

Sin and Forgiveness: How Bad the First One, How Good the Second?

Friends,

Marie here. There seems to be no significant change in Ed's health. Stronger headache medications make that pain almost go away. Double vision and weakness persist. Several of you have told him he could take a rest from these postings for a while. He agrees with that, so there may be a pause if the health doesn't improve. But in our morning devotions yesterday, we came across the following from one of Luther's sermons on John 6-8, as translated in the book Day by Day We Magnify Thee. Luther's equation here (Kingdom of God = Forgiveness of Sins) has been Ed's drumbeat for a good long while, as many of you know, especially among our friends in missiology. His thesis is Kingdom of God equals God's regime change with sinners. That happened in Christ, and it equals forgiveness of sins. So when he heard me read Brother Martin's selection below, you can imagine how he brightened up. His latest article on this theme is in the August 2006 issue (33:4) of the journal Currents in Theology and Mission, entitled: "A Second Look at the Gospel of Mark – Midway in the Year of Mark." In a day or two it should be available on the Crossings website: <www.crossings.org> Click on "Works by EHS" and scroll down to this title.

Luther says: "The Kingdom of Christ does not consist in condemnation. 'I have not come to condemn but to forgive sins. For no one can enter My Kingdom unless his sins are forgiven. My Kingdom is not barren. All who are called and have entered it are sinners. And as they are sinners they cannot live without forgiveness of their sins.'

“Thus, none but sinners can enter the Kingdom. Such is the Kingdom of Christ. He admits no saint, He sweeps them all out. And if anyone wants to be a saint, He thrusts him out of His Church. But if sinners enter His Kingdom they do not remain sinners. He spreads his cloak over them, saying, ‘If you have fallen into sin, I forgive you and cover your sin.’ It is true that sin is present, but the Lord of this Kingdom will not look upon it. He rather covers it over, forgives it and does not count it against you. Thus you are made a living saint and a true member of Christ.”

That reminded Ed of correspondence that passed between Ed and a dear Roman Catholic brother, a frontline missiologist, this past August. Perhaps it might be helpful to you too.

Peace & Joy!

Marie

Letter to Ed: *I wonder if resistance to seeing the Gospel as a message about “forgiveness” doesn’t stem from an inadequate view of what forgiveness means. The sin Jesus comes to forgive is not disobedience to formal statutory law but blindness to our true state and our need for God. I wish I knew better the etymology of “forgiveness,” because I think part of our resistance to seeing forgiveness as a constitutive element of the Gospel lies in reading the word in univocally juridical terms. [Ed: even worse, moralistic terms.] We rebel against that, but may be missing its deeper dimensions just as we typically forget the deeper resonances of being blind or lost or missing the mark that stand behind the Greek word harmartia. Whaddya think? Can you do a quick exegesis of “forgiveness” for a struggling Roman?*

Ed's reply:

Re: Forgiveness.

Rather than “exegesis,” my first thoughts go to the two traditions in which you and I grew up.

Substantively methinks you’re absolutely on target about the “being blind or lost or missing the mark” getting subverted when it comes to sin, and thus forgiveness of sin reduced to small change.

My hunch is that the RC ethos in which y’all grew up, esp. such practices as your regular presence at the confessional booth (and pastoral conversation thereunto appertaining), might well have been more formative for the concept of sin y’all interiorized (and also the forgiveness thereof) than the formal instruction you may have received from the Baltimore catechism. And possibly that catechism – I don’t know what it really says – may just have confirmed that laundry-list concept of sin. Namely, that sins were the rule-infringements that you recited to the confessor, the naughty thoughts, deeds, and words you could remember (or fabricate) from the past week. And forgiveness – at least, subliminally understood – amounted to wiping away the blemish of those bad marks on one’s religious report card. Such a notion of sin as naughty stuff is, as you say, a long way from “being blind or lost or missing the mark.” In other words, sin was viewed as the stuff of peccadillos – serious, but not a biggie. Rather a collection of “littlies.”

We Lutherans were catechized to see sin as just ONE thing: breaking the first commandment. Not “fearing, loving, or trusting God above all things” as Blessed Martin told us in his one-sentence explanation of that first decalog word in his Small Catechism. All of the nine subsequent commandments are but repeat performances of numero uno in nine specific cases.

So we were taught. [Whether we interiorized it or not was another thing.] Thus ML begins his “What does this mean?” for each of the remaining nine with “We should fear and love God, so that we may . . .” do what the two affirmative commandments – #3&4 in our numeration – call for and NOT do what the remaining 7 prohibit. But sin is ALWAYS first commandment stuff, analogous to your words from the Scriptures –BIG words – “being blind or lost or missing the mark.”

