

The Idea of Sin in the Theology of John Newton

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At the early age of eleven, John Newton went to sea at the command of his father. By the time he was fifteen years of age he had made several voyages. "During this period. . . he learned to curse and blaspheme, and was exceedingly wicked."¹ But the death of a friend served to awaken him and for two years he attempted to reform, chiefly by an ascetic type of discipline. It was not long, however, until, as Newton says, "I renounced the hopes and comfort of the gospel, when every other hope was to fail me."²

The habit of swearing was so deeply ingrained in John Newton that it was habitual with him. Furthermore, he renounced his belief in God and classed himself as an infidel. Yet, in his own strength he tried to reform from time to time. In fact, vacillation between willful participation in sin and attempted reform was the chief characteristic of Newton's moral life up to the time Josiah Bull terms the "turning-point"--an awful storm at sea in March of 1748. From then on Newton began to think seriously about the Christian gospel and its demands on his life.

Looking back on this experience of the storm at sea and his conversion, Newton wrote in the language of hymnody, the fact of his personal sinfulness and God's grace:

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;

¹ Josiah Bull, *John Newton of Olney and St. Mary Woolnoth. An Autobiography and Narrative, etc.*, p. 13.

² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

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How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!

Thro' many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

This last quoted verse points up not only the dangers in that storm at sea in March, 1748, but a host of other experiences. The slave trade of which he was a part for so long, was a sinful, depraved social practice of his day, and it was dangerous. How often the slaves in the chain rebelled, throwing the captain and crew overboard! Newton knew all too well the sinful sources of irritation behind such rebellion. Years later he wrote and preached against slavery calling it "that unhappy and disgraceful branch of commerce."³ A friend of Newton's is reported to have said that "he never spent one half-hour in Newton's company without hearing some allusion to slavery and to Newton's remorse for his early share in the trade."⁴

Experience and the Fact of Sin

It is out of this wretched experience of sin that Newton preaches about it. Sin was no mere theological idea which had somehow to fit into a system of thought! Anything but that! Sin was real; it was a fact. How Newton must have despised the popular deistic concept of sin in his own day, that "Whatever is, is right,"⁵ and that sin is not really to be taken seriously. To Newton it was incredible that sin should be taken any other way than seriously. But the fact is that eighteenth century Deism flatly denied the existence of sin and evil in the world, and said that "man is not vile, but exactly what he should be."⁶

Perhaps Newton fought this notion even more than Wesley because of his own bitter experiences in sin. How clearly does Newton paint the fact of sin in his hymn entitled "A Sick Soul":

Physician of my sin-sick soul,
To thee I bring my case;

³ *Works*, vol. VI, p. 521, from "Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade." (Third edition, 1824, *Works* in six volumes.)

⁴ Bernard Martin, *John Newton*, p. 55.

⁵ Pope from his "Essay on Man."

⁶ Basil Willey, *The Eighteenth Century Background*, p. 46.

My raging malady control,
And heal me by thy grace.

Pity the anguish I endure,
See how I mourn and pine;
For never can I hope a cure
From any hand but thine.

I would disclose my whole complaint,
But where shall I begin
No words of mine can fully paint
That worst distemper, sin.⁷

Pride and the Nature of Sin

Referring to the Garden of Eden story, Newton says that the root of Adam's sin was pride:

Compell'd to answer to his name,
With stubbornness and pride,
He cast on God himself the blame;
Nor once for mercy cry'd.⁸

The creature put himself in the place of the Creator; he wanted to take the place of God. Thus the unbelief and rebellion of Adam--and of us too, for we, like Adam of old, are also proud--points to pride as the essence and origin of sin. Man is more interested in fulfilling his own wishes than in obeying God's commands.

In pin-pointing pride as the real nature or essence of sin, Newton follows in the Augustinian tradition. Man's "fall was due to pride, the greatest of all sins, which means putting of self before God and the denial of one's absolute dependence on him."⁹ So A. C. McGiffert's description of Augustine's position.

