

# CHAPTER 10

## HAMARTIOLOGY

### A. Traditional Ideas of Original Sin

The biblical term for sin is *hamartia*, meaning to miss the mark. In the Old Testament sin was interpreted as breaking the covenant, disobeying God's commandments, or rebelling against Him. In the New Testament, sin refers to man's rebellion against the reign of God, obstructing the coming of the kingdom, or unwillingness to accept grace. According to the Bible, we are naturally sinners, rather than men who just happen to commit sins. Also, sin is a universal condition. As soon as a person is born, he comes in contact with a sinful environment. He is weighed down by the sins of the past and he is contaminated by his sinful society.

Scripture gives three interpretations of the origin of sin.

1) The oldest explanation is found in the story of the fallen angels (Gen. 6:1-4).<sup>1</sup> There we read that the sons of God came down from heaven and engaged in lustful acts with the daughters of men. This implies that sin originated from the intermingling of the celestial and material realms. It makes concupiscence the key factor. Also, it excuses man, because wickedness was induced by supernatural powers beyond human control. However, the tale of the fallen angels played a minor role in biblical tradition. It is only referred to once in the New

Testament, but is expounded in the intertestamental Book of Enoch.

2) Rabbinic Judaism found another explanation for sin. According to Genesis 6:5 and 8:21,<sup>2</sup> every sin proceeds out of the “evil imagination” of man’s heart. Every individual is subject to an evil impulse inside him, which causes him to sin. All men are constituted this way. This idea recognizes the universality and inevitability of sinning. The evil inclination theory seems to make God ultimately responsible for sin; but the rabbis replied that God gave man the ability and responsibility to subjugate the evil imagination.

3) The Adam and Eve story has been the most commonly accepted explanation among Christians, largely because it was taught by Paul and Augustine. Traditionally, the Genesis account was understood as an historical event. Even though many theologians now think of the Adam and Eve tale as a myth, they still find it a valuable psychological and religious interpretation of the origin of sin. According to the conventional exegesis, man’s original sin was pride and disobedience. God gave men the whole world to enjoy but He placed a limit on them, because humans are tempted to think of themselves as gods.

Man rightly seeks the knowledge of good and evil. But that knowledge comes only from man’s humble and obedient relationship to God. When humans put themselves in place of God, they sin. Temptation for Adam and Eve originated from distrust of God’s goodness. The tempter said that God’s limit on man stood in the way of man’s full self-expression.

As a consequence of their sin, Adam and Eve were driven from Paradise. Deprived of God’s presence, their life changed from joy to travail, pain and suffering. The Fall of man destroyed the natural harmony of creation. Man felt shame, disrupting the harmony between his body and soul. Men blamed each other, wrecking the natural harmony among people. Even nature became disorderly.

The center of the Fall story is the tragic disharmony between man and God. When God issues a command, we feel it threatens our rights or limits our possibilities for happiness. We therefore defy God, breaking His commandment. Man turns his back on God and runs away. Like Adam and Eve, we hide from God when He calls us.

Sin corrupts the very center of human life. Fallen man is rotten to the core. Sin cannot be completely overcome by education, or eradicated by character-building. Man is afflicted with the terrible disease of an evil heart. Hence the worst sins result from man's highest gifts—his heart, mind, and free will.

Augustine was the first to give an elaborate treatment of original sin. He taught that the guilt and tragic effects of Adam and Eve's sin are biologically transmitted to their descendants. Since Adam is the father and representative of all men, his guilt is imputed to all men, its poison transmitted through the act of reproduction. Hence, all men are cursed by hereditary guilt, and merit eternal damnation.

In Augustine's view, prior to the Fall, Adam was able not to sin. After the Fall man is unable not to sin. But when the final redemption takes place and the kingdom of God is established, men will not be able to sin. The clear-cut distinctions among these three stages of man's experience are an important feature of Augustinian theology.

Like many Jewish rabbis, Augustine believed that Adam was physically, emotionally and religiously perfect when he fell. Thus, man fell from a great height. Irenaeus had quite a different concept of man's Fall. For him Adam was not perfect prior to the Fall. Man's original state was one of dreamy innocence. Since Adam and Eve were not fully developed, it was easy for them to succumb to temptation and fall. So man lost his intimate fellowship and communion with the Creator, but the Fall did not deprive man of the divine image. Even fallen man is still human. In spite of Adam's sin or our own, we do not

lose our freedom and rationality.

In the ancient world, there were three opinions about the nature of the soul.

1) According to the Greek mystics and Plato, souls are immortal. They exist prior to the bodies in which they are temporarily embedded, and will survive bodily death. Since the individual soul feels imprisoned in its body and longs for release, the real Fall is the soul's entrapment in matter. Origen of Alexandria defended this notion of a *cosmic fall*. It was also accepted by Christian Gnostics, some mystical rabbis and mystical Muslim theologians. This view was condemned.

