

Sin and Salvation

Sermon Based on Mennonite Confession of Faith, Article 7 and 8

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Of all Christian doctrines, sin is the most empirically verifiable one (Reinhold Niebuhr). We cannot deny the reality of sin in our daily life and experience. It needs no further proof. We know in our daily experience again and again that we sin against others, and sinned against.

So, what is sin? What is the Mennonite's concept, or doctrines of sin? I think we would agree that in our hearts or minds, we more or less know what sin is. But can we describe it in a clearer language? I think it is useful, if we are about to study a concept or doctrines of sin, to have a description of it which we can agree on.

On article 7 of the Mennonite Confession of Faith, sin is described as “turning away from God making gods of creation and of ourselves”, and “unfaithful to the covenant with God and with God's people”. Indeed, the story of the Fall of the humankind in the Bible, Genesis 3, is a narrative account of the origin of sin in human experience that precisely captures this description of sin. Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden, committed the original sin when they turned away from God by rebelling against the will of God and breaching the covenant with God.

The consequence of sin, as captured in this story, is a separation from God. The relationship between humankind and God becomes broken, and we are not able to worship God rightly. But not only that, sin also destroy relationships between human beings. Because of sin, we cannot fulfill God's intents and purposes for us, for we have turned away from God. The result of sin is the enslaving power of evil and death. This is another aspect of the story of the fall. God did not intend for His creation to fall to the

power of evil, but it is a result of our own free choice. Ultimately, sin and evil involve personal responsibility of our choices. Sin is a result of our choices. as individuals and groups, to do unrighteousness and injustice. The consequences of this are division, destruction, and death of the creation.

“So, all of this trouble is because of a single disastrous act of Adam and Eve in the fall? “, we ask. Or, another question of the same effect, “are we sinner by nature because we inherit it ?”. The Anabaptists do not believe that sin is propagated through inheritance, or genetic inheritance. from our parents. However, we do not deny the *tendency* to sin as inheritance from our first parents. Because of the original sin, we are trapped and the efforts of human being to do the good and to know the truth are constantly corrupted. Another way of seeing this. the consequence of turning away from God would find its embodiment in the resulting social and cultural structure, thus continually asserting itself and propagating from generations to generations. This is how the fall affecting us, an environment in which we are conditioned toward sin, although what condemns us is our own choice to sin. Here we can see the enslaving power of sin and evil over us. However, we do not believe that this is our inevitable fate. Thanks be to God, the fall is not the end of the story. God does not allow humanity to be trapped in the enslaving power of sin and evil without hope.

Throughout the history, God has actively tried to restore covenant with his people. But the ultimate act of God’s love and mercy to save the world is by sending his Son. As John 3:16 says “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Jesus, the Son of God, has provided the way of salvation for all people with his faithfulness unto death on the cross. The cross is an indication of the depths to which men and women had fallen in their sin; but the cross is also an indication of the seriousness with which God takes sin and the extent to which God is willing to do something about it.

In the center of Christian doctrine of salvation is the concept of atonement. Atonement refers to a reconciliation of people who have sinned with God. Atonement, literally at-one-ment, is how we are made one with God, through forgiveness and repair, based on the mercy of God. In Hebrew tradition, an innocent sacrificial lamb is sacrificed on behalf of the sins of a group. Because human beings have all violated God's law, we deserved to be punished. God, in his righteousness and justice, demands satisfaction or atonement for our sins. We, because of our sins, are incapable of ever atoning for our own sins. Thus, Jesus substitutes our place, and because Jesus was completely without sin, his death pays the debts of all humanity. Jesus became the sacrificial lamb in the metaphor of the Hebrew legal tradition.

The gift of salvation through Christ is offered freely by the grace of God. By our own efforts and merits we would never be able to reconcile ourselves with God. No amount of good deeds or moral behavior would be enough to save ourselves because we are corrupted by sin. This is the basic difference of Christianity with most other religions. Where other religions usually tell their followers to do moral good in the hope to receive salvation, Christianity says that we are to do moral good because we are already saved by grace of God, through our faith in Christ. This is also our new covenant with God, in which we are reconciled with God, our relationships repaired. Obedience and our work in good deeds are part of this new covenant, to show our faith and gratefulness for the grace of God.

Although the gift of salvation is offered freely, Mennonites maintain that we need to respond to it by accepting the grace. This is different than other Christian theology, for example that of Luther and Calvin. In the theology of Luther and Calvin, human free will is thoroughly corrupted by sin, that we are unable even to choose to accept the grace. Thus, in this predestination theology, salvation can only come through God's irresistible grace. God had willed that some should be saved. Calvinist doctrine goes further to say that God actually decreed that some would be saved and others damned. Mennonites believe that, even in the state of our corruption of the will due to sin, there is still remaining marks of the

divine image that was there in the creation. It is through this divine image that God, via the Holy Spirit, could appeal to us to turn from our sin and receive the grace of salvation. The Holy Spirit moves us to accept the gift of salvation, but always without coercion. We are not robots that simply act out God's script, and God respects that. Just as we freely choose to turn away from God and be sinful, we need to freely choose to respond to the grace. This implicitly is also a rejection of the doctrines of universalism. Just as Mennonites maintain that we are not inherently sinful in nature because of the original sin, we are also not automatically saved because Christ died on the cross. It needs to be ultimately our own choice to receive the gift of salvation. We need to respond to the grace freely given to be a part of God's plan in our salvation. For us to receive the gift of salvation, we need to accept it first.

For Mennonites, the story of salvation does not stop at the cross. There is a deeper meaning that goes beyond atonement as only a legal satisfaction for the redemption of our sin. The resurrection of Jesus provides a parallel for us that as God vindicates Jesus, He also vindicates us from the power of evil and bondage of sin. This gives a new meaning to the life and teaching of Christ on earth, which invite us not to be a bystander in His mission, but to be a fully active participant of His redemptive work, to be a good disciple and part of God's plan in this world. Salvation then, also brings us reconciliations with others who have been invited to be a part of this community of God's people. In this sense, in the new environment and community of God's people, salvation is not only a personal saving of an individual, but it is also transformation shaping the new environment which conditions people toward the will of God and His righteousness. It is necessary to realize this. As we observed earlier, the bondage of the original sin that propagates from generation to generation is an environment which conditions people toward sin. Salvation will only work if it is also a redemption of that environment, a transformation that changes the environment to condition people to follow the will of God instead. In essence, this is where salvation and the church intersect. The church can be seen as this new environment which has been or is being transformed, in which the community of the people of God actively participate in God's redemptive work for the world.

Finally, salvation is not the end but the new beginning. Through salvation, we are "born again", adopted into the family of God. Salvation is our new covenant with God. It is the start of a transformation that makes us becomes more and more Christ-like. We need to celebrate this new life, this transformation, the new relationship with God and His community by showing forth the obedience of faith in words and deeds so that in time, we can "Be perfect, because our heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48)."
Amen.