

## Saved From “Original Sin”<sup>1</sup>

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“I believe that Jesus is the Christ, son of the Living God, and I accept him as my personal Lord and Savior.” These words, or some version of them, may sound familiar to many members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). They constitute the confession of faith those wishing to join the church are asked to confirm. With the non-creedal stance of the Disciples of Christ denomination, this confession is the sole requirement for membership in the church; however, the meaning of this confession is left up to the individual to define. What does it mean to accept Jesus as one’s personal “Savior”? What is salvation?

When asked this question, most persons, within the dominant Christian tradition, usually answer with statements similar to the following. Salvation is eternal life, getting to heaven. Salvation means being saved from sin. Salvation guarantees that God has forgiven me. How does Jesus factor into this definition? Traditionally, Jesus has been understood as the sacrifice that saves humanity from sin and the power of death. Because Jesus paid the price for humanity’s sin, we are now redeemed and will go to heaven. Looked at closely, these understandings of salvation have little to do with Jesus. They do say much about humanity and God. Underlying these ideas of salvation and of Jesus is a view of humanity as sinful and in grave need of forgiveness. The result of this sinfulness is separation from God and death. God, then, is seen as needing a sacrifice in order to forgive humanity. The only acceptable sacrifice is the death of another person. Most of the “orthodox” views of salvation are grounded in the idea of “original sin”, indelibly imposed upon the Christian belief system by Augustine (4<sup>th</sup> century CE)<sup>2</sup>, and based on an unsubstantiated claim of the “fall of humanity.”

The element of humanity’s inherent sinfulness is rooted in a misreading of Genesis 2-3, the story of the Garden of Eden. The dominant Christian understanding of this text has been that, in choosing to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the man and the woman sinned against God, and the punishment for this sin was death. In addition, this sin of the first couple has been inherited by all humanity (i.e., original sin) and is the curse under which humans live. With this view of the human condition, Christianity proclaims Jesus as the sacrifice through which we are saved from sinfulness and death.

There are, however, serious flaws in this interpretation of the story. First, the word “sin” is never used in the Hebrew of Gen 2 or 3; the word first occurs in Gen 4, with the first murder. The couple’s actions of eating from the forbidden tree are never declared “sinful” nor are the humans “cursed” by God. Second, death is not a punishment for their behavior. The first humans were created mortal (i.e., they were always going to die) or else the tree of life would have been pointless. What the text states is that, with the new found knowledge of good and evil, the couple is in danger of eating from the tree of life and having to live forever with the awareness of their mistakes

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<sup>1</sup> Published in *DisciplesWorld*, Vol 3, Issue 5, April 2004, 3-5.

<sup>2</sup> Although Augustine was not the first to suggest the idea of “original sin”, his articulation of this theory was the most influential in the adoption of this view of humanity by later councils, including the Council of Trent in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

and those of others. God sends the couple out of the garden to protect them from the danger of immortality (Gen 3:22-23). Death is not a punishment; it is a gift of grace. Humanity is never declared as “originally sinful”. Rather, they are now like God, knowing good and evil, and thus have the responsibility of making choices and dealing with the consequences of those decisions.

If humans are not inherently evil, but rather are originally blessed,<sup>3</sup> then the traditional views of salvation must be reconsidered. If death is not the punishment for our sins, then from what, if anything, are we “saved”? This requires a reassessment of the human condition and a redefinition of salvation. Based on the creation stories of Gen 1 & 2-3, humanity is the only part of creation that is made in God’s image, given the responsibility of caring for God’s world, and given a conscience (the ability to make choices and be aware of both good and bad ones). Humans have a special role to play in the world, and God expects humanity to live up to this God-given potential.

Yet, throughout the biblical story, humanity seems to forget who they are called to be. When we do not fulfill God’s hopes for us, there are consequences to our actions; all of creation suffers from the bad choices humans make. However, it is not our mistakes that cause a break between humanity and God; God forgives our bad choices, without the need of an offering, or bribe. The separation between God and us is on our part; it is caused by our unwillingness to believe we are forgiven and loved. Rather than inherent sinfulness, humanity needs to be saved from believing that we are unworthy of God’s love, that we must somehow earn God’s forgiveness. Salvation is being assured that God loves us as we are; this is grace. Salvation also involves being liberated from the belief that we are not able, nor expected, to live out the image of God that dwells within us. This is the harder part of salvation for many to accept. It is easier for us to defend our actions by claiming that we are doomed to sin rather than acknowledging God’s expectations of us. Salvation that is based on Jesus’ sacrificial atonement for our sins requires little of the believer; all one must do is believe.

Instead, Jesus saves by reminding humanity that we are created in God’s image and loved by God. His life challenges humans to live up to God’s expectations of us. We are called to love God with all of our being and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Even more important is that Jesus taught people that they could not truly love their neighbor unless they believed themselves to be lovable. Jesus’ death on the cross did not pay some cosmic debt nor save humanity from sin and death. Rather, his death was the natural consequence of how he lived his life. His violent death was the result of his taking seriously God’s faith in us and calling people to a high level of accountability to God and to one another.

Christianity’s insistence on the “original sinfulness” of humanity has done great harm, not only to those who profess and practice the faith, but also to countless others who have lived in societies influenced by Christianity. By being told that they were inherently evil, humans have lived up to that expectation. They have believed themselves unlovable and unforgivable. Without being able to love themselves, they have been unable to love their neighbor likewise. The doctrine of “original sin” has provided the excuse, “I’m only human”, as an irresponsible justification for choosing evil.

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<sup>3</sup> The phrase “original blessing” is borrowed from Matthew Fox and his book, *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality*. (New York: Jeremy Tarcher, Inc., 1996).

If we embrace the idea that humans are not originally sinful but rather originally blessed and endowed with the ability to choose good over evil, then how we live our lives must change. We must be held accountable for the wrongs we do. The defense of “I’m only human” never has been an adequate excuse. Rather, when humans choose the evil over the good, the accusation should be: “How could you do this, after all you are human?” Like Jesus, we must hold ourselves to a high standard, living as those who reflect the Divine in the world.