2) A second interpretation has been called the *traducian* doctrine of the soul. For Augustine, Tertullian and many others, the soul of man is corporeal, at least to some extent. The soul is the regulating mechanism of the body, its vital spirit, and is part of the body; the soul is created along with the body, through the union of the parents.

3) The third interpretation, *creationism*, was adopted by Aquinas. According to the creationists, parents produce only the bodies of their children. The soul of each child is created by God directly, at the moment of conception. In a way, Aquinas synthesizes the two older views. Like the Greeks, he separates man's soul from his body. But he rejects the Greek notion of pre-existent souls, and conceives of them as special divine creations.

Aquinas' doctrine of the Fall is far less pessimistic than Augustine's. Man is not totally depraved. Because of Adam's sin, man fell from a supernatural state to his present natural state. As Irenaeus said, the Fall deprived man of the special gift of grace, the divine similitude, but it did not destroy his natural faculties. For Aquinas, the Fall defaced or slightly damaged man's reason and freedom. Following Augustine, Aquinas speaks of concupiscence as the material cause for original sin. He

thought baptism could remove the taint of original sin, leaving the soul in a neutral state. However, Aquinas compared the soul to a tinderbox which can easily be ignited and consumed by the heat of our passions.

The Protestant Reformation returned to Augustine's doctrine of the Fall. Luther, for example, believed in man's total depravity, inherited guilt and the completely damnable nature of all men. Luther claimed that natural man is so accustomed to his sins that he does not realize his miserable state until it is revealed by the Spirit. The cross makes us aware of our woeful state. Aquinas explained the Fall as a fall from a supernatural level to a natural one, whereas for Luther, the Fall was a fall from the natural to a subnatural state. In his eyes, we sin against our natural humanity when we rebel against God. Man's attempts to be superhuman cause him to degenerate to the sub-human level.

## **B. Modern Views of Sin**

During the Renaissance and Enlightenment, Europe rebelled against the Pauline-Augustinian picture of man as a depraved creature. Since the 17th century there have been numerous critics of the notions of fallen man, original sin, and inherited guilt.

According to many modern theologians, the Adam and Eve story is just an ancient Hebrew myth. Man is not fallen, but has been in a continual process of evolution from his animal origins. Original sin is an unbelievable concept, and inherited guilt deprives man of personal responsibility. That we should be damned by God because of Adam's act in the distant past—over which we had no control—seems unreasonable and unjust.

Inherited sin is a contradictory notion. If sin is a conscious violation of a known law of God, the sinner has to be personally responsible. The acts of Adam and Eve are not our acts; therefore, we cannot be held liable for them.

Moreover, the doctrine of inherited guilt makes God unjust. No judge or court would sentence a person for crimes committed by his ancestors. As man has progressed and recognized the importance of individual rights, the old notions of corporate responsibility and collective guilt have become outmoded. No God who is a loving father would damn mankind for the sins of Adam and Eve.

There is still another criticism of the Augustinian doctrine of sin. This doctrine explains sin by its origin in Adam, Satan, or God. But this causal explanation relieves us of our responsibility. For example, when someone accuses us of sinning, we blame our fallen nature, instead of recognizing our personal guilt. Or we say "the Devil made me do it." Again, this is a way to shift the blame and justify ourselves. Sin is not sin unless it is a voluntary act.

Where, then, does sin come from? Why do we sin? Several alternatives to the Augustinian view have been suggested:

### *1. The Evolutionary View*

According to evolutionists, man's personal and social sins are vestiges from his animal past. Even though we have evolved, we have not completely outgrown certain animal characteristics. There is still something of the beast in the best of us. Or, as cultural anthropologists say, our morals have not yet caught up with our intellectual and technological progress.

Long before Darwin published his *Origin of Species* and *Descent of Man*, Schleiermacher realized that man's efforts to achieve God-consciousness are hampered by his animal nature. We have a basic precognitive awareness of God. Innately, man feels his dependence upon God. Yet this aspiration for union

with Him conflicts with our lower impulses. Our spirit is repeatedly handicapped by the demands of the flesh.

F. R. Tennant, a British theologian, stated that if we accept the scientific world-view, we have to give up the notion of original sin, the historicity of Adam and Eve, and the Augustinian doctrine of the Fall. Biology shows that man has not fallen from a state of supernatural bliss. Quite the opposite; originally we were animals without a conscience. Very slowly, man evolved to the primitive stage of society. Morality at this level meant obedience to external norms sanctioned by custom and enforced by the tribe. Only gradually have our ethical standards improved. More recently, man has recognized the dignity of the individual, endowed with personal rights and responsibilities.<sup>3</sup>

According to Tennant, the development of each child recapitulates the history of the whole human race. When a baby is born it is simply an animal. It grows and becomes human and it learns to conform to external standards of behavior enforced by its parents. These external regulations are gradually internalized, and the child develops a conscience. At last he matures enough to be trusted to act in accordance with the ideals of his culture. Henceforth he can live by the dictates of his conscience. Tennant thinks that a modern hamartiology should be based on a modern scientific understanding of man's ethical development. This means that one cannot sin until he has a conscience. Furthermore, sin must be a conscious violation of a moral law, the individual's deliberate choice of a forbidden act. We cannot inherit a burden of guilt from past generations; a man must rise or fall on the basis of his own acts.

