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JESUS CHRIST
Fundamentals of Christology

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the process by which God accepts full solidarity with sinful mankind and raises human nature in Jesus to himself. This entails a preparation in the Old Testament, reaches its decisive phase in the Incarnation and is consummated through the cross and Resurrection of Jesus (Chapter II). After dealing with various aspects of the humanity of the Son (Chapter III), we will describe the reconciling work of the Triune God: the role of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Then the final goal of redemption, including the transformation of the material world, will be outlined (Chapter IV). The work ends with a twofold appendix on the relationship of Christ to non-Christian religions and to possible intelligent beings on other planets.

CHAPTER I

Sin As A Threesfold Alienation

1. Sin

In order to understand the way of redemption we need to examine the state of sin from which we have been redeemed. According to Christian faith, man and woman committed sin at the very beginning of human history. In this first sin man chose to realize his human existence (an option made possible by his nature as a finite created freedom) in conscious independence from and opposition to God. As a result of this first sin, all human beings are born without God’s grace and with the inclination to ratify the same option for themselves. The propensity in mankind for a false autonomy from God has been reinforced by the accumulation of personal sins that has created a universal sinful environment. Nevertheless, by virtue of the redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ, and even before the historical realization of that redemption, all human beings have always been offered the grace of Christ, so that they may resist the “gravitational pull” of sin or at least repent of their sins and yearn for communion with God. However, in this first chapter I deal not with the action of God’s grace in human history, but the state of universal sinfulness from which it saves us.

Every time one consciously and freely opposes an imperative of his conscience, he goes against his “better self.” He knew before the act what was the “right thing to do,” yet he overruled his own judgment and set his own sinful will above the awareness of his
duty to do what he recognized as right. Thus, through the act of sinning, a split or estrangement is introduced into the core of man's self, into his judgment and will. His sinful will, seeking the support of a rationalizing judgment, is set against his right judgment and will to do what is right. If he perseveres in his sin, then his sinful judgment and will is going to overpower and, to a greater or lesser extent, "silence" his "moral self," the self who appreciates and obeys moral values. The sinful self affirms himself as an absolute, higher than the recognized moral order he had previously acknowledged through his conscience. The result is self-estrangement: man finds himself in conflict with his own "truth," with his own real self whom he chose to ignore. He acts as if he were an "Absolute Being" who can, by his own whim and decree, set up what is right and wrong for himself. Yet, while in his acts this "absolute" false self dominates the true "moral self," at the core of his being the sinner knows that his self-affirmation as an Absolute is false since, at least at the beginning of this process, he acted consciously against his own better judgment.

When man overrules the judgment of his conscience, he always does so for the sake of some limited good he decides for himself to be superior to the values his conscience proposes. For instance, a married man may decide that for him here and now an extramarital affair is more important than his obligations to his family; the satisfaction and pleasure he finds in the relationship with "the other woman" becomes more important for him than his family. In fact, for the sake of this affair he may be ready to risk everything that he had cherished before. In other cases the limited good the sinner idolizes may be wealth, power, or fame.

Yet in every choice against one's own conscience it is ultimately not an external object that becomes the idol; rather, through choosing a created good as an absolute, the sinner idolizes himself. In setting up arbitrarily his own values, for instance, the pleasures of an extramarital relationship, against the order of reality itself as it has become known to him through his conscience, he acted as a "god" by deciding arbitrarily what was right or wrong for himself. That in every "idol" the sinner actually idolizes himself, becomes very clear when the idol no longer satisfies him. His ecstatic love will immediately turn into hatred if the idolized woman no longer fulfills the role he assigned to her. If the people a dictator idolizes turns against him, he will try ruthlessly to suppress or destroy them.

Thus, if the sinner understands himself as in some sense the "Absolute," the highest and the only true value, he will get into a conflict not only with his own true self, but also with his fellow human beings. He cannot accept his neighbors as his equals, since that would require him to dethrone himself. As long as the sinner holds himself to be the center of the universe, others cannot be accepted for their own sake, but only as a means to further his own interests or else as potential rivals to be overcome. Depending on the kind of society the sinner lives in, his methods will be covert or overt, crass or subtle, but his goal will always remain the same: he will attempt to suppress, manipulate, and exploit the freedom of others.

The sinner will also use the material world to enhance his own interests, without regard to the interests of others, and in the process he may destroy the environment for future generations.

The conflict with one's conscience and one's neighbor necessarily implies a conflict with God. Through the awareness of the absolute obligation to do what is right, believer, agnostic and atheist alike encounter the true Absolute, God himself. Moreover, we know from God's revelation that the voice of conscience calls one not only to respect the order of reality established by the Creator, but, ultimately, to accept the love of God the Father who wants to transform us into his children. Thus the one who sins mortally not only opposes the will of God the Creator, but also God's will to be our Father. Hence sin — to varying degrees and in various ways — is always a personal offense against God the Father.

