

Sin in the Light of the Cross

M. Theodore Miglautsch

During the existence of humanity two events have been absolutely pivotal. First, the fall of man, when Adam and Eve deviated from the divine purpose. Second, the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. While some may say that these events are only relevant within Christianity, there is also a counter argument in the extent of Christianity's impact on the remainder of humanity, which has been extensive. The purpose of this paper is to explore briefly one significant aspect of the latter event, the humiliation of the cross.

The starting point is sin. Koehler gives a concise and classic definition, "sin is disobedience to His [God's] will."¹ This is a good beginning. Koehler goes on to declare that it is not based in an existence of evil but a lack of good. It might be argued that Koehler's definition has ignored implications of the original Hebrew word for sin, **⌘**. A possible translation from the Book of Judges would be, "each of whom could sling a stone at a hair and not sin (Judg. 20:16). The word often translated as "sin" in the Old Testament implies "to miss the appointed target or mark." Does Koehler's classic definition of sin hold true in the etymological context? Definitely, if one considers a proper understanding of the target, which is God's will. Sin is missing, often through rebellion, God's will. It calls to mind the defiant child, who, after estimating a parent's inability to apprehend him, goes running in the forbidden direction. However, it is important to consider another aspect of sin. Long before the defiant child there

¹Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1952), 62.

were two people in a garden with one instruction from God. That one instruction carried a promise, “when you eat of it you will surely die (Gen 3:17).” It is important to remember that death is rooted in a promise from God. Having established the connection among sin, death and a promise, we will return to it later in this paper.

The instantaneous aspect of sin has been defined, but there is also a durational aspect. Returning to The Great Divorce, Lewis uses the idea of rejecting God and His will as a progression occurring after death.² Admittedly, there are serious questions about the Biblical basis for a progression after death, but Lewis, by encapsulating the after death experience in a dream story, removes the doctrinal pretense.³ Still the concept of sin being a destructive progression remains. Sin is not only an instantaneous event but something that continues to expand, ignoring Lewis’ literary device, to the point of death.

St. Athanasius had a similar concept – that God created man in God’s image – but after the fall sin was progressively returning man to non-existence.⁴ Now this non-existence was not referring to just death itself but to a reversal of God’s work in man, both the creating in His image and the breathing of

²Clive Staples Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York, NY: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1978), 19.

³Ibid, 128.

⁴Saint Athanasius, *On The Incarnation*, trans. a religious of C. S. M. V. (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 30.

life. It is important to remember that the death resulting from sin – the rebellion against God’s will – was established by a promise from God. Or to put it simply, by God’s promise sin requires death.

Understanding that sin is both the progression from the image of God to non-existence and an instantaneous affront to God requiring death, the question remains – why the cross? The next piece of the puzzle rests in an attribute of God, His Holiness. To begin, the Hebrew word ___ means “to separate or set apart.” In describing God as holy, this etymologically implies separation. It is interesting how seldom the word appears before the introduction of the Mosaic Covenant. The seventh day of creation, which God declared as holy (Gen 2:3), is the only use of holy prior to Moses standing on holy ground (Exod 3:5). Interestingly, it was through Moses that God introduced the Law. Through this revelation both sin and holiness were established. The Law showed from what the people of Israel were to separate. God would use them to demonstrate His separation from sin through the sacrificial system and the lifestyle about which He instructed. Because God must be true to his nature, His hatred of sin was demonstrated by His wrath towards sinners. Through the period of the prophets God continues to reveal His attitude toward sin. The judgment on Jerusalem in 586 BC, with all its cruelty, is just one graphic demonstration of God’s hatred of sin.

Having briefly examined God’s Holiness, now a different attribute of God must be considered, God’s consistency. This can be most quickly addressed in His Hebrew name, _____. This was the name given to Moses (Exod 3:14), which is usually transcribed “LORD” in the NIV. The etymological root for this word implies a concept. Three different ways to say it are: “That which is in and of itself”; “self sustaining”; or just plain “IS.” The immutable nature of God can also be derived through reason. In defense of this approach it should be noted that Athanasius considered reason a major component of

the God Image in which man was created.⁵ There are certain requirements for God to be God: omniscience (Psalm 139:1-4); omnipresence (Psalm 139:5-12); omnipotence (Psalm 139:13-16); and perfection (Matt 5:48). Each of these terms are absolutes in their definition. This might be difficult to understand in today's pluralistic society where the only evil is the notion of absolutes. Moving away from this amorphous perspective to a more empirically pure reasoning, perfection has certain requirements. If perfection does not remain consistent, it is not perfection. For God to be perfect He must be immutable.

