

## 9. Sin and Salvation: Transforming the Heart

"Sin" and "salvation" are loaded with many meanings throughout Christian history, but they are poorly understood.

### Thinking About Sin

Sin and confession of sin play central roles in Christianity and its emphasis is unique among religions. Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our sins (trespasses, debts) as we forgive those who sin (trespass) against us." Reason for Jesus' death: he died for our sins. Central issue: what separates us from God is "sin".

Bible's central plot: God creates world, the world gets lost, God seeks to restore the world. Is the language of sin and forgiveness helpful to illuminate what the Christian life is about or cloud it?

- **What is Sin?** "Disobeying God's laws" is most popular meaning. Rules matter—we can't live together without them. Other meanings: sin as a state or condition. State of self-centeredness. We have anxiety about our finitude and vulnerability so we become self-centered very early in life. State of separation or estrangement: separated from that to which we belong. We are estranged from God and center our lives in something other than God. Unfaithful to God (recall ch. 2).
- **Is "Sin" the Best Term for Our Problem?** Or should we use multiple images to speak about our problem? Bible has many rich images for naming our problem, only one of which is sin. We are blind, in exile, in bondage; we have closed hearts; we hunger and thirst; we are lost. Each image implies a solution. Get into problem if "sin" becomes the all-encompassing term for all of these images. Sin solution is "forgiveness". But if we're blind, we need sight, not forgiveness. If we are enslaved, we need liberation, not forgiveness. If we have closed hearts, we need to have our hearts opened, not forgiveness for having closed hearts.

Although sin is often involved in our human condition, our sad state is not always because of our deeds. Recall from ch. 8 that our closed hearts are a natural, inevitable result of growing up. We can be in bondage through no fault of our own. Even stronger: we cannot avoid bondage itself, exile, blindness, or developing closed hearts. Message of sin and forgiveness doesn't address these problems well. Borg favors letting go of sin as the umbrella or sole description for the human problem. Sin *plus* blindness, estrangement, lost, in exile, self-centered, sick, enslaved, etc.

The central images of the Christian life as a "way" do speak to these issues: the way to restoration of sight, the way to liberation from bondage, the way to having our hearts opened, etc. Multiple images of our condition would help us in speaking with greater effect to others whose central existential issue is not a sense of sin.

The use of "sin" today usually focuses on the individual's actions and obscures the reality of "social sin"—much of human suffering and misery is due to collective sin, the domination system of our world. We need to enrich our understanding of the condition from which we need deliverance.

## Salvation

Salvation most often associated with "heaven" or "going to heaven", the afterlife. But this hides the rich meanings of salvation in the Bible and Christian tradition.

- **Salvation as Heaven?** Whenever afterlife is emphasized, Christianity becomes a religion of requirements. Something we believe or do is what determines who gets to go to heaven. The "in group" (those who are saved) is distinguished from the "out group" (not saved). Our attention is focused on the afterlife (next world) instead of on transformation in this world.
- **Salvation in This Life.** Biblical understanding of salvation is for this world, not the afterlife. Belief in afterlife not arise until near the end of the writing of the Hebrew Bible with the book of Daniel (written 165 BCE). By Jesus' time, most Jews did believe in afterlife but Jesus not much concerned with life beyond death. Jesus' message was about a way of transformation in this world and the Kingdom of God on earth. Though New Testament affirms afterlife, it is not the primary message of New Testament community. The primary message is the new life "in Christ" in *this* life. New life in the now. "Eternal life" in the gospel of John means "the life of the age to come" and it is spoken of in the present tense—a present reality as it also involves a future destiny.

"Salvation" comes from a Latin word for "wholeness" or "healing": movement beyond fragmentation and being healed of the wounds of existence. Salvation is:

Light in our darkness, sight to the blind, enlightenment, liberation for captives, return from exile, the healing of our infirmities, food and drink, resurrection from the land of the dead, being born again, knowing God, becoming "in Christ", being made right with God ("justified").

