

UNKNOWN OR UNCONSCIOUS SIN

Does It Exist?

Is It a Problem in Laodicea?

Can It Be Overcome?

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November 11, 2009

The America of today seems incapable of persecuting people for their religious convictions. But prophecy indicates that multitudes of apparently liberty-loving people of today will tomorrow oppress the consciences of their fellowmen, choosing in principle to revive the horrors of the Dark Ages. This “national apostasy will be followed by national ruin” (RH Dec. 18, 1888).

Will these multitudes suddenly acquire this terrible sin? Or is it already smoldering undetected beneath the surface of national good will, gaiety and material prosperity, awaiting only the mark of the beast issue to activate it and expose it? Did it exist in principle a hundred years ago in the time of the Blair Sunday Bill and the Tennessee chain gangs?

In the final crisis within the remnant church, “many a star that we have admired for its brilliancy will then go out in darkness. Chaff like a cloud will be become away as the wind” (5T 81). Does the pure wheat suddenly become chaff? Is final apostasy a new development or the disclosure of a buried, perhaps unknown alienation from God that was present all the time in the heart?

Is an outward sin that suddenly appears in the life a new phenomenon or the open expression of a

secret sin, such as lust developing into adultery or hatred becoming murder? We agree that such a sin can be cherished in a person’s heart while other people are not aware of however, the *real* issue here is whether sin can be cherished in the heart when the person himself is not aware of it.

Are our motivations always apparent to us? Can we assume we are righteous when our real motivations are selfish? Are selfish motivations actually sinful? Can a person sincerely think he or she is converted when in reality unknown selfishness is spoiling the character and nullifying one’s assumed witness for Christ? Can we “scatter abroad” while we sincerely think we are “gathering” with Him? Could this be one reason why we fail to attract more young people to the Saviour?

Can a person be genuinely converted, sincerely living up to all the light he or she has, and yet unknown sin lurk beneath the surface that must come to knowledge and be repented of before the seal of God can be applied? Or have God’s people throughout the ages always been sealed when they were first genuinely converted? Is there a final sealing work related to the character development of God’s people, or is it a mere ritual in heaven?

Is it possible that in past ages saints who were genuinely converted did not in their lifetime receive the seal of God because of unknown sin? For example, was John Wesley’s sincere Sunday-keeping and Sabbath-breaking an unknown sin, or

was his transgression of the fourth commandment something less than sin?¹

When can we safely *claim* to be *completely* converted or safely *feel* or say, “I am saved”? On what foundation does a true assurance of salvation rest?

What hinders God’s people from finishing the gospel commission in all the world? Is the real problem the presence of sin “in the camp”? If the answer is yes, what is that sin? Why has it not been overcome during the past 150 years that we have understood the Laodicean message? Is it a sin for God’s people to be lukewarm today, to say or to feel that they are “rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,” yet “know not” that they are “wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked”? Or is this self-deception merely an unfortunate naivete, something less than sin? When Jesus says, “You . . . do not know” (Rev. 3:17), is He talking about unknown sin or something less serious? If it is something less serious, Why does He say that the only remedy is to “repent”?

¹ This does not imply that an unknown sin necessarily implies guilt. The guilt is covered or atoned for by the continued mediation of Christ. Getting ready for death so that we can be assured of salvation in the resurrection is not our concern here. The real issue is a preparation for translation without seeing death, and the final vindication of Christ. Stated another way, the issue is: Whether Christ’s intercessory and substitutionary work must never come to an end. If it must come to an end, it follows that there must be a character development of “overcoming even as [Christ] over me” that no community of saints have ever previously experienced.

We all believe there is a unique factor in the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary that has to do with a problem of sin in the hearts of God’s people. If we are correct, there are other questions we need to ask. Is that sin *only* of a personal, individual nature, or is it also of a *corporate* nature? If so, how can it be repented of? Could such a repentance be part of Ellen White’s term “final atonement”? Does that uniquely Adventist phrase have reference to the 144,000 not merely as individuals but as a group “sealed” and corporately “united” “in a perfect square” (EW 15, 16)?

What is Sin?

