

XI.

Sin Not Material.

“Sin is lawlessness.”

—1 John iii. 4 (R. V.).

What did sin blunt, corrupt, and destroy in God’s image-bearer Adam?

Altho we can touch this question but lightly, yet it may not be slighted. It is evident that, for the right understanding of the Spirit’s work regenerating and restoring the sinner, the knowledge of his condition is absolutely necessary. The mend must fit the rend. The wall must be rebuilt where the breach is made. The healing balm must suit the nature of the wound. As the disease is, so must also be the cure. Or stronger still, as is the death so must be the resurrection. The fall and the rising again are interdependent.

Generalities are useless in this respect. Ministers who seek to uncover and expose the man of sin by simply saying that men are wholly lost, dead in trespasses and sin, lack the cutting force which alone can lay open the putrefying sores of the heart. These serious matters have been treated too lightly. Hence by ignoring general and shallow statements we simply return to the tried and proven ways of the fathers.

We begin with pointing to one of the principal errors of the present time, viz., that of a resuscitated Manicheism.

It would be very interesting to present in a condensed form this sparkling and fascinating heresy to the Church of to-day. The immediate effect would be the discovery of the origin or the family likeness of much pernicious teaching that is brought into the Church under a Christian name, and by believing men. But this is impossible. We confine ourselves to a few features.

The mission of divine truth in this world is not to wanton with its wisdom, but to expose it as a lie. Divine Wisdom does not compromise with the speculations and delusions of worldly wisdom, but calls them folly and demands their surrender. In the Kingdom of truth, light and darkness are pronounced opposites. Hence the Church, in coming in contact with the learning and philosophy of the Gentile world, came into direct and open conflict with it.

Compared to Israel, the heathen world was wonderfully wise, learned, and scientific; and from her scientific standpoint, she looked down with deep contempt and infinite condescension upon the foolishness of Christianity. That foolish, ignorant, and unlettered Christianity was not only false, but beneath their notice, unworthy to be discussed. In Athens the good-natured people had for these unthinking men and their absurd babbling a Homeric smile, and the sinister ridiculed them with bitter satire. But neither the one nor the other ever *seriously* considered the matter, for it was unscientific.



And yet, after all, that stupid Christianity carried the day. It made progress. It obtained influence, even power. At last the great minds and geniuses of those days began to feel attracted to it; until, after a conflict of nearly a century, the hour came when the heathen world was *compelled* to come down from its proud self-conceit, and acknowledge that ignorant, unlettered, and unscientific Christianity. The lively preaching of these Nazarenes had drowned the disputations of those dry philosophers. Soon the stream of the world's life passed by their schools, and flowed into the channel of the wonderful and inexplicable Jesus. Even before the Church was two centuries old, proud heathendom discovered that, mortally wounded, its life was in jeopardy.

Then under the appearance of honoring Christianity, with cunning craftiness Satan vitally injured it, injecting poison into its heart. In the second century three learned and complicated systems, viz., Gnosticism, Manicheism, and Neo-Platonism, tried with one gigantic effort to smother it in the mortal embrace of their heathen philosophies.

When the cross was planted on Calvary, two empires existed in heathendom: one in the West, containing Rome and Greece, and the other in the East, with its centers in Babylon and Egypt. In each of these centers, Babylon and Athens, there were men of rare mental powers, comprehensive learning, and profound wisdom. Both centers were swayed by a worldly and heathen philosophy; altho its character in both was different. And from these centers the effort proceeded to drown Christianity in the waters of their philosophy. Neo-Platonism tried to accomplish this in the West; Manicheism in the East; and Gnosticism in the center.

Manes was the man who conceived that magnificent, fascinating, and seducing system which bears his name. He was a profound thinker, and died about the year 270. He was a genial, pious, and seriously minded man; he confessed Christ. It was even the aim and object of his zeal to extend the Lord's Kingdom. But one thing annoyed him: the endless conflict between Christianity and his own science and philosophy. He thought there were points of agreement and contact between the two, and their reconciliation was not impossible. To bridge the chasm seemed beautiful to him. One might walk to the heathen world, and in its brilliant philosophies discover many elements of divine origin; and returning to Christianity lead some serious heathens to the cross of Christ. The profound glory of the Christian faith filled him with enthusiasm; yet he remained almost blind for the inherent falsehood of heathen philosophy. And as both lay mingled in his soul, so it was his aim to devise a system wherein both should be interwoven, and transformed into a brilliant whole.