Again the question is asked, why the cross? At this point the offensive aspect of the cross must be noted. St. Paul said, "to the Jew it is a stumbling block and to the Greek it is foolishness (1 Cor 1:23)." Martin Hengel describes the atrocious nature of crucifixion by citing descriptions from ancient writers and historians. However, he does not stop there. Going to a deeper level, Hengel explains why the cross of Christianity was so offensive. Crucifixion was the name given to a variety of punishments where the executioner was allowed to vent fully his aggressions⁶. In every case the body of the victim was suspended like a sign on display. Sometimes this was after death while the more common methods used the display to inflict death. Each of the different cultures referenced in his book reserved this form of punishment to dispense complete humiliation.

There is a substitutionary element to the Cross of Christ. God gave a promise regarding sin. This was the promise of death to man if they rebelled against His will. When man did sin, God could not

⁵Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 28.

⁶Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1977), 25

ignore the promise and maintain His immutable character. Nor could God, being perfect, ignore the sinfulness, the progression back to non-existence, of mankind. His Holiness demanded sin be addressed as its true rebellion.

Here the obvious choice might be to follow Athanasius and others to further demonstrate the substitutionary aspect of the cross to address sin.⁷ Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness (Heb 9:22). The letter to the Hebrews goes on to talk about Christ's death being the one perfect sacrifice (Heb 10:14). This doctrine is fundamental to Christianity.

Still the substitutionary aspect of the cross does not explain why God used crucifixion as the instrument of Jesus' death. To this question John Stott, who also describes Christ as "Our Sinbearer⁸," gives an answer. Before Stott details the substitutionary aspect, he first shows the Cross of Christ as an example.⁹ Here he references the Greek word *ὑπόδειγμα* translated as, an example. This word, used only once in the New Testament (1 Peter 2:21), describes a teacher's copy book whereby students would learn the alphabet by copying the letters. Peter uses this to describe Christ's suffering as an example for us.

If this seems uncomfortable, then we should look back to the depravity of sin. Both Athanasius and Lewis mention the progression of sin. Athanasius refers to this as a return to non-existence, a moving away from God's Image. If man were created in God's image and sin progresses man away

⁷Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 25

⁸John R. W. Stott, *Basic Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), 93.

⁹Ibid, 90.

from that image, then both sin and crucifixion are dehumanizing. Athanasius does not miss this connection between the evil of sin and the evil of crucifixion.¹⁰

¹⁰Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 54.

One of the disappointments of this research is the lack of recent writings on the topic. This topic is so paramount to the church and yet so neglected in recent years. Koehler's only reference to the cross is a description of a Christian's cross to bear¹¹. However, his was not the only doctrinal book with this fault. Common Ground, by Jordan Bajis, an introduction to Eastern Christianity for the American Christian, focused on sacraments, authority, the Church and other doctrinal issues but never directly addressed Christ's crucifixion. With the exception of Stott's book titled The Cross of Christ the twentieth century passed with almost no major works on the subject. This is a sorry statement considering that by this obscenely dehumanizing¹² death Jesus accomplished something extraordinary. Jesus specifically states "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself (John12:32)." Even in the brief overview of this paper it seems this topic should be on the forefront in every Christian's life.

In conclusion, the parallel seems obvious: God wished to declare by the dehumanizing and humiliating peculiarity of crucifixion how sin does likewise to the true human nature intended for man. All sin is really evil. Christ said, "But he who has been forgiven little loves little." (Luke 7:47) We only love little if we fail to understand sin's significance in the light of Christ's crucifixion.

¹¹Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 2nd Rev. Ed. (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1952), 172.

¹²Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 38

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