While the Bible defines sin as “the transgression of the law” (1 John 3:4, KJV), it nowhere says that transgression of the law is limited to consciously performed outward acts. Adultery exists long before the outward act if the purpose is cherished in the heart (Mt. 5:27-30), and hatred is already murder long before one pulls the trigger (1 John 3:15). Paul probes deeper into the nature of transgression of the law when he says, “Whatever is not from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23). This is not an alternative definition of sin, but a deeper insight into the correct one.

If Scripture teaches the truth of *righteousness by faith*, the opposite must be that *unrighteousness* (sin) is by non-faith (or unbelief). Sin has its roots in a heart condition of unbelief or non-faith. And Paul’s idea of faith is a heart-appreciation of the *agape* of Christ. That love was revealed most fully in its breadth, length, depth, and height, in the cross. In order to appreciate what sin is, we must understand

more clearly what faith is. Here is one of Ellen White's clearest definitions of faith:

You may say that you believe in Jesus, when you have an appreciation of the cost of salvation. You may make this claim when you feel that Jesus died for you on the cruel cross of Calvary; when you have an intelligent, understanding faith that his death makes it possible for you to cease from sin and to perfect a righteous character through the grace of God, bestowed upon you as the purchase of Christ's blood. (RH July 24, 1888).

Christ's definition of faith is in perfect harmony—"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish" (Jn. 3:16). It is impossible for anyone to "cease from sin" without that "intelligent, understanding faith" that includes "an appreciation of the cost of salvation"—the cost of that divine loving and giving. This brings us to the cross.

Biblical unbelief, therefore, [whether in the OT or the NT], is a hard-hearted, self-satisfied *lack* of appreciation for that love of Christ (Heb. 3:7-19). *This is the root of sin.* And it is always volitional, whether one is conscious of the choice or not. We read how that that sin was ancient Israel's constant failing. And it finally motivated the Jews to crucify the Son of God. It is at the cross that we see sin fully exposed in the rejection and murder of Christ. All other categories of sin are caught up and absorbed in that greatest sin of the ages.

But this Biblical unbelief was notably an unknown sin, eluding the consciousness of those professed

people of God. Prophetic insight alone could discern it. For example, the apostasy of Elijah's day was unconscious, a gradual losing "sight of the provisions made for their spiritual welfare" (PK 137). In Jeremiah's day the priests and people were not aware of their apostasy: "How can you say, 'I am not polluted, I have not gone after the Baals'? . . . You say, 'Because I am innocent, surely His anger shall turn from me.' . . . You say, 'I have not sinned'" (Jer. 2:23, 35). "When you show this people all these words, . . . they [will] say to you, 'Why has the Lord pronounced all this great disaster against us? Or what is our iniquity? Or what is our sin that we have committed against the Lord our God?'" (16:10). The final sin of sins that filled up their descendants' cup of iniquity was an unknown one, for Jesus prayed for His murderers, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). Thus the greatest sin ever committed was one "they do not know," an unconscious one, done by the religious people of God's chosen nation on earth.

And that sin remains the fundamental sin of the whole world even today: "That prayer of Christ for His enemies embraced the world. It took in every sinner that had lived or should live, from the beginning of the world to the end of time. Upon all rests the guilt of crucifying the Son of God" (DA 745).

Why Is This So?

Because "every sinner" by nature would do that awful deed if he had not repented and thus been redeemed from it. Given the right circumstances,

the right pressures, “every sinner” would do no better than those people did two thousand years ago. We actually crucify Christ afresh in all lovelessness of our brethren or our fellowmen. The inhumanity of man toward man is in reality inhumanity toward Christ. “The books of heaven record the sins that would have been committed had there been opportunity” (5BC 1085). If they “record” such sins, it is obvious that such sins must eventually be blotted out because a record is permanent until erased.

There is an important truth implicit in the message of Christ’s righteousness—no one of us is innately better than another; all genuine righteousness is imputed by Christ. Luther wisely said, “One should exercise mercy, for we are all made of the dough of which prostitutes and fornicators are made. If we stand, we stand by grace alone; otherwise our piety stands on a wisp of straw and soon collapses.”² This principle is expressed as follows (the disturbing 5BC 1085 statement about “the books of heaven” belongs with this one):

We are still in a world where Jesus, the Son of God, was rejected and crucified, where the guilt of despising Christ and preferring a robber . . . still rests. Unless we individually repent . . . we shall lie under the full condemnation that the action of choosing Barabbas instead of Christ merited. The whole world stands charged today with the deliberate rejection and murder of the Son of God. . . . All . . . would act the same part,

² *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, ed. Ewald M. Plass, Vol. III, p. 4263.

were the opportunity granted, as did the Jews and people of the time of Christ. They would be partakers of the same spirit that demanded the death of the Son of God. (TM 38).

