

FOUNDATIONS OF FAITH: IV. SIN **“The serpent beguiled me and I did eat”**

We are almost through a series of five sermons on the Foundations of Faith that is taking its clues from the opening chapters of the book of Genesis. We have dealt with the great themes of God – “In the beginning God,” of Creation – “God created heaven and earth,” and of Man – “God created man in his own image.” To this point all was wondrous and beautiful. Then we come to the fourth subject, Sin – “The serpent beguiled me and I did eat.”

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“Oh dear, oh *dear*,” whispered Mrs. Bonner loudly, ‘a very interesting sermon, but what a lot of talk about *sin*. I suppose it’s only to be expected at the beginning of Lent, but it’s all so *miserable*, don’t you think?” Those words of an elderly Anglican lady in the Barbara Pym novel, *Excellent Woman*, are typical of a number of church people these days. And if this attitude toward sin exists among many in the Church, how much more in the general populace?

It’s been almost forty years since Karl Menninger, who in addition to being a psychiatrist of international repute was also a very committed Presbyterian ruling elder, wrote the aptly titled book, *Whatever Became of Sin?* In that 1973 book he pointed to the increasing avoidance of the word. He cited for example the fact that in 1953 President Eisenhower in his first proclamation of a national day of prayer made a reference to ‘sin.’ He borrowed the words for his proclamation from a call issued in 1863 by Abraham Lincoln, our most theological President. Lincoln said: “It is the duty of nations as well as of men to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with the assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon.” Menninger then cited a 1972 article on ‘The National Day of Prayer’ by Fred Fox of Princeton University which stated,

None of Eisenhower’s subsequent calls to prayer mentioned *sin* again. The word was not compatible with the Commander-in-Chief’s vision of a proud and confident people. ... Since 1953 no President has mentioned sin as a national failing. Neither Kennedy, Johnson nor Nixon. [and we

could bring that up to date.] To be sure, they have skirted the word. The Republicans referred to the problems of ‘pride’ and ‘self-righteousness.’ The Democrats referred to ‘shortcomings.’ But none used the grand old sweeping concept of sin. I cannot imagine a modern President beating his breast on behalf of the Nation and praying, ‘God be merciful to us sinners,’ though experts agree that is one of the best ways to begin.

So almost four decades ago Karl Menninger wondered aloud *Whatever Became of Sin?* and tried to show us our loss at its loss. Cornelius Platinga of Calvin Seminary published a book along the same lines entitled, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*. The Preface begins like this:

In this book I am trying to retrieve an old awareness that has slipped and changed in recent decades. The awareness of sin used to be our shadow. Christians hated sin, feared it, fled from it, grieved over it. Some of our grandparents agonized over their sins. A man who lost his temper might wonder whether he could still go to Holy Communion. A woman who for years envied her more attractive and intelligent sister might worry that this sin threatened her very salvation.

But the shadow has dimmed. Nowadays, the accusation *you have sinned* is often said with a grin, and with a tone that signals an inside joke. At one time, this accusation still had the power to jolt people. Catholics lined up to confess their sins; Protestant preachers rose up to confess *our* sins. And they did it regularly. As a child growing up in the fifties among Western Michigan Calvinists, I think I heard as many sermons about sin as I did about grace. The assumption in those days seemed to be that you couldn’t understand either without understanding both.

‘Sin’ is a lost concept, and with it ‘guilt,’ and when you have lost sin and guilt you have also lost the possibility of forgiveness, of reconciliation, of redemption, . . . and of peace. Cornelius Platinga describes sin as the vandalism of Shalom. Shalom, the Hebrew word for peace, means not simply peace as the cessation of war, but as the total tranquility and sense of well-being one has when one is in a right relationship with God, with creation, with family, friends and neighbors, and with one’s self. That is Shalom—“the way it’s supposed to be”—and sin is that which violates Shalom, that which destroys our right relationship with our true self, with other selves, with creation and with God, and destroying all our proper relationships destroys us and separates us from the source of all true happiness.

We began this series by speaking first of God, then of Creation, and thirdly of Man created in God’s image, man created by and for the love of God. At the end of that

last sermon on Man I quoted the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as stating: “The first man was not only created good, but was also established in friendship with his Creator and in harmony with himself and with the creation around him, and in a state that would be surpassed only by the glory of a new creation in Christ.”