- **Stories of Salvation.** Macro-stories of the Hebrew Bible:
  - Exodus, liberation from Egypt—land of bondage, life of powerlessness and victimization.
  - Journey of the return home from exile in Babylon—alienation, separation from home, meaninglessness.
  - Being cleansed, forgiven of our sin and impurity so that we can enter into the presence of God in the temple.

New Testament understanding of Jesus, the story of salvation in the New Testament:

- Jesus as liberator ⇔ exodus story. Salvation is liberation.
  - Jesus as "the Way" of return ⇔ exile story. Salvation is homecoming.
  - Jesus as the sacrifice ⇔ temple story. Salvation is about forgiveness and acceptance.
- **Salvation as Both Social and Personal.** Usually we view salvation as personal but salvation in the Bible is also social. Salvation is about our life together in a community, city, nation, world with peace *and* justice. The Kingdom of God is *social* salvation that is a stark alternative to the life of empire and under empire. The New Testament communities were communities of bread as well as Spirit.

- **Salvation and Response.** Salvation comes from God. God is the source. We respond. Without our response, little or nothing will change in our lives or in the life of the world. We without God cannot bring about transformation of us as individuals or societies. But God without our response will not bring about transformation.

### **Sin, Salvation, and Repentance**

Just as "sin" has been trivialized to become "breaking God's rules" and as "salvation" has been trivialized to become about individuals "going to heaven", repentance has been trivialized to become introspective guilt, feeling sorry for what you did or didn't do. But in the Bible, to repent means to return home to God—to walk the way in the wilderness that leads from Babylon (exile) to God. In the New Testament it also means to "go beyond the mind that you have" from the one shaped by the world to the mind you have "in Christ". Repentance is the path of salvation, reconnection, transformation in the personal *and* social.

- **Salvation and the Afterlife.** So what about an afterlife? Where does it fit into the Christian vision of life? A lot of questions about life beyond death and a lot of different answers for this among religions and even among Christians themselves today and throughout history. If there is life after death, is it reincarnation, or instant heaven or hell, or purgatory, or being dead until Jesus' second coming or...? Would our personal self-awareness survive? Would we be reunited with family? Would either of those be desirable or undesirable?

Different visions but all affirm a "moreness" and that is the ground of our hope. We do not die into nothingness; we die into God. The salvation of the Bible is the transformation of life, individually and together, here and now, and it is a hope for history and a hope that leads beyond history. Metaphor and poetry is the only language we can use to speak of what lies at the end of history and beyond history. The New Jerusalem of the Revelation of John; creation groaning in labor pains in Paul's letter to the Romans; now seeing in a mirror dimly but then seeing face to face, knowing fully then in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

Salvation is about life with God, life in the presence of God, now and forever.

## **Questions**

1. What does "sin" mean for you?
2. What is the problem of our life in this world that the term "sin" is used to describe?
3. Which of the other images of our problem that Borg describes did you find especially meaningful or helpful to you? Why or how so? Are there other images that Borg did not describe?
4. Borg states that the usual use of the term "sin" today obscures the reality of our "social sin". What does he mean by that and do you agree with him? Why or why not?
5. What does "salvation" mean for you?
6. How do you feel about Borg's discussion of the biblical understanding of salvation—that it is for this world, not the afterlife?
7. Which of the other images of salvation that Borg describes did you find especially meaningful or helpful to you? Why or how so? Are there other images that Borg did not describe?
8. What are the "macro-stories" of salvation in the Hebrew Bible and how does the story of Jesus' life in the New Testament match or echo those stories?
9. Are there other stories of salvation in our history since the New Testament canon was set in around 400 C.E.?
10. What is required for transformation to happen in our personal lives and our social lives together?
11. What does "repentance" mean for you? What are the meanings of "repentance" described in the Bible?
12. What role does belief in an afterlife play in your own faith? How important is it?