This does not mean that God charges this *guilt* (or responsibility) upon mankind before each individual finally rejects repentance. Christ’s prayer for forgiveness is still effective; but the final judgment of the lost will demonstrate the reality of this deep, underlying sin that has all along been unconscious:

In the day of final judgment, every lost soul will understand the nature of his own rejection of truth. The cross will be presented, and its real bearing will be seen by every mind that has been blinded by transgression. Before the vision of Calvary with its mysterious Victim, sinners will stand condemned. . . . Men will see what their choice has been. . . . The thoughts of all hearts shall be revealed. (DA 58).

The obvious intent of this passage is to show that the lost have *not seen* “what their choice has been” and thus they have not understood “the nature of [their] own rejection of truth.” It comes to consciousness too late. Their lives have been a succession of wrong choices, made unconsciously. “The heart is the treasure-house of sin; not being expelled, it is hidden until an hour of opportunity, and then it is revealed, and springs into action” (Letter H-16f, 1892. This statement would be pointless if “hidden” means only from someone else, and not from the sinner himself). Jesus tells us of the sad consequences of this unknown sin for people who have been sincere:

Many will say to Me in that day. “Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?” And then will I declare to them. “I never knew you.” (Mt. 7:22, 23).

At this point we can ask what may appear to be a foolish question, but it is relevant: Is the crucifixion of Christ really *a sin*, or is it merely a sociological evil that became necessary in a less than perfect world? Caiphas had sociological reason on his side when he argued that it was “expedient” that one die for the nation rather than for all to die. To Caiphas, crucifying the Son of God is not sin; it is merely an unpleasant administrative necessity. Could it be that Caiphas’ followers today are also playing games with sin, refusing to face the stark reality of its existence? Could Seventh-day Adventists unwittingly play that game?

Recognizing the reality of unknown sin as the factor hindering the finishing of God’s work can resolve the spiritual paralysis that now afflicts Laodicea. It can also solve the thorny problem of “original sin.” Unknown sin is the reality toward which that confused idea has long been pointing. While it is true that sin involving guilt is always volitional, the choice may often be an unconscious one, possibly even an infantile one. A baby who has temper tantrums is displaying something that the infant Jesus did not display. His sinlessness was not due to a genetic advantage, for from the first He came, with “a sanctified human will” (ST, Oct. 29, 1894).

Scriptural Insights Into Unknown Sin

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked who can know it?” (The question is: can we be deceived about our own hearts?) The intent of the passage seems to be that there is wickedness lying beneath the surface of human hearts. Yet the Lord says He will “search the heart” and “test the mind” (Jer. 17:9, 10). The KJV says “reins” or kidneys, a Hebrew idiom difficult to understand apart from recognizing unconscious motivations. The ancients were relatively unacquainted with the functions of physiology. The kidneys symbolized for them the unknown depths of one’s feelings or emotions. “I know the abysses,” and ‘discerner of hearts and searcher of the reins’ were old Egyptian titles for divine beings” (*The Expositor’s Greek New Testament*, Vol., 5, pp. 361, 362). The true process of disclosing this reality must become complete in the time of the “final atonement.”

Only Christ has fully known what lies within those depths, for He alone was “made . . . to be sin for us” (2 Cor. 5:21). What He knew slew Him on His cross!

But the reality of self-knowledge was veiled from His apostles. He has to tell them, “You do not know what manner of spirit you are of” (Luke 9:55). “Hearing” and “seeing,” the people of His day did “not perceive” (*oida*, be conscious; Mt. 13:14). Mark adds, “lest. . . their sins be forgiven them” (4:12). *In other words, their sins could not be forgiven unless they became conscious of them.*

When David prays, “Who can understand his errors? Cleanse me from secret faults” (Ps. 19:12),

he is obviously speaking of faults or sins that he cannot be conscious of apart from the ministry of the Holy Spirit. He is not speaking of secret sins consciously cherished; if he were, he would say, “We *understand* our errors.”