That state of innocence and bliss is portrayed for us vividly and unforgettably in the primordial story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden. That story establishes the fundamental truth of our original state, that God created all things, with man as the crowning touch, and that as creation and man came from the hand of God all was good, good in the sight of God, good within itself, and good in all its prospects. Why God allowed sin to enter this paradise we do not know. His ways are as far above our knowledge as the heavens are above the earth. St. Augustine wrote, “I sought whence evil comes, and there was no solution.” Why sin entered, we cannot say for certain, but enter it certainly did. Man being created in the image of God was no puppet on a string, but rather a moral being with solemn responsibility and freedom of will, its necessary accompaniment. He was responsible to love and obey God and to walk in blessed communion with him.

But a subtle voice insinuated itself into this paradise—not a dark evil, on the surface, that is, . . . an almost innocent doubt. The fruit which God forbade is luscious and will only lead to pleasure, the voice insinuated. “Hath God said? Look. Use the common sense God has given you. You shall not die.” And the tempter’s tempting eased its way into heart of man and man reached out his hand for the fruit . . .and in reaching out his hand he , in fact, raised his fist in the face of God and his commandments. Davie Napier’s sermon/poem, ‘The Garden,’ in his delightful little book, *Come, Sweet Death, A Quintet from Genesis*, catches the very essence of the deed. Adam is carrying on a monologue with God, and the humor with which Napier relates it catches its impudence, its prideful arrogance, its insidiousness. In Napier’s telling of it, Adam says to God,

You speak a pious, childish doggerel
that sings like “Mary had a Little Lamb”
 Freely eat of every tree
 every tree every tree
 freely eat of every tree
 nothing I deny
 but the tree of good and evil

good and evil good and evil
 but the tree of good and evil
 eat of it and die.

Behold, God's wondrous gift is given—with strings.
 All glory be to thee, uncertain Giver,
 who wants to have his gift and give it too.
 I know about your damned restricted tree:
 It symbolizes you and your dominion.
 To spare its fruit is to acknowledge you.

Now hear this, Lord: the Giver with the gift
 is strictly for the birds and fish and beasts.
 I am a Man, made in the godly image,
 made to receive and rule the gift of God.
 God is for giving. Give, then, and get out.

Go now, Creator, spin some other worlds.
 I cut you off, I sever all your moorings.
 Drift, God, irrelevant and impotent,
 along uncharted seas of vacuous space.
 The earth belongs to me, and all its fullness,
 the world and every living creature in it;
 since it was I who named each single item
 in this vast, complicated, awesome structure.

Dominion given cannot be reclaimed.
 By act of God, this land is man's dominion
 from this day forth, and evermore forever.

All sin, like the first sin, is an act of rebellion, though we may not feel it such, so deceptive is its nature. It is a casting off of the blessed bonds by which God would bind us to himself in love. By preferring ourselves and our ways to God's self and his way we turn from him who is the fount of our life and our truest good. We cut ourselves loose. We mutiny and take control of the ship of our lives. Our 'yes' to self is a 'no' to God, and its truest nature is disclosed not in the Garden of Eden but on the Mount of Calvary. There our 'no' to God is seen in fullest display. This is why St. Jean Eudes was not exaggerating when he said,

Sin is a cruel murder, a frightful act of deicide, a ghastly annihilation of all things. It is murder because it is the only cause of death, both of the body and of the soul of man. It is deicide because sin and sinner caused Christ to die upon the Cross and the sinner continues this crucifixion of Jesus, day by day, within himself.

Sin came into the world through Adam, that is through man, for Adam is simply the Hebrew word for man. As a consequence, man is not only cut off from God, his truest good and only source of genuine happiness, he is also cut off from his own true self, that self that was created by God in his image and for his fellowship. Among the saddest words of Holy Scripture are those of Adam when God sought to walk with him in the cool of the day, and he said, “I heard thy voice in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked and I hid myself.”

And sin, having entered through Adam, infected his race forevermore. This we call Original Sin. The *Catholic Catechism* summarizes well the effects of that first sin. It states:

Scripture portrays the tragic consequences of this first disobedience. Adam and Eve immediately lose the grace of original holiness. They become afraid of the God of whom they have conceived a distorted image—that of a God jealous of his prerogatives.

The harmony, in which they had found themselves, thanks to original justice, is now destroyed: the control of the soul’s spiritual faculties over the body is shattered; the union of man and woman becomes subject to tensions, their relations henceforth marked by lust and domination. Harmony with creation is broken: visible creation has become alien and hostile to man. Because of man, creation is now subject “to its bondage to decay.” Finally, the consequence explicitly foretold for this disobedience will come true: man will “return to the ground,” for out of it he was taken. *Death makes its entrance into human history.*

It is the consequence of human sin that we rehearse when we come here on Ash Wednesday to receive the dark mark upon our foreheads and to hear again the sentence that hangs over each of us. “Dust thou art and to dust shalt thou return.” We remind ourselves of that grave sentence that we may be the better prepared to hear the word of our pardon and to behold the work of our redemption, that of the second Adam who came to reverse the work of the first.

