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Scripture

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THE REMISSION OF SINS—I

The remission of sins is most immediately associated in the mind of a Catholic with the Sacrament of Penance; for this sacrament many Catholics in England would simply use the name 'Confession,' and if they reflected upon the question would probably consider it a more suitable name, since, at least, it refers to the most onerous part of the whole rite, whilst 'Penance' is associated with a far less essential, and certainly less onerous complementary duty to be fulfilled, *after* forgiveness has been granted. To many the name Penance might seem something of a misnomer in present practice. And 'Confession' is evocative of the belief in the remission of sins through this sacrament, for much of the teaching concerning this is presented as an answer to the question: Why must we confess our sins to the priest? We are told¹ that Our Lord appointed the apostles as judges, to exercise a juridical power, and that in order that this juridical power of forgiving sins may be exercised, it is necessary to reveal our sins to them, in the person of their successors. He did this after the Resurrection, when he breathed upon the apostles and said: 'Receive the Holy Spirit; whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven them, and whose sins you shall retain they are retained' (John 20:23). And the juridical nature of the apostolic authority had already been set forth in the 'binding and loosing' texts of Matt. 16:18 and 18:18.

The scriptural foundation for the belief in a juridical power of forgiving sins seems quite clear, and it may be a matter of considerable surprise to find that the Fathers of the Church during the first three centuries failed to see this. They do not refer to these texts when dealing with the question of forgiveness of sins committed after the reception of Baptism.² This would not be of particular significance,

¹ cf. Council of Trent, Sess. xiv, cap. 5 (DB 899)

² Origen, it is true, does refer to John 20:23 when stating that even certain sins against God (as distinct from sins against one another) may be forgiven. To the question: When a man sin against God who will intercede for him? (cf. 1 Sam. 2:25), he replies: 'He upon whom Jesus has breathed, as upon the apostles, and who can be known from the fruits, as having made room for the Holy Spirit, and having become spiritual by being led by the Spirit in the manner of a son of God to each of those things to be done according to the word, remits whatever God remits, and retains

if it were not for the fact that precisely during these first three centuries one of the most crucial questions which exercised the Church was whether there be any forgiveness of sins for the baptised. The penitential controversy is one of the most difficult questions in the history of theology, and there is a wide variety of opinions concerning it; but at least all would agree that a body of opinion in the Church expressed grave doubts on the possibility of any such forgiveness. In such circumstances it does seem worthy of note that those who rightly maintained the possibility of forgiveness of sins after Baptism did not have recourse to the text from John. They obviously needed the support of the Scriptures for their teaching; since they did not seek it here we may conjecture that they interpreted the text in a way which, to say the least, gave it a less direct reference to the forgiveness of sins after Baptism than we give to it. Thus Tertullian, arguing strongly enough for the possibility of a second repentance (namely, forgiveness of sins after Baptism) refers to such scriptural evidence as the situation of the various churches mentioned in the Apocalypse who have evidently fallen from their first fervour, and yet are all given 'general monitions to repentance—under comminations it is true; but He would not utter comminations to one *unrepentant* if He did not forgive the repentant.'¹ The Spirit, he claims, has elsewhere demonstrated this profusion of His clemency, and he refers to Jer. 8:4 (LXX), Os. 6:6, Luke 15:7, 10; the parables of the lost drachma, the sheep that has strayed and the prodigal son all provide excellent examples of God's willingness to forgive.² On the question of a juridical power exercised by God's representatives in putting into effect this forgiveness he is silent, and makes no reference to John 20:23.³

¹ 'On Repentance,' chap. viii, in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, xi, Edinburgh MDCCCLXIX, p. 271

² *ibid.*

³ Tertullian does, however, provide evidence that Matt. 16:16 was quoted by his adversaries to support their claim to forgive sins against chastity, committed, presumably, after the reception of Baptism: 'But, you say, the Church has the power of forgiving sins. This I acknowledge . . . I now inquire into your opinion, (to see) from what source you usurp this right to the Church. If, because the Lord has said to Peter, "Upon this rock will I build my Church," "to thee have I given the keys of the heavenly kingdom"; or, "Whatsoever thou shalt have bound or loosed

the incurable sins, ministering for God Who alone has power to remit, like the prophets, by speaking not their own things, but those of the divine will for God. The words for the apostles' remission run thus: "Receive . . . (John 20:23)."' (*De Orat.* 28, 9) But it is quite clear that Origen does not see in this text the conferring of a juridical power. The reception of the Spirit gives them that priestly wisdom whereby they know for whom they may intercede by prayer and sacrifice, as in the Old Law. They will not commit the monstrous error of interceding for those who have committed sins which God has no intention of forgiving—the sins unto death. Hence B. Poschmann's claim that here we have an example of interpretation 'für die Vergebungsvollmacht bei der Busse' (*Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, iv, 3, p. 4, ftn. 4) is greatly exaggerated.