[This is not to say that we Lutherans escaped the peccadillo notion either. First of all it's very much the fabric of American religion, and we all breathed that willy-nilly as well. But there are also theological reasons for being drawn in that direction. To wit, the old Adam in us also liked to minimize sin – and we also learned that – to make it “manageable.” Which it is not, when understood as “being blind or lost or missing the mark.” “Mint and dill and cummin-tithing” stuff, but NOT the biggies.]

If we wanted to go deeper, Luther's Large Catechism on the First Commandment was perfectly clear and articulated the depth of first-commandment breaking. [The Large Catechism was intended for the clergy who, though many of them grads of Wittenberg Univ, were often still stuck in the sin = peccadillo paradigm.]

The classic controversy twixt the medieval scholastic tradition [largely peccadillo-ism, the Reformers thought, and as folks themselves catechized/educated that way, they were insiders to the tradition] and the Lutheran crowd on both terms – sin and forgiveness of sins – comes when you lay side-by-side the Augsburg Confession, the Confutatio Pontifica of 1530-31, and then Melanchthon's reponse to the Confutatio with his Apologia [defense] of the Augsburg Confession.

The whole controversy focuses in AC II, Confutatio II and Apologia II on original sin as the core malady of the human race, and then AC IV, Confutatio IV, and Apologia IV as the Christic remedy thereof. The AC/Apologia caption to Article Four is Justification. But the substance – and the Reformers' rhetoric – is all about the "Work of Christ as Forgiveness of Sin." To wit, healing the first-commandment-breaker's malady of "being blind or lost or missing the mark." I.e, big stuff, not peccadillos. And that's where sola fide comes in. The only way to become a forgiven sinner is to trust Christ's word that we are.

When I taught Reformation era theology at the seminary, students had in hand the AC, the Confutatio, and the Apology. We proceeded article by article with all three texts side-by-side. We were eavesdropping on the 16th century disputants—and then stopping again and again to ask ourselves: What's the real debate about at this point? What's at stake? What's gained or lost if AC/Apology has it right? If the Confutators have it right? What are the warrants invoked as the argument proceeds? It was a fun way to do historical theology. And we soon saw that controversy was still going on, not just between you folks and us folks (see below), but within our own Lutheran churches.

Come to think of it, that's also near the center of my ongoing "dialogue" with your dear friends who wrote the current best-seller in missiology, Constants in Context. My two-part review of that book is at <https://crossings.org/thursday/2005/thur070705.shtml> and <https://crossings.org/thursday/2005/thur071405.shtml>

Under separate cover (snail mail) I've sent you today an article of mine just published by CURRENTS IN THEOLOGY AND MISSION. Although I don't mention their names, it is really my next volley to the Constants in Context authors on what the

Kingdom of God is and isn't. I waltz my way through the Kingdom texts in the pericopes of the remaining half of this lectionary year, the Year of Mark.

My real griitch against Constants/Context is that they never address the malady of "being blind or lost or missing the mark" as anything important for mission.

Back to the Augsburg Confession Article II. Here's how sin is described: sinners "are without fear of God, are without trust in God, and are concupiscent." [And here concupiscent = curved back into oneself and into one's own agenda. If that's not "missing the mark," what is?]

Sin how bad? Forgiveness how good? I referred above to the Augsburg/Confutation standoff as persisting today, also within Lutheranism. Here's an item from almost 50 years ago, during my first years of teaching at Valparaiso University. Ted Hesburgh, legendary president of Notre Dame University, just 40 miles away from us, and our own university president, equally notorious in our circles but not so well known in yours, O.P. Kretzmann, arranged to have some home-and-home dialogue between their respective theology departments. And this was a couple years before Vatican II! Bob Bertram was chair of our department, Bob Pelton, C.S.C. (I think) was chair at Notre Dame. The first dialogue topic was sin. Pelton started out telling us what your tradition said about sin. Bertram then trotted out Augsburg Article II with Apology Article II's expansion thereof. I can still see and hear Pelton's first response, "Bob, it can't be that bad, can it?" And I can almost as clearly hear Bob Bertram's response, "If it were not that bad, Bob, why did it take the crucifixion of God's own Son to get sinners forgiven?" That's how bad sin is. That's how good forgiveness is.

Reply to Ed: *Lieber Edward, Your response is a real treasure trove, for which, unbounded thanks.*