

CHAPTER VI

ARTICLE V.—*Of the Sin of Man.*—We believe that our first parents, being tempted, chose evil, and so fell away from God and came under the power of sin, the penalty of which is eternal death; and that, by reason of this disobedience, all men are born with a sinful nature, that we have broken God's law and that no man can be saved but by His grace.

This article deals with the most tremendous fact of human history, the fact of sin. Endless debate has arisen regarding various aspects of this gloomy and mysterious subject. It may be questioned, indeed, whether the debate has not diverted men's minds from the awfulness of the tragedy, and the intolerable burden of Man's responsibility for it. This article confines itself to the answers of the Christian conscience to the deep questions which arise as we contemplate the fact of Sin. (1) Was it necessary? Some theories, philosophical and scientific, have maintained that it was. Sin was, according to this view, a necessary stage in man's progress toward virtue. He could not reach goodness, without first tasting the bitterness of moral evil. The article meets this view with flat denial. If sin is a necessity, whether physical or metaphysical, it is not sin, whether in the race or the individual. Let there be no paltering with conscience on this point. The preacher need have no hesitation in proclaiming that Sin is Sin. That is a value-judgment, which has the consent of every

conscience, that is not stifled by false estimates. (2) How did it arise? The narrative in Genesis is not history, as we moderns regard history. But it is true to the very core. Sin was not inflicted on man by an alien influence. Man was not compelled to Sin. He sinned of his own act. He was tempted, but not forced. There arose for him a moral crisis. A choice confronted him; and he chose the evil, and rejected the good. There are determinative acts in life. We may have forgotten them, or misinterpreted them. But they have controlled our own career, and have entered with pregnant meaning into the lives of others beyond our reckoning. After some such analogy, we interpret the history of the human race. A record began which is the story of mankind, stained throughout with nameless wrong. (3) What is its root in human nature? When we push our analysis of sin far enough, what do we find prompting it? The answer of Scripture, reaffirmed in conscience, is unbelief. The ultimate choice for man lay between God's will and man's will. Man would not submit himself in trustful submission to God's revelation of what is good. Sin is essentially rejection of God. One writer calls it "deicide"—the attempt to dethrone the Almighty. Let us keep carefully to the personal relations of God and man. We are not dealing with abstractions. The Bible sets before us God, who is Love, whose will is supreme in creation and providence, and man who is made by God and meant for God. Man ought to have yielded himself to God;

and so doing he would have glorified God, and reached his own good. He did not. He set his own will against God. That is sin, in origin and in meaning, and in all its innumerable manifestations. (4) What are its consequences? We must be careful to avoid imputing any arbitrariness to God in connection with the consequences which sin brings upon the sinner. The analogy of the court room does not help us here. Human justice adds something to the crime, to express the condemnation which society pronounces upon it. But the punishment of sin is just the sin itself, as it works itself out in the experience of the sinner. There is nothing more terrible about sin than the inevitableness of its issues. They come upon the sinner with the inexorableness of a law of nature. "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." Yet we must not exclude God from this inevitable reaction of the moral order against the fact of sin. This reaction is His justice. The consequences which devolve upon the sinner, follow by Divine appointment, and come with the Divine will. In all the relations of God and man, we must recognize to the full their personal character. When we sin, we are confronted by the living God, the God of love and holiness. Against *Him*, and not an *order* or a *system*, we have sinned. Judgment and redemption alike are His strange work. The consequences of sin are the meaning of sin, and that is threefold: (a) Separation from God. Sin and holiness are mutually exclusive. To live in sin is to live without

God, and to be without hope in the world. No language can exaggerate the horror of such a situation. God is the chief Good, the true Life of the soul. To sin is to separate ourselves from God, to find ourselves self-excluded from the fellowship which is meant to be the crowning glory and blessing of human nature, to be alone for ever with the reproaches of a guilty conscience. (b) Bondage to sin. The modern mind is very susceptible to the idea of the power of habit. Common observation and scientific psychology alike have forced upon men's attention the terrific power, which repeated actions gain over the whole man, and the terrifying swiftness with which this tyranny is established. Sin is not, in the individual or the race, a mere heap of unrelated incidents. It is, as one theologian has expressed it, "a kingdom of sin," whose subjects are bond slaves of a force, to meet which they have no countervailing energy. Sin is man's doing and man's responsibility; but it has fastened upon humanity like a fate, which has wrought incalculable and unspeakable woe amid the innumerable members of a sinful race. (c) Death. That life, which is not hid with Christ in God, is already death. The corrupting and destructive effects of this inward principle of death are, in part, manifest during our time on earth. The experience of dying, while yet unreconciled to God, is, as one has said, the "sacrament of sin"—sign and seal and final application, within time, of what sin is, and effects. What lies beyond, who shall say? We can put no concrete