It is impossible here to introduce his system, which shows that Manes had thought out every deep question of vital importance, and with comprehensive eye had measured all the dimensions of his cosmology. All that we can do is to show how this system led to false ideas of sin.

This was caused by his mistaken notion that the word “flesh” refers only to the *body*; while Scripture uses it as referring to *sin*, signifying the *whole human nature*, which does not love the things that are above, but the things of the flesh. Flesh in this sense refers more directly to the soul than to the body. The works of the flesh are twofold: one class, touching the body, are the sins related to fornication and lust; the other, touching the soul, consist of sins connected with pride, envy, and hatred. In the sphere of visible things it finishes its image with shameless fornication; in the realm of invisible things it ends with stiff-necked pride.

Scripture teaches that sin does not originate in the flesh, but in Satan, a being *without a body*. Coming from him it crept first into man’s soul, then manifested itself in the body. Hence it is unscriptural to oppose “flesh” and “spirit” as “body” and “soul.” This Manes did; and this is the object of his system in all its features. He taught that sin is inherent in *matter*, in the flesh, in all that is tangible and visible. “The soul,” he says, “is your friend, but the body your enemy. The successful resistance of the excitement of the blood and the palate would free you from sin.” In his own Eastern environment he saw much more carnal sin than spiritual; and deceived by this he closed his eyes for the latter, or accounted for it as caused by the excitement from evil matter.

And yet Manes was quite consistent, which, giant-thinker that he was, could not be otherwise. He arrived at this singular conclusion, essential to his system of inventions, that Satan was not a fallen angel, not a spiritual, incorporeal being, but *matter itself*. Hid in matter was a power tempting the soul, and that power was Satan. This explains how Manes could offer the Church such a singular and anti-scriptural doctrine.

Manes’s system bordered on materialism. The materialist says that our thinking is the burning of phosphorus in the brain; and that lust, envy, and hatred are the result of a discharge of certain glands in the body. Virtue and vice are only the result of chemical processes. In order to make a man better, freer, and nobler, we should send him to the laboratory of a chemist, rather than to school or church. And if it were possible for the chemist to lift the man’s skull, and subject his cells and nerves to the necessary chemical process, then vice would be conquered, and virtue and higher wisdom would effectually sway him.

In a similar way Manes taught that as an inherent and inseparable power sin dwells in the blood and muscles, and is transmitted by them. He exhorted to eat certain herbs, as a means to overcome sin. There were, so he taught, animals, but chiefly plants, into which had penetrated a few redeeming and liberating particles of light from the kingdom of light which opposed evil; by eating these herbs the blood would absorb these saving particles of light, and thus the power of sin would be broken. In fact, the church of Manes was a chemical laboratory, in which sin was opposed by material agencies.



This shows the logical consistency of the system, and the weakness of the men who, having adopted the false notion of material sin, try to escape from its tight hold upon them. But they can not, for, altho discarding the draperies belonging to the system as unsuitable to our Western mode of thinking, they adopt his whole line of theories, and thus falsify not only the doctrine of sin, but almost every other part of the Christian doctrine.



And yet it is only in the doctrine of *inherited sin* that this error is so conspicuous that it can not escape detection:

It is argued: By virtue of his birth man is a sinner. Hence every child must inherit sin from his parents. And since an infant in the cradle is ignorant of spiritual sin, and without spiritual development, the inherited sin must hide in his being, transmitted with the blood from the parents. And this is pure Manicheism, in that it makes sin to be transmitted as a power inherent in matter.

The Confession of the Reformed churches, speaking of inherited sin, says, in article xv.