In committing sin, man necessarily distorts his understanding of God. If he was an unbeliever (even innocently) before sinning, the sin will confirm him in the received notion that "God" is an arbitrary and tyrannic power from which man must be set free. If he was a believer before his sin, in rationalizing his sin he may gradually come to believe that it is not God who actually
forbids this or that sinful act, but only a Church teaching or other human tradition. In another case, the sinner may continue to think what he did was sinful, but begin to resent God as the cause of his guilt, a tyrant and vindictive judge. He might even repress his instinctive knowledge of God and come to the conclusion that God does not exist. His resentment or cynicism will then be directed against "life" or "reality" in general. In any case, by sinning, one distorts or represses his knowledge of God and no longer knows the holy and loving One who has created him out of love and whose will is man's life and fulfillment.

While sin is always committed by the will, a spiritual faculty, it expresses itself, and influences others, through the body. Through the body sin becomes contagious; it creates a milieu that affects everyone to varying degrees, and increases its power by enticing or pressuring other freedoms to commit the same sin or to oppose it with other sins. Thus violence begets counter-violence, promiscuity provokes self-righteous indignation, arrogance begets hatred, infidelity in one spouse tempts the other to become unfaithful.

Moreover, by replacing the true Absolute with an idol, with some limited created good made into a false absolute, the sinner opposes his own spiritual nature, which is naturally drawn towards the infinite spiritual Absolute. By embracing a creature as his ultimate value, the sinner loses his ability to know and love God. All that interests him now are the goods of this world, pleasure, possessions, power, and self-aggrandizement. Scripture and patristic tradition are describing this change when they say (speaking existentially rather than metaphysically) that the sinner becomes flesh: in conflict with his spiritual nature, he is captivated by the things of this passing world rather than by the things of God.

The contaminating influence of sin spreads not only through the body but is also extended and reinforced through the structures of society; the economic, political, and cultural institutions are — to varying degrees and in various ways — all deformed by sin. While a sinful environment does not eliminate all individual freedom to be good and to do good, it curtails its range of action and makes some semi-conscious or unconscious appropriation and imitation of the sins of others inevitable. Thus hypocritical parents may produce hypocritical attitudes in their children, even before the children are able to recognize hypocrisy as evil. Promiscuous parents may produce promiscuous offspring. Parents alienated from their true selves (through their own or through others' fault) may influence their children to develop a "persona." a mask, which covers up their true selves even before the children are able to recognize that such an attitude is wrong. Institutionalized economic exploitation and political oppression create a climate in which individuals become unconscious or half-conscious instruments of injustice.

2. The Punishment of Sin

The punishment man receives for his sin is not something extrinsic to sin itself. It is not like the application of a penal code whose penalties have only a legal connection with the sin committed. God respects man's dignity to shape freely his own being. If by sinning man freely distorts his own reality and thereby his relationship to his neighbor and to God, God allows this freely chosen distortion to take effect. The punishment of sin, then, is its necessary, "natural" consequence. Thus, while sin is the freely chosen opposition to one's true self, to God and to one's neighbor, the punishment is the suffering which results from this threefold estrangement. Yet, as long as the sinful choice is not finalized in death, the suffering which comes from the estrangement remains a powerful incentive for the sinner to seek a reversal of his state. We need to investigate this in more detail. For simplicity's sake we examine only that kind of alienation for which the person himself is responsible. However, in real life responsibilities always intertwine, and we carry in our own alienation — prior to our own decisions — the alienation caused by everybody else's sins.

In refusing to obey his conscience, the sinner negates his own true being and lives in a state of falsehood and self-deception. Hence the experience of self-alienation. It manifests itself in
diminished self-worth and in a diminution of the sinner's own sense of identity. Often, he tries to compensate for it by inflating his ego and by exaggerating his self-importance. He needs to convince himself more than anyone else of his own worth against the nagging suspicion of worthlessness.*

In refusing to accept himself as a gift from God and to accept God's own self offered to him in love, the sinner is trying to be independent from God, and attempting to become what he is not, an absolute in himself. By cutting himself off from Being Itself, he necessarily experiences the fragility of his own being, which borders on nothingness and is threatened by nothingness. The result is a heightened sense of anxiety, a dread before the inevitability of his own death. Heidegger's "Angst" is the anxiety of sinful mankind. There is a connection between living as if "I were my own god" and experiencing my existence as a sliding towards death, a Sein zum Tod.

In refusing to accept his neighbor with equal rights and a claim for personal relationships, the sinner isolates himself from everyone. He ends up with nothing but alliances and enmities based on self-interest; he becomes incapable of personal relationships, which demand mutual respect and acceptance of the other for the other's own sake. In either using everyone around him as a means for his ends or looking on them as rivals to be overpowered, he will be treated by others in exactly the same way.