The Fathers do understand this text as conferring a juridical power, but this power is exercised in the forgiving of sins by the administration of Baptism. As an example we quote St Cyprian, writing during the controversy on heretical baptism: 'But it is manifest, where and by whom remission of sins can be given, that, namely, which is given in Baptism. For to Peter first, on whom He built the Church, and from whom He appointed and shewed that unity should spring, the Lord gave that power, that whatsoever he should loose on earth should be loosed in heaven. And after His Resurrection also, He speaketh to the Apostles, saying, As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you. And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whose soever sins ye remit . . . retained. Whence we learn that they only who are set over the Church, and are appointed by the law of the Gospel and the ordinance of the Lord, may lawfully baptise and give remission of sins; but, without, nothing can be bound or loosed, where there is no-one who can either bind or loose.'¹

This interpretation of the texts is in line with the earliest forms of the Creed where the remission of sins is linked with Baptism: 'One Baptism unto the remission of sins.' By the time of Hippolytus (d. 235) 'the prominence of the remission of sins is now so great that the phrase is virtually a synonym for Baptism itself. . . . The whole elaborate catechumenical preparation is seen to be "a vast sacramental dominated by the idea of exorcism."'² On the other hand St Cyril of Alexandria, in the fifth century, clearly states that the text of John confers the power of forgiving sins in two ways: 'They who have the Spirit of God remit or retain sins in two ways, as I think. For they invite to Baptism those to whom this sacrament is already due from the purity of their lives, and their tried adherence to the faith; and they hinder and exclude others who are not as yet worthy of the divine grace. And in another sense, also, they remit and retain sins, by rebuking erring children of the Church, and granting pardon to those who repent.'³

The fact that the early Fathers saw in this text a reference to the

¹ Epistle LXXIII, in *The Epistles of St Cyprian*, Oxford 1868, p. 247. The same two texts are interpreted in exactly the same way by Firmilian, bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, when he writes to Cyprian complaining that Stephen, bishop of Rome, recognises the validity of heretical baptism; cf. Epistle LXXXV in op. cit., p. 279.

² J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 1950, p. 162

³ *Commentary on the Gospel according to St John*, II, London 1885, p. 680

in earth, shall be bound or loosed in the heavens," you therefore presume that the power of binding and loosing has derived to you, that is, to every Church akin to Peter . . . 'On Modesty,' chap. XXI, in op. cit., xviii, Edinburgh MDCCCLXX, pp. 117-8.

power of the apostles to remit sins through Baptism¹ suggests that a fruitful consideration of the sacrament of Penance should take into consideration the relation between the two. Penance, we shall see, is the more laborious and painful way² whereby the Christian recovers the place in the Body of Christ granted to him in Baptism, which he has forfeited by sin. We shall see how the Holy Spirit taught the Church, largely through His inspired word preserved in the Old Testament, to realise that those to whom was given the power of binding and loosing, of forgiving or retaining sins through the Sacrament of Baptism, had also been given the power of repeating such a remission of sin in the Sacrament of Penance, which an early writer calls 'the spiritual Baptism.'³ Considered in this way, we may understand more clearly the place of penitential practices which constitute the external sign of this remission of sins committed after Baptism. But more important, we may realise more clearly that there is no remission of sins except through Christ, the conqueror of sin, and that Penance, therefore, remits sins as Baptism does, by uniting us with Christ and making us one with him, so that his victory over sin becomes ours.

I *Remission of sins through Christ* When we consider the sufferings endured by the Jews during the period which immediately preceded the coming of Our Lord it is not surprising that they had a clear realisation of their sinfulness. There had been the bloody persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes; there had been the humiliation of Roman rule and the indignity of the Idumean dynasty. In such circumstances the longing for deliverance was greatly increased; they prayed for the coming of the Messiah, to give them the peace and prosperity, the freedom and happiness which they could surely hope for, since they were the chosen people of God to whom the promises had been made. The Messiah would restore all things, there would be no longer any grief or suffering. He would take away all this. He would take away all sin. In the past they had won relief from God, whether through David, or Ezechias, or the Servant, or Judas Maccabaeus, for in the past God had forgiven them their sins when they turned to him in sorrow and repentance. But all these partial

¹ From an exegetical point of view, the corresponding words in Matt. 28:16ff., Mark 16:16, and Luke 24:47 make it likely that John 20:23 refers to forgiveness through Baptism; cf. J. Jeremias, in G. Kittel (editor), *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, III, 1950, p. 753, ll. 3ff.

