

Original Sin

This week we bring you an essay from the files of Ed Schroeder, written by Ed under circumstances lost to time, but offered up here as a short meditation on the connection, as Ed puts it, between the “spoke” of sin and the “hub” of Christian theology.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Original Sin

The Biblical word for the human dilemma is sin. The first-ever “Lutheran” articulation of the term comes in Article II of the Augsburg Confession (1530) on “Original Sin.” In English translation only seventy-one words. “Our churches also teach that since the fall of Adam all men who are propagated according to nature are born in sin. That is to say, they are without fear of God, are without trust in God, and are concupiscent. And this disease or vice of origin is truly sin, which even now damns and brings eternal death on those who are not born again through baptism and the Holy Spirit” (Tappert edition).

“Sin” designates two things absent in human beings—from the very git-go—and one thing that has moved in to fill the vacuum. We don’t fear God, nor do we trust in God. [The Latin term for trust is *fiducia*.] And replacing these absent realities is concupiscence. That term, ‘concupiscence’, in its Latin original was shown to be the hot potato as the Roman theologians responded to the Augsburg Confessors on Article II. Which elicited this response from the author of the AC, Philip Melanchthon, when he penned (yes, a pen!) the document labeled “Defense of the AC.”

“Our opponents approve Article II, ‘Original Sin,’ but they criticize our definition of original sin.” And the fight is about concupiscence. Just what does the term mean? As Melanchthon then spells out what “we” mean, he starts with the usage of the term ‘*concupiscentia*’ in the Latin Bible, the Bible that was the authority for all the debate participants. And he then goes to Augustine, claimed by both sides in the debate as THE doctrinal authority from antiquity.

But then he goes on. “Not the ancient theologians alone, but even the more recent ones—at least the more sensible among them [!]-teach that original sin is truly composed of the defects that I have listed, as well as of concupiscence [as we describe it].” Documentation for that claim is then found in Thomas Aquinas (!), Bonaventure, Hugo of St. Victor.

In one sense both sides agree on what concupiscence is, namely, an “inclination” to do, think, “evil.” The disagreement is on how serious, how bad, this “yen” toward wickedness really is. “Our opponents claim that the inclination to evil is a neutral thing,” the sad consequence of Adam’s fall. Namely, the orderliness of Adam and Eve’s original righteousness went topsy-turvy with their Ur-disobedience, and all their offspring now have received the same dis-orderly heritage. Our “yens” go in wrong directions. Yes, that IS serious, but not THAT serious to justify saying, as AC II does, that concupiscence “even now damns and brings eternal death.”

Serious, yes, but not THAT serious.

I’ll never forget—well, I haven’t up until now—an exchange between Robert Bertram, chair of the theology department of Valparaiso University, and Robert Pelton, chair of the theology department of Notre Dame University. It was back in 1958 or ’59. I was the new kid on the block in the VU department. The

presidents of the two universities, O.P. Kretzmann (VU) and Theodore Hesburgh (ND), personal friends, had decided—doubtless over cocktails—“Let’s get our boys (yes, all boys) together for some theological exchange.” It was some five years before Vatican II. So “the boys” got together twice a year at the outset. Their place, and then our place. The first one at ND was on baptism. One of them and one of us presented papers. No surprise, mostly simpatico.

Second one at our place, VU. Topic: Sin. Here both department chairs presented the papers. Pelton first, Bertram second. In Bertram’s presentation he walked/talked his way through Article II of the AC and its sequel in the Defense of the AC. When Bertram finished, the first response came from Pelton: “Bob, it can’t really be that bad, can it?” It was an Augsburg 1530 re-run in northern Indiana four-hundred-plus years later.

So how bad is it?

Melanchthon again: “When we use the term ‘concupiscence’, we do not mean only its acts or fruits [the discombobulated moral orderliness pervading Adam and Eve’s descendants], but the continual inclination of [human] nature.” Yes, “the scholastics [i.e., the debate partners in this kerfuffle] misunderstand the patristic definition of sin [e.g., Augustine’s] and therefore minimize original sin... They miss the main issue.”

[Sidebar. On the term ‘original’ in this discussion. For the Augsburg Confessors “original” has two valences. On the one hand it signals that sin has been coterminous with my life from the very moment of my origin. Namely, there is no time way back at the beginning of my existence which I can point to and say “Back there I was innocent.” Rather this has been my diagnosis right from the beginning of my life. It is the shape of my life. The inclination of not fearing God, not trusting in God, and the

“yen” to be my own God, to curve back into myself, to find in myself the center of my universe.

On the other hand it signals that the “bad” things I do in thought, word, and deed have their own origin, their root, in this primal inclination. My sins (plural) have their root in this primordial inclined plane where everything rolls in the same direction: to me.]

Basically the “main issue” missed by the scholastics is what has just been said in the sidebar above. “When they talk about original sin, they do not mention the more serious faults of human nature, namely, ignoring God, despising him, lacking fear and trust in him, hating his judgment and fleeing it, being angry at him, despairing of his grace, trusting in temporal things, etc. These evils which are most contrary to the law of God, the scholastics do not even mention.”

The punch line for such a minimal diagnosis of the human malady then follows: “What need is there for the grace of Christ...what need is there for the Holy Spirit?”

There is a direct correlation between diagnosis of the malady and the healing thereof. Therefore the wagon-wheel spoke about sin is always linked to the prime article of the AC, justification by faith alone, a faith clinging to the merits and benefits of Christ. The doctrine of sin is eventually Christological. When sin is minimized, Christ is too.

The reality of concupiscence, “the inclination to evil,” persists also in those who do trust Christ. It is a constant for the believer as well. “Doubt about God’s wrath, his grace, and his Word: anger at his judgments; indignation because he does not deliver us from trouble right away; fretting because bad people are more fortunate than good people; yielding to anger, desire, ambition, wealth, etc. Pious men have confessed to these

things, as the Psalms and the prophets show.”

In the Defense Melanchthon concludes, “Christ was given to us to bear both the sin and penalty and to destroy the rule of the devil, sin, and death; so we cannot know his blessings unless we recognize our evil. Therefore our preachers have stressed this in their teaching. They have not introduced any innovations, but have set forth the Holy Scripture and the teaching of the holy Fathers.”

Back to Valparaiso University in the 1950s. To Bob Pelton’s “It can’t be that bad, can it, Bob?” the other Bob, Bob Bertram, said: “How bad is it? Bad enough that it took the death and resurrection of the second person of the Trinity to fix it.”

That’s how the spoke labeled sin links to the hub of the wheel of Christian theology, Augsburg catholic version.