We shall move on to that next in the fifth and final sermon in this series, but in closing this one I must read to you the concluding section of that first sermon/poem in Napier’s *Come, Sweet Death*. In it he moves us well from this fourth sermon in this series, ‘Sin,’ toward the fifth, ‘Redemption.’ So let us now go back to the Garden of Eden where Adam, having sinned, continues his irreverence:

VIII

Good Lord, I think he's coming.
 He's walking in the garden
 in the coolness of the day.

He's looking for a waltz.
 Who wants to waltz with Yahweh
 in the coolness of the day?

Where are you? Can't you see, all-seeing Seer?
 I'm picking daisies here with Mother Eve,
 daisies of good and evil, smooth and warm,
 of one and one . . . she loves me, loves me not.
 You have some better word on what to do
 in times like these? Thank God for chastity?

Who told you were naked? This is good.
 Who told me, Lord? So tell me when I'm drunk;
 or maybe that I ought to see the barber;
 but I can manage this one by myself.
 Or shall I say in abject piety.
 "All men, O Lord, are naked in thy sight"?

Then have you eaten of the tree? The Tree?
 My God! You plant existence in a forest,
 a veritable jungle where one cannot
 discern his right hand from his left, and then
 expect me to distinguish tree from tree!
 I skipped the merit badge for trees. I am
 no forest ranger. Trees. Be more specific;
 the tree of life . . . the tree of moral knowledge
 (or is it existential "good and evil"?). . .
 the tree which grows (in Brooklyn) "in the midst"
 (in Birmingham and Belsen "in the midst:
 in Brisbane, Buenos Aires, and the Bronx
 and "in the midst" of Bergen and Beirut,
 of Bombay, Babylon, and Bethlehem—
 that pregnant tree is always in the midst!)
 and finally, compounding this confusion,
 "the tree from which I told you not to eat."
 Let's face it, Lord, this is unreasonable.
 You ask about a tree; Almighty God,
 forget your silly tree, I will "confess"—
 the woman whom *you* gave to be with me,
she gave me fruit.

What have you done? All right.
 No more than this: We take the gift with thanks
 but spurn the Giver's counsel for its use;
 or at the very worst, the gift accepted,
 we ostracize the still-possessive Giver.

It may be said we were beguiled (a term
 in any case untrue, since, if deceived,
 we wished to be deceived). But we were not.
 We gained the promised knowledge, and we live,
 enjoying it.

You are the problem, Lord.
 You *force* us into disobedience—
 if disobedience it really is,
 and this depends upon a man's perspective.
 The theologians want to call it pride
 or even by the stranger term, rebellion.
 The pious make the charge apostasy
 and hypocrites will cry idolatry.
 But this is nonsense, Lord. It is our nature
 (you ought to know, who missed the hot ingredients)
 to spurn the docile role of subjugation;
 to be not merely creature but creator;
 to stand alone; to cherish ourselves
 all requisite resources for renewal;
 to mount with wings as eagles
 to run and not be weary
 to walk and not to faint.

You give us all creation, to be sure—
 then shake a disembodied godly finger
 in our face about a special tree.
 Well, God Almighty, if you are almighty
 let us be free of you—or let us die!

It is the same, you say, you stubborn God?
 Than count me out, I say—and come sweet death!

IX

*And I will greatly multiply your pain
 in bearing children. . . . Cursed is the ground
 because of you; now eat of it in toil.
 Since dust you are, to dust you shall return.
 Then Yahweh Elohim sent man away . . .*

to till the ground from which he had been taken.

This is a fine romance. A fine romance
 this is. A beautiful relationship—
 the Potter and his animated clay;
 Creator and his free, creative creature;
 the Father and his independent son—
 a beautiful relationship is fractured
 for nothing but a silly little tree.

For you, an empty, loveless, lonely garden;
 for me, frustrated, unfulfilled existence.
 Congratulations, God and Man. Well done.

X

Sweet Eve, you say you thought you heard him laugh?
 I heard him say, "*How can I give you up?*
How can I hand you over?" Then a word
 about another silly little tree—
 an antidotal tree, redemptive tree.
 And then—this must be when you thought he laughed—
 I think I heard him sob.

I think he wept.