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PERSPECTIVES OF A DISTORTED IMAGE

DOCTRINE FOR TODAY

SERIES: THE ARMY'S ELEVEN ARTICLES OF FAITH

We believe that our first parents were created in a state of innocence, but by their disobedience they lost their purity and happiness, and that in consequence of their fall all men have become sinners, totally depraved, and as such are justly exposed to the wrath of God.

Sin can be very physical and concrete in the way it appears in an evil world, but the reasons behind sin are often much more theoretical – so we use metaphors, symbols and images to try to formulate what is spiritual and abstract. We also need to look at the reasons for and consequences of sin from different viewpoints to get a more complete understanding of what it is.

Scripture is full of historical events and stories that give us these different perspectives. They paint complementary pictures that we are able to interpret into knowledge, and into theology, which help us to understand God and ourselves better. They have been interpreted and understood in various ways by men and women in contrasting cultures over the centuries.

This is also true when we try to understand man's broken relationship with God. The British evangelical, John Stott, shared some helpful wording in his book, *The Cross of Christ*:

The essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone; God accepts penalties which belong to man alone.

Based on the creation story, the apostle John and, later, other apologists like Irenaeus and Origen, proclaimed that all humans were created completely good and in the image of God: 'God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them...' (Genesis 1:27-28). However, the first generations of Christians also communicated with others and sometimes argued with philosophers, sceptics and members of other religions about their faith – just like us.

Thinkers like Plato, and religions like the different branches of Gnosticism, had dualistic views of human existence. They argued that the human body was evil, but contained a divine spark or an image of God embedded in the soul of man. We find similar dualistic arguments today, when people say that we are basically good and do not need salvation, or that we are 'just human', with the conclusion that no one can blame or change our human nature.

“ It is important that, in studying the Scripture, we communicate ... with others from different contexts and cultures ... ”

FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

- * WHAT ARE THE ATTITUDES REGARDING HUMAN NATURE IN YOUR CULTURE?
- * HOW DO THESE COMPARE WITH THE BIBLICAL PICTURE?
- * HOW CAN WE HELP PEOPLE UNDERSTAND THE NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF SIN?
- * WHAT WORD PICTURES ARE HELPFUL IN THE 21ST CENTURY WHEN DESCRIBING OUR SEPARATION FROM GOD AND THE NEED FOR RECONCILIATION?

“ When the doctrine says we are all 'totally depraved' it means that sin affects all dimensions of our existence ... ”

Although we are created in the image of God, it is also true that this image has been distorted. In Genesis chapter 3 the story continues, and Adam and Eve become sinners. The Greek term the New Testament uses for sin, *αμαρτία (amartia)*, means that we are missing the mark and have not reached our goal; our fullest potential. This already gives us new illustrations and perspectives to help us understand the doctrine.

Other pictures that concern the alienation of man include images of humans who are: fallen, naked, enslaved, guilty, indebted, captured by sin, blind, in darkness or spiritually dead. These illustrations help us think wider and create broader associations in relation to the images we use. These metaphors also give us a broader understanding and provide answers to the questions of why we are sinners, and what the nature of sin is. Images and stories can also lead us to extend our thinking in a wrong direction and arrive at false conclusions. Therefore it is important that, in studying the Scripture, we communicate with God, and with others from different contexts and cultures and learn the lessons of history, so that we are able to better understand God's love and the nature of sin.

At different stages of the history of the Church, theologians like Tertullian, Augustine of Hippo, Luther and Wesley have interpreted the

story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They all understood that the essence of man was changed when they disobeyed God's command, and our doctrine formulates, '... that in consequence of their fall all men have become sinners, totally depraved.' The reason for this change is understood by Augustine, Luther and the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth as human pride. Barth writes in his book *Church Dogmatics* (Volume IV.1):

What is sin? The sin of man is the pride of man. Pride is the disobedience of man and, more specifically, the unbelief of man. The sin of man is the human action which does not correspond to the divine action in Jesus Christ but contradicts it.

This is true from one perspective, although some theologians argue that sin is the opposite; to lack pride and self-esteem. This illustrates why we need different perspectives and experiences – as Paul writes to the Ephesians: '... that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height – to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God' (Ephesians 3:17-19 NKJV).

Despite the distorted image and the sinful nature of man, there is hope for change through faith in Christ

and through his death on the Cross. Although we have broken the law, Christ's suffering and death justify us and make us blameless (Romans 3:21-26). Through his death we become alive from our spiritual death (Romans 6:4) and are set free from our bondage to sin (Romans 6:16-18). Through his death the ransom is paid and we are released from slavery. Our guilt has been paid and we have no more debt (Matthew 6:12; 18:21-35; 20:28). The good news is, therefore, that through Christ's salvation, God's image in us can be restored. (This will be considered further in another article).

When the doctrine says we are all 'totally depraved', it means that sin affects all dimensions of our existence. The spirit of love has been replaced with a spirit of selfishness and pride. This affects our mind, feelings and self-image. Our mindset is revealed in our behaviour and shows itself in our actions. It is not a sin to be sick, but sin can make us sick. It is not a sin to be alone, but sin can make us alone. Our sins affect also our relationship with others. The spirit of sin, through our mindset, affects the community body that we belong to and, consequently, the body of our society. That is why we proclaim salvation, not only for men, women and children. We proclaim salvation for the neighbourhood where we minister; the community where we serve; the society of which we are part. We proclaim salvation for the world.