Suffering and the Results of Sin

Newton speaks of the "bitter fruits" of sin. What does he mean by this expression? He has direct reference to death and suffering. It was John Newton's belief that with the advent

⁷ *Olney Hymns*, Book I, 83.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Book I, number 1.

⁹ A. C. McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. II, p. 90.

of Adam's sin, two kinds of death were introduced into the world: spiritual and physical. Originally man possessed "a spiritual and divine life; for he was created in the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness."¹⁰ But "this moral image . . . was totally lost by sin. In that sense, he died the day, the moment, he ate the forbidden fruit."¹¹ Adam had deprived himself of the presence of God; he lost his former feeling of "at-homeness" with deity. "He no longer desired, he no longer could bear, the presence of his offended Maker."¹² He was dead spiritually! Now fear and anxiety took the place of serenity in the human soul, and ignorance and guilt replaced innocence and knowledge of God.

If Adam's sin meant the coming of spiritual death, it also meant the ushering in of physical death and natural evil. Subsequent to the Fall life became a struggle on the road which leads to physical death. "Sin is the cause of all the labour, sickness, and pain. . ."¹³ "Sin has brought us all under a sentence of death. . ."¹⁴ Man had been warned that, "In the day that thou eatest--thou shalt surely die."

Once again, this was no mere theory in the thought of John Newton. Again and again, from pulpit and in living room conversation, Newton warned his people of the tragic results of sin. Every New Year's day he held a service for his young people and he spent a good deal of time in prayer and preparation for that service; he always warned his young friends about the tragic results of sin. Sin always causes pain, suffering, and unhappiness, he announced.

Christ and the Cure of Sin

Newton never ceased to be amazed at the grace of God operative in the converted personality. He sang about it, he preached about it, he was a living example of God's grace. God was available through Jesus Christ. To paint the horrid picture of sin in human experience served only one purpose, to point to the cure of sin in a Person, Jesus Christ, who offered grace and forgiveness.

Now the cross was no mere unfortunate incident in history. No indeed! The cross made possible redemption from sin. Though God allowed evil and sin to enter the world, he also

¹⁰ *Works*, vol. IV, p. 462.

¹¹ *Works*, vol. I, p. 576.

¹² *Works*, vol. IV, p. 435.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 461.

¹⁴ *Works*, vol. II, p. 433.

sent his Son into the world "to restore us to the favour of God; to reconcile us to ourselves, and to each other; to give us peace and joy in life, hope and triumph in death, and after death glory, honour and immortality."¹⁵ So moved is Newton by the place of the cross in redeeming man, that he sings:

When on the cross my Lord I see,
Bleeding to death for wretched me,
Satan and sin no more can move,
For I am all transform'd to love.¹⁶

John Newton's doctrine of the cross points up his purposive Christology, and any doctrine which negated this purposive Christology he abhorred. Thus he could not accept the deistic statement of man's nature, which indicated that man "no longer" needs to "foster any gloomy conviction of sin, nor any enthusiastic yearning for salvation,¹⁷ because he is in himself good and possesses the capabilities of being good." If this be true, then there is no need for Jesus Christ and His work. Contrary to the deistic position, Newton holds that the "idea of deliverance presupposes a state of distress. . . ." and that the purpose of Christ's "appearance in the world" was "'to save sinners,'"¹⁸ This "was the sole design of his advent . . .,"¹⁹ which Newton sees prophesied in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the New. It follows that Jesus Christ occupies a place in history not as a mere man who lived and died in a certain period, but as the One who fulfilled God's purpose for mankind by his mighty acts which culminated in providing salvation from sin.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* , p. 284.

¹⁶ *Olney Hymns* , Book II, number 54.

¹⁷ Basil Willey, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

¹⁸ *Works* , vol. II, p. 282.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* , p. 284.