

SIN, GUILT, REPENTANCE

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Some buzzwords in this little-visited area:

Penance from the Latin *poena* meaning *punishment, penalty*: accepting the need for some kind of *reparation* to be made for the damage of wrongdoing.

The biblical Greek background to this usage is the word *meta-melesthai*, which signifies a regret for an unworthy and punishable fault or deed.

Repentance from the Latin *pentire*, meaning *to turn or change direction*: a parallel coinage is the simple Latin term *conversio*, meaning *a turn-round or about-face*. This reflects a series of Greek terms in the Bible, *epi-strepho*, which means *to come back or return*, and *meta-noia*, which conveys *change of mentality*.

The prophets used the Hebrew term *shub*, which covers everything under “repentance” above.

Guilt refers to at least two things:

- the legacy of personal responsibility which attaches to a sinner, and
- the complex of emotions which flow from the acknowledgment of sin.

Knowledge of guilt - an awareness of our having sinned - seems to me to be an essential part of Christian experience. It is not necessary for this to be accompanied by huge emotional experiences in order to be genuine. Most sin is complex in nature, and contains a more or less impressive measure of goodness; otherwise we should scarcely be tempted to do it. Thus repentance for the stealing of a cream cake demands that we experience a disgust for theft and dishonesty, but not that we didn't enjoy it, or resolve never to enjoy cream cakes in the future.

Hidden in the emotional experience of guilt may be very dubious psychological forces, such as self-hatred, loathing for the life one has with its powerful drives and appetites, and a contempt for oneself which forgets the love of God for us, and can even lead to a kind of schizoid approach to life. Repentance is a total turning back to the author of our life, and must include a comprehensive acceptance of God's gifts.

Original Sin is not a Biblical term, and the precise significance of the story of the **Fall of Adam** is under pretty hot debate in the theological arena. It does not appear that the Old Testament as a whole could be said to be aware of any anthropology based on original sin. The Old Testament is predominantly positive about humanity, and has a pronounced tendency to exult in the divine gifts that characterize human existence. Only with the New Testament analysis conducted by Paul do we find an understanding of original sin as a cataclysmic wounding of human nature. In historical terms, such a presentation of human nature was required by the need for Paul to present “fallen humanity” as a single race, united in its helpless enslavement to sin and death, so that he could present the restored humanity of Jew and Gentile alike as coming through the one Saviour, Jesus Christ.

This was necessitated by the obsession of the Jews of the first century with their destiny as a nation chosen by God, and their anxiety for their future survival. Paul's policy of openly accepting Gentiles, unconverted to Judaism, into the Church dismayed Jewish Christian converts, and led to the greatest controversy the Church ever faced. We might like to see this as a determined revulsion against a narrow nationalism in Jewish Christianity, in favour of a new internationalism - greatly favoured by the huge arena of the Roman Empire, of which Paul could claim to be a citizen. In cultural terms, it has to be said that the horizons of the Jesus-movement in his own lifetime were local and rural ("If they refuse you in one town, go on to the next...go to the lost sheep of the tribes of Israel; you will not have gone the round of the towns of Israel before the Kingdom comes...") Whereas Paul's concept of salvation reaching to the ends of the earth, his missionary journeys, and so on, have to be seen as Empire-wide in their scale. In this sense he needed an analysis of the need for salvation which did not spring from an understanding of Jewish concerns (beginning from Abraham) but an analysis of human concerns (beginning with Adam and Eve).

Modern Catholic doctrine, reinforced by such men as Augustine of Hippo, has accepted Paul's analysis of human nature more or less unquestioningly, despite the contrast between Paul's interpretation of Genesis, and that of the Old Testament and subsequent Jews.

In our time, the former practice of the Catholic community has radically changed. The role of guilt has come under tremendous fire, and people have become resistant to *both* forms of guilt. Not only are we becoming anxious not to labour under undue criticism or low self-esteem, we are also becoming incapable of saying we are sorry, accepting we are wrong, or experiencing the need for salvation. This, in the end, will deprive Christianity of its basic shape.

Question: What role should awareness and understanding of sin play in the making up of our religious mind?