## 2. *The Social Theory of Sin*

A different interpretation of sin was worked out by social reformers. In this case, man's tendency to sin comes from the

sinful structure and conditions of society. The views of Albrecht Ritschl and Walter Rauschenbusch are illustrative of this trend.<sup>4</sup> Ritschl claimed that there is a well-organized and powerful kingdom of sin opposed to the kingdom of God. Sin is not simply an individual matter; there is a real federation of sin in society; we individuals are caught in a web of collective sin.

According to Rauschenbusch, the traditional doctrine of sin is too individualistic, impractical and other-worldly. Sin is transmitted through society; because of the unjust structures of society, we learn how to sin. Institutions of all kinds—political, economic, racial, cultural and religious—can cause individuals to sin, encourage them to continue sinning, and even blind them to the fact that they are sinners. Men's organizations can and do become superpersonal forces and agents of evil. Rauschenbusch said that, since the epitome of sin is selfishness, we will be guilty of sinning until we redeem our society. The Social Gospel challenges us to Christianize the social order.

### 3. *Psychoanalytical Theory*

Darwin, Marx and Freud are the three most influential creators of the modern understanding of man. Psychoanalysis, evolutionary biology and socialism have been major forces for revolutionary change. At first theologians denounced Freud, but recently they have recognized that his discoveries are of considerable value in defining the nature of sin.

For Freud, the springs of human behavior are hidden from view. Besides man's conscious actions, much of what we feel and do originates in the unconscious. Sins are rooted in the subconscious. The church and psychiatry are concerned with compulsive behavior, social deviancy, etc.

Freud's model of the human personality consists of three elements: the ego, the id and the superego.<sup>5</sup> The id represents man's pleasure principle. We naturally seek to enjoy more and

more pleasure, and likewise to avoid pain. The ego is the reality principle; by understanding himself and his environment, man can adjust to the demands of life. Then there is the superego, the individual's moral censor.

Why has man fallen? What causes his emotional disturbances, anxiety states, fits of depression, and psychosomatic disorders? According to Freud, the Fall of man is caused by the superego. We suffer, and even become deranged, because we repress our instinctive desires, causing the terrible sicknesses of the soul.

Freud explained that our guilt feelings arise from early childhood experiences. A boy loves his mother; a girl loves her father. Our deep love for our parents has a sexual character. The little boy subconsciously longs to be his mother's partner, mate and lover, and resents his father's attachment to her. He can really love his mother completely only if he gets rid of his father. Thus, each child entertains dreams of murder and incest. Since society abhors such acts, these natural wishes must be suppressed. They do not disappear; all we do is push them into a dark corner of the soul. Our guilt feelings become internalized. We blame ourselves as adulterers and murderers who lack the courage to carry out our deep desires. Hence, the superego torments us with guilt and self-condemnation. In extreme cases, repression produces psychotic behavior; in less dramatic forms, it creates neuroses which trouble us like demons.

Freud believed that self-understanding would serve as therapy for the sick, divided personality. The psychiatrist banishes irrational guilt feelings by bringing them to the surface. To know oneself is to help oneself, say the psychotherapists.

#### *4. The Christian Existentialist View*

Existentialism originated with Søren Kierkegaard, who has greatly influenced the contemporary theological understanding of sin. He described sin as despair or resignation before

God, unwillingness to be oneself before Him. We sin out of rebellion or despair. Man feels rebellious in the presence of God because his freedom is threatened by divine authority. God provokes in man a feeling of uneasiness, fear, and dread. Thus for the religious existentialist, sin arises from the predicament of man's freedom before God.<sup>6</sup>

We start out both ignorant and innocent, until we are confronted by the awesome reality of God. We know deep inside that we are free to accept or repudiate God. God commands us to obey Him. When we hear the divine command, we have a desire to break His commandment, yet we fear to do so. This conflict creates a mood of terrible anxiety, and constitutes the real Fall of man.

Everyone is Adam, for Kierkegaard. Man does not fall from an original state of perfect righteousness. We fall because of our freedom. Because we are free, we are tempted to act like God's rivals. We feel an urge to assert our freedom and put ourselves in God's place. But when we do so, we fall. Original sin is not inherited, but primordial. It is an inevitable and all-pervasive fact of human nature. Since each of us is his own Adam, each of us falls. Because we are anxious in the presence of God, we commit numerous acts of wickedness out of defiance or despair.