“We believe that, through the disobedience of Adam, original sin is extended to all mankind; which is a corruption of the whole nature, and an hereditary disease, wherewith infants themselves are infected even in their mother’s womb, and which produceth in man all sorts of sin, being in him as a root thereof; and therefore is so vile and abominable in the sight of God, that it is sufficient to condemn all mankind. Nor is it by any means abolished or done away by baptism; since sin always issues forth from this woful source, as water from a fountain: notwithstanding it is not imputed to the children of God unto condemnation, but by His grace and mercy is forgiven them. Not that they should rest securely in sin, but that a sense of this corruption should make believers often to sigh, desiring to be delivered from the body of this death. Wherefore we reject the error of the Pelagians, who assert that sin only proceeds from imitation.”

It is apparent, therefore, that the Reformed churches positively acknowledge *inherited sin*; acknowledge also that the child *inherits sin* from the parents; even calls this sin an *infection*, which adheres even to the unborn child. But—and this is the principal thing—they never say that this inherited sin is something material, or *is* transmitted as something material. The word *infection* is used *metaphorically*, and therefore is not the proper expression for the thing which they wish to confess. Sin is not a drop of poison which, like a contagious disease, passes from father to child. No; the transmission of sin remains in our confession an unexplained mystery, only symbolically expressed.

But this does not satisfy the spirits of the present day. Hence the new school of Manicheists which has arisen among us.



Entangled in the meshes of this heresy are they who deny the doctrine of inherited guilt; who entertain false views of the sacraments, holding that in Baptism the poison of sin is at least partly removed from the soul, and that in the communion of the Holy Supper the sinful flesh absorbs a few particles of the glorified body; and lastly, who advocate the ridiculous efforts to banish demoniac influences from rooms and vacant lots. All this is foolish, unscriptural, and yet defended by believing men in our own land. O Church of Christ, whither art thou straying?

XII.

Sin Not a Mere Negation.

“I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind.”—*Rom. vii. 23.*

258

Dr. Böhl’s theory, that sin is a mere *loss, default, or lack*, is an error almost as critical as Manicheism.

This should not be misunderstood. This theory does not deny that the sinner is unholy, nor that he ought to be holy. It says two things: (1) that there is no holiness in the sinner; but—and this indicates the real character of sin—(2) that there ought to be holiness in him. A stone does not hear, nor a book see; yet the one is not deaf, nor the other blind. But the man who lost both hearing and seeing is both; for to his being as a man both are essential. A chair can not walk; yet it is not lame, for it is not expected to walk. But the cripple is lame, for walking belongs to his being. A horse is not holy, neither is it a sinner. But man is a sinner, for he is unholy, and holiness belongs to his being; an unholy man is defective and unnatural. Sin, says St. John, “Is unrighteousness,” non-conformity to the law, or, literally, lawlessness, anomaly. Hence sin appears only in beings subject to the *divine, moral law*, and consists in *non-conformity* to that law.

Thus far this view presents only clear, pure truth; and every effort to give sin positive, independent entity contradicts the Word and leads to Manicheism, as may be seen in the otherwise fervent and conscientious Moravian Brethren.

Scripture denies that sin has a positive character implying that it has independent being. Independent being is either created or uncreated. If uncreated, it must be eternal, and this is God alone. If created, God must be its Creator; which can not be, for He is not sin’s Author. Hence Scripture does not teach that the power of evil inheres in matter, but in Satan. And what is Satan? Not an evil substance, but a being intended for, and endued with holiness; who abandoned himself to unholiness, in which he entangled himself hopelessly, becoming absolutely unholy. The doctrine of Satan opposes the false notion that sin has entity. The idea that sin is a power, in the sense of a faculty exercised by an independent being, is inconsistent with Scripture.

259

So far we heartily agree with Dr. Böhl, and acknowledge that he has maintained the old and tried conviction of believers, and the positive confession of the Church.

But from this he infers that, before and after the fall, Adam remained the same, with this difference only, that after the fall he lost the splendor of righteousness in which he had walked hitherto. So far as his powers and being were concerned, he remained the same. And this we do not accept. It would make man like a lamp brightly burning but soon extinguished, when it became a dark body. Or like a fireplace radiant with the glow and heat of fire this moment, cold and dark the next. Or like a piece of iron magnetized by the electric current,