While serving the true Absolute results in growing freedom and harmony in the person, the sinner who sets himself up as an "absolute" by choosing limited goods like pleasure, wealth, glory, or power as ultimate values ends up in slavery and must endure the disintegration of his freedom. He becomes "addicted" to his "idol," as the idol begins to exert more and more power over him, so that even when he wants to shake free from it he can no longer do so. The object of man's desire shapes and transforms his being to the likeness of the desired object. If he desires as his ultimate value things of this world, they will restrict his horizon and sensitivity to their level. Moreover, the instincts and drives these values give free rein to, the sex drive, the drive to possess things and dominate people, and the hunger for fame and greatness gradually weaken the person as a free agent, who himself is the cause of his free acts. Now, even if he wanted to reverse the trend, the sinner might not be able to assert himself against the internal forces that have taken control of his life. He is no longer free, because it is no longer the self that determines himself; one or several of these internal forces, of which each and all are less than the person himself, pressure his decisions. Yet the sinner remains responsible for his actions, because he freely surrendered his freedom to these internal forces, and his will remains attached to them. Thus the sinner who began by asserting himself as an "absolute" ends up as a slave to the goods of this world and to his passions.

All these forms of alienation, the self-estrangement, the estrangement from others, the slavery to the goods of this world, and the disintegration of the person as a free agent cause not only emotional and physical pain but also a feeling of numbness, of not really being alive.

Just as sin expresses itself and acquires power and influence through the body, so does the punishment for sin: the suffering, which results from man's threefold alienation and from his conflict with the material universe, affects him through his body. It is in the death of the human body that the process of alienation and the suffering caused by alienation comes to a climax. This makes intelligible why physical death is viewed by Scripture as the natural punishment for sin and — but for Christ's death — the image and anticipation of eternal death, that is, eternal damnation.

The human soul and human body constitute one being, one person. Thus, when man dies, directly only his body dies, but since man is his body, the dying person experiences the disintegration of his body as something not external to himself; rather he experiences himself dying (even though his soul, the very "core" of the person will survive this experience). This explains why the anticipation of the separation of body and soul in man is so threatening and so painful: it is experienced as the disintegration and annihilation of the person who had originally been created for eternal life.
If the dying person is a believer who finds himself in the state of sin, his dying is experienced as the foretaste of that final separation from God who is life, and who is now perceived as absolutely distant from him. If the sinner does not believe in God, then his alienation from God will be felt as a cruel, impersonal fate indifferent to personal concerns and aspirations. Either way, the sinner who attempted to be his own “absolute,” his own god, must come to the realization that he is the exact opposite of an absolute; he is a dependent, contingent being whose annihilation is not only not impossible, but appears as the most natural outcome of the process of dying.

The dying man becomes more and more separated from his fellow men and women. If he considered them beforehand merely as means to further his interests, they are now slipping out of his control. He cannot force them to undergo the experience of dying in his place. Nevertheless, if some vestiges of humanity still remain in the dying sinner, he may now long for the companionship and personal closeness of some human beings, whom he had not even noticed as persons before.

Man’s conflict with the material world also comes to a tragic climax at the moment of death. The material goods he used and abused in his lifetime no longer serve him. They are no longer attractive; they may even become a source of pain to him. In general, the material universe appears as totally alien to the dying sinner, indifferent and even harmful to his well-being.

3. The Need for Redemption

1. As long as the sinner is alive, he has not entirely immobilized himself in the state of threefold alienation. Thus the misery that results from his state, especially when he is facing death, may serve as a powerful “therapy” to bring the dying man back to reality. Yet, while he was free to distort himself and his relationships with God and with his fellow men and women, he is no longer free to reverse the process. Sin has affected his nature so deeply that only the author of nature, God, can create him anew.

2. If we consider sin as the free rejection of God’s love, we find another reason why man cannot rescue himself from the state of sin on his own. He cannot earn back God’s love. Even at the outset he could not have earned the absolutely free initiative by which God offers himself to him; much less can he gain it back now by his own resources. The analogy of human friendship may shed light on this truth of faith. Even a human friendship is a freely bestowed gift, and if, by an act of disloyalty, I become unworthy of my friend’s trust, I lose all “rights” to his friendship. I may repent and may try to repair the broken relationship, but I cannot restore it on my own. I am completely dependent on my friend’s forgiveness and mercy. If this is the case with a human friendship, how much more is it true of the lost friendship of God. The initiative to restore man to God’s friendship must come from God himself. Left to his own resources, the sinner cannot rescue himself.* But the question still remains: why did God redeem man by the way of the Incarnation and death of his Son? Why could he not simply offer his grace for repentance and declare the repentant sinner forgiven?

4. Why Redemption through the Death of God’s Incarnate Son?

1. As a result of sin man has distorted God into either a cruel tyrant or a permissive, non-demanding force of love or simply into the non-existent sanction of an oppressive morality — to mention just a few of the many possibilities. In rescuing sinful man, God responded to man’s needs. He took into consideration the sinner’s distortions of divine reality, his suspicions, mistrust, and aggressivity towards the Divine. In this state man needed more than just a moral exhortation and a divine offer of grace to convert him. God’s grace had to provide man with tangible evidence for the reality of his infinite compassion and of his holiness; if it was to respect man’s rational nature, this evidence had to be both external and internal: historical facts and inner persuasion of grace; it had to be of such power as to shake man’s fiercely