The sinful condition of man affects each individual and the entire human race. Sin implies man's total depravity. It wounds and corrupts every aspect of the human personality. There is no part of man untouched by sin. Sin also results in death—but not simply physical death. Animals and plants die with no consciousness of being sinful. The tragic death of man occurs at the spiritual level. He who does not love and cannot love is dead. Because of sin, man suffers from the "sickness unto death."<sup>7</sup> We are dead inside.

### 5. *Barth and Tillich*

Karl Barth defined man's primary sins as pride, sloth and falsehood.<sup>8</sup> Our sinfulness is revealed by contrasting what we are to what Jesus Christ was. He was humble and took on the form of a servant; we are puffed up with a sense of our self-importance. Jesus completely dedicated himself to the coming kingdom, whereas we are apt to be lazy about carrying out God's will. Christ was determined to be truthful, whatever the cost; whereas we are inclined to compromise with the truth.

Paul Tillich defined sin as the estrangement of man from the true ground of his being. This alienation of man from his essential character is expressed in three major forms. The primal sins are hybris, concupiscence and unbelief. Hybris is exaggerated pride, the sin of the will. Concupiscence is lust, a sin of the flesh. Unbelief is a sin of the mind or spirit.<sup>9</sup>

Actually, Tillich's definitions of unbelief, hybris and concupiscence go beyond the conventional meanings of these terms. Unbelief means that man turns away from God and turns to himself in knowledge, will and emotion. Man in the totality of his being turns away from God. Hybris (self-elevation) is the sin of making oneself the center of the whole world. In so doing, man refuses to recognize his finitude and creatureliness. Concupiscence refers to man's unlimited striving, his never-satisfied desires for power, love, or knowledge. Unbelief, concupiscence and hybris are marks of man's existential estrangement, which is the sinful state into which we are fallen.

### 6. *The Unification View*

Original sin is related to pride, rebellion, concupiscence, disobedience, immaturity and ignorance, as others teach. However, we must first understand what happened to the primal couple in the garden of Eden. The archangel Lucifer seduced Eve, causing a spiritual fall; and then Eve seduced Adam, com-

pleting a physical fall. God's intention was to bless Adam and Eve in marriage when they reached maturity, the full awareness of God's love. Hence, their sinful action constituted a premature and self-centered love in disregard of God's divine plan for them. Thus all three disobeyed God's command and rebelled against Him. Lucifer became Satan, God's adversary; and the first couple became his subjects. Their Fall: 1) separated them from God; 2) frustrated the whole purpose of creation; and 3) deeply wounded God's heart. Until their original sin is indemnified and removed by a new Adam and Eve, mankind remains alienated from God. This separation is the root of all our sins.

Many modern theologians regard the story of the Fall as mythical. They range from Bultmann, with his demand for demythologization—regarding myths as simply false—to Eliade, who recognizes the deep spiritual meaning of myths. The biblical story of the Fall profoundly conveys God's desire for His children and their failure to live up to His expectations. But each element in the myth should not be taken literally (e.g., the fruit or the serpent): to do so is to miss its point.

The emphasis in the Unificationist view of the Fall is on two elements often ignored in recent (especially liberal Protestant) interpretations: the reality of the power of evil, and the seriousness of sexual sin as the root of all sins. No matter how abstract one's interpretation of the Fall may be, these elements cannot be downplayed or eliminated without losing the essence of the story of how men and women became estranged from God, and how evil came into the world.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 10

1 This story must be much older than Judaism, because its concept of many divine beings ("sons of God") shows a polytheistic belief, which

- Judaism had abandoned long before the United Monarchy period. We do not know the exact source of Gen. 6; it could have been of Canaanite or Babylonian origin. Later Judaism interpreted these "sons of God" as angels, to conform to its monotheistic beliefs, but the text itself does not say this. Gen. 6 makes them divine beings, not angelic beings.
- 2 Gen. 6:5: "When the Lord saw that man had done much evil on earth and that his thoughts and inclinations were always evil, he was sorry that he had made man on earth, and he was grieved at heart." Also Gen. 8:21: "When the Lord smelt the soothing odour he said within himself, 'Never again will I curse the ground because of man, however evil his inclinations may be from his youth upwards. I will never again kill every living creature, as I have just done.'"
  - 3 F. R. Tennant, *The Origin and Propagation of Sin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1906).
  - 4 Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation* (Clifton: Reference Book Publishers, Inc., 1966), p. 338; and Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1945).
  - 5 Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1969), Ch. 1.
  - 6 Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness unto Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 208.
  - 7 *Ibid.*, p. 144.
  - 8 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. IV: *The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1974), pp. 142-144.
  - 9 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), Vol. II, p. 47.