." Do you think these words of Faulkner about sin are an accurate description of the human predicament?
10. Do you think it is proper to speak of "inherited" sin? Does Paul teach it in Rom. 5:12-21?
11. Is "total depravity" a misleading description of humankind's sinfulness? Why? Why not?
12. Read 1 John 3:14-18. How would you explain John's statement "Whoever does not love abides in death"?