Moses prays, “You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance” (Ps. 90:8). He, cannot be praying about secret sins already known and confessed, for they are not displayed “in the light” of His “countenance.” They are cast in the depths of the sea. Moses’ prayer vividly depicts mankind’s lifelong conflict with unrealized sin. The work accomplished in the cleansing of the sanctuary must at last resolve the problem by the Holy Spirit bringing it to full knowledge.

Solomon understood how prone we are to self-deception: “All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirits” (Pr. 16:2). King Hezekiah in his illness sincerely thought he had “walked before [God] in truth and with a loyal heart, and [did] what was good in [His] sight” (2 Kings 20:3). Yet we read that “God withdrew from him, in order to test him, that he might know all that was in his heart” (2 Chron. 32:31). Hezekiah’s foolish sin of pride disclosed what was there all the time “in his heart,” a classic example of buried, unknown sin in a wonderful man of God highly honored of Heaven. Where he failed, the saints of God must eventually succeed! (See GC 425, 623). They dare not repeat his folly, for if they “should prove themselves unworthy, and lose their lives

because of their own defects of character, then God’s holy name would be reproached” (p. 619).

All the while that good King Hezekiah walked in his apparently to himself “loyal heart” (“with a perfect heart,” KJV), the books of heaven recorded the sins that he would commit when the “opportunity” presented itself. That “opportunity” came in the visit of the ambassadors from Babylon (see. 5BC 1085). Then his unknown sin of pride was revealed.

The wise in heart in ancient Israel cherishes an intelligent grasp of the gospel as did their father Abraham. Therefore they had to discern that the antitypical Day of Atonement comprised the final blotting out of sin through the ministry of the High Priest. He alone could bring unknown sin to consciousness.

Unconscious Sin in Unconverted People

The Jews who rejected Christ never dreamed where their sinful unbelief would lead when at last their “opportunity” came at Calvary.

When the two-horned beast of Revelation 13 enforces the mark of the beast, we shall see their history repeated. The fun-loving, freedom-cherishing multitudes absorbed today in their merry pursuit of pleasure can hardly dream of the evil they are capable of doing when at last serious unforeseen crises pressure them and thus provide their “opportunity.” Fear and terror for their security will motivate them to repudiate the principles of liberty that have made this nation great and kept it prosperous. They will then do what Americans have long thought impossible for them to do—persecute for conscience’ sake.

When the ancient Jews rejected and stoned their prophets, the dimensions of their deeply buried sin were greater than they realized they were on their way to Calvary. But God did not hold the *guilt* of that sin against them until they did the deed, and even then their Victim prayed for their forgiveness. Thus, they will never face their full guilt until the day of final judgment.

Likewise, the generation who will finally enforce the mark of the beast are not today charged with the *guilt* (or responsibility) of that sin until it is committed. Thus “those who live in this day are not accountable for the deeds of those who crucified the Son of God” (RH Apr. 11, 1893). Christ still bears the guilt of the world as Intercessor and Substitute. But the ultimate sin lies buried in every unconverted heart and will finally manifest itself in the open unless there is repentance and conversion. The people of a hundred years ago could have enforced the mark of the beast if the restraint of the Holy Spirit had been removed from them. Innately, they were no better than the final generation will be. When the High Priest ceases His intercession, each unreconciled human heart will act out to the full the evil that has always been latent and repressed within it. The history of the final generation will be the true undisclosed history of the entire human race “in Adam.” Every lion is by nature a man-eater, and will surely turn to human flesh if the “opportunity” of hunger someday pressures him sufficiently.

An example of obviously unconscious sin is Hazeal. He was “astonished . . . when the prophet

told him of his future course”: “‘I know the evil that you will do to the children of Israel: Their strongholds you will set on fire . . . and their young men you will kill with the sword; and you will dash their children, and rip open their women with child.’ So Hazeal said, ‘But what is your servant—a dog, that he should do this gross thing?’” (2 Kings 8:12, 13; MYP 278). Probably Hitler in his youth also never dreamed of the evil he was capable of doing.

We can be sure that D. M. Canright in his youth could never have imagined the evil, untrue things he would in later life write about Ellen White. He often thought he was truly converted! “Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.”