meaning into "eternal death." A horror of great darkness breaks on us. Not to be with God, not to be of the fellowship, to be left to ourselves; that is sin, that is death. Modern refinement rejects the crudities of the older preaching. But the fact of sin remains; and it means death, to the utmost confines of that awful conception. (5) How far does it extend? Does it include the whole human race? Are all men sinners? The article affirms the universality of sin. It does so upon two grounds. (a) The first may be termed doctrinal, and was laid down by Paul and by Augustine. The human race is not an aggregate of unrelated units. It is an organic unity. Individual human beings are members of that organism, and for good and for evil share its life, and are endowed with its moral qualities. Sin is no mere accident which may or may not adhere to the individual. It is a racial characteristic; and this sinful nature is part of the heritage of every human being that is born into the race. It is in this aspect that Scripture presents the human race. On this sombre fact Augustine laid emphasis. The history of nations and of mankind everywhere confirms the verdict that men are by nature sinful. The operation of heredity and environment have created a situation, which unquestionably influences for evil every human being, who belongs to what is in very deed a "kingdom of sin," who breathes its atmosphere, and bears its impress. (b) The second is furnished by observation and experience. It is true that it is impossible to have under direct

observation every member of the race. But all that we know of men, of every race, confirms the judgment that there is "none righteous, no not one." The older theology erred in describing the wickedness of man in terms that are a manifest exaggeration, and have repelled the modern mind, and are the cause of a revival of Pelagianism. No man, of course, is as bad as he might be. Still it remains true that a man's character is determined by his actions; and, if even one of these is sinful, the whole man is involved. It is not to bring a railing accusation against our fellows, to say that they are all sinful, not one capable of standing in his own righteousness secure before the just judgment of God. And what we say of them, they say of themselves. The more competent they are to judge themselves, the more severe their judgment is. The educated and disciplined conscience, unblinded by habitual sin, unhardened by pride and self-righteousness, bears witness to the presence and operation of sin; and the man, who is by all tests "good," is the one man who charges himself with shortcomings and offences, and with sincerity and humility declares himself a sinner as he stands in the searching light of the Divine holiness. For the most of us, there is no possibility of mistake. We know that we are sinners, by nature, and by long habit. From every side the evidence presses in upon us. A great poet has declared that he sees "reasons and reasons" for the truth of Christianity; and this, above all, that it is bold enough to

meet the old stupid claim of self-righteousness with flat denial, and to teach definitely "original sin, the corruption of man's heart." Modern Pelagianism, with its magnifying of man's goodness, and its depreciation of God's grace, is not merely a heresy, it is sheer unmitigated ignorance, of which, common knowledge of men and their ways, as well as of our own hearts and their deceitfulness, is the exposure and the refutation.

We ought not to pass without mention the serious problem which emerges when we affirm the universality of sin. If the race is sinful, and if every human being is sinful, the pressure upon the individual must be inconceivably great, so that his becoming an actual transgressor is practically inevitable, how then is he responsible? The problem is insoluble by any calculation which we can make. But we set against the gigantic influence of heredity, environment, and example, the fact, to which experience gives ample warrant, the fact of man's freedom, of his ability to cope with all the circumstances in which he finds himself, and through them and spite of them reach toward the end which is set before him. In other words, used by Dr. Denney, the universe in which man is set, with all the history which is behind him, fixes his *trial*, not his *destiny*. Life is probation. Man, free and responsive, undergoes the discipline. If he fails under the trial, he has not been bludgeoned by fate. The burden of the failure rests on him. Here we bow before the sovereignty of God, in His

love and wisdom. The kind of probation, the degree and measure of the discipline, are secrets hid in the everlasting counsels of God. He alone knows the whole situation, and can weigh the responsibility, and estimate the guilt. With respect to the innumerable souls who have passed through "earth's probation space" and are now entered on the award, we can only say, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" It is not for us to pass judgment on any man. Be it ours to note the conditions under which life is to be conducted, by relation to which its issues shall be determined. (6) In view of the appalling fact of sin, and of the state in which all sinful men are placed, how is deliverance possible, and what guarantee have we that it will ever be achieved? (a) In the first place, let us be sure of what the situation actually is. In plain words, it is one of infinite need. There is nothing man can do, which will deal effectively and finally with the situation created by sin. Sin has separated him from God—he cannot heal the breach. It has reduced him to bondage—he cannot break the fetters which hold him. He has the sentence of death in himself—he cannot acquire spiritual life by any effort he can make. His very nature is tainted and corrupt—he cannot cleanse his soul. In short, man needs salvation. And salvation, that is, in one aspect, deliverance from sin; in another, attainment of the good, individual and social, which he has missed. Before this, his exceeding need, man stands helpless. (b) In the

second place, let us grasp the central truth of the Gospel. God enters into the situation created by sin, and deals with it as man cannot do, provides the salvation of which man stands in infinite need. He does so by his own personal action and suffering. He is Love. His grace is just His love, in active operation for the redemption of man. Between man and uttermost ruin, stands nothing but grace, Divine, all-sufficient. Salvation is possible only through God's grace; and, for those in whom that grace operates, salvation in every aspect, to the utmost limit of conquest of all evil, and attainment of all good, is not merely a wistful hope, but a glorious certainty, filling the trustful and expectant soul with hope and gladness.