² 'Ut merito poenitentia laboriosus quidam baptismus a sanctis patribus dictus fuerit,' Conc. Trident. Sessio XIV, Mansi, XXXIII, 92E

³ *De Rebaptismate*, n. 10, quoted in B. Leeming, *Principles of Sacramental Theology*, London 1956, p. 191, fn. 31

remedies would be perfected in the Messiah; he would 'fulfil' them all; he would take away all evil, for he would take away all sin. Thus they taught that the Messiah himself would be without sin: 'Unstained by sin' (Ps. Sol. 17:41), 'No sin will be found in him' (Test. Jud. 2:4 A). All sin would be destroyed in the Messianic kingdom, and men would be sinless: 'They will sin no more, neither will they be chastised all the days of their life, and they will not die because of the chastisement or the (divine) anger; but they will complete the number of the days of their life, and their life will go forward in peace, and the years of their joy will be multiplied in an eternal gaiety and peace, all the days of their life' (Hen. 5:8).¹

The message of the New Testament is that Jesus is the conqueror of sin, and he is the Messiah. He came to save his people from their sins: 'I did not come to call the just but sinners' (Matt. 9:13). He is the friend of sinners (Matt. 11:19) and even dines with them. Such incidents as the anointing by the woman that was a sinner (Luke 7:37ff.), Zachaeus (Luke 19:1ff.), and the cure of the paralytic (Matt. 9:2ff.) preach this message. John the Baptist had prepared the way for Christ by inviting the people to repent and be baptised for the remission of sins (Mark 1:4), a cry which Jesus made his own (Matt. 4:17), and pointing to Jesus had exclaimed: 'Behold the lamb of God, who is taking away the sin of the world' (John 1:29). John receives proof that he was correct in thus recognising the Messiah, when it is reported to him how the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed (Luke 7:22), for Jesus's miracles of healing were proof of his power to remit sin, with which sicknesses were intimately connected.² This is not only shown clearly in the cure of the paralytic (Matt. 9:2ff.; cf. John 5:14), but in Our Lord's own declaration in the synagogue at Nazareth: 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release³ to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord' (Luke 4:18-19). And it is the apostolic message from the first day they preached the gospel that through Jesus, established as ruler and saviour, God gives repentance and remission of sins to Israel (Acts 5:31; cf. 2:38; 3:19; 3:26; 10:43; 13:38; 17:30; 26:20).

¹ Translated from J. Bonsirven, *La Bible Apocryphe*, Paris 1953, p. 28

² cf. T. Worden, 'The Meaning of "Sin"', *Scripture* ix (1957), pp. 44-53

³ *aphesis*, the word used in the expression 'remission of sins.' The corresponding verb, *aphiēmi*, which is so frequently found with 'sin(s)' as its object has a complexity of meaning which makes it very difficult to come to any firm conclusion on the exact significance of the expression *aphienai hamartias*. This text may possibly be one of the clearest indications.

But it is Paul's doctrine of remission of sins through Christ which is of particular significance for our subject, for he shows so insistently the link between sin and death, that crowning evil which sums up, as it were, the sicknesses and the miseries which sinful man must endure. According to Paul, sin ruled men since Adam, as can be seen from the fact that all have died (Rom. 5:12) : death is the result of sin, it is the reward which sin gives to them, prefaced by all the misery and ailments of which they were the victims. It is true that they did not recognise the cause of their misery until God revealed Himself. But when God made known His will to men through the Law, promising that if they would observe His commands they would live for ever, freed from all their miseries, they realised that their wretchedness was the result of failing to live according to God's will, the result of sin. Time and again sin had its way with them ; when they murdered, when they committed fornication, when they stole, when they lied, they now recognised that such actions were in opposition to God's will (Rom. 5:20) ; they realised in the light of God's Law that they were ruled by sin, and they never succeeded in conquering the power of sin within them. Even the just man who observed the Law failed to conquer sin ; it still clung to him, it still brought death to him. Even Abraham had died. The observance of the Law was the fulfilling of God's will ; it did therefore bring its rewards ; yet it did not bring that complete fulfilment of God's promises for which they hoped. He had given His promise (Rom. 4:13) ; He therefore owed it to Himself to realise all the blessing He had pronounced over Abraham. God was supremely reliable, faithful to His every word. But when would He prove that fidelity finally and perfectly ? When would He show forth His 'justice' : when would He do full justice to His promises¹ and save His people from the afflictions and death which were their lot since sin had obtained its power over them ? Many times in the past He had saved them from evils which threatened ; many times He had repeated that great act of salvation whereby He delivered them from Egypt. This deliverance had always served as the firm foundation of their hopes. The evils which had threatened them from the Canaanites and the Philistines, the Assyrians and the Babylonians, the Greeks and the Syrians : the whole of their history had been proof that God's promises were not illusory, even though they had failed so frequently to co-operate in the conquest of sin which caused such evils. They had richly deserved the delay ; but it remained true that however much they did co-operate, complete conquest of sin could not be achieved by anyone but God alone. Even the just man to whom the Law meant everything could

¹ cf. S. Lyonnet, *De 'Iustitia Dei' in Epistola ad Romanos*, Romae 1947

do no more than await God's hour, when all sin would be dismissed, when misery, persecution, labour and that greatest horror of all, death, would be destroyed.

In his efforts to describe the change which the coming of Christ has made, Paul's comments on the Law seem so derogatory as to suggest that he did not believe the Law was the revelation of God's will. But it is impossible to describe this momentous change in human language ; it is also impossible to believe that Paul actually denies the divine revelation of the Law, or the part it has played in the history of salvation. But he affirms that now, at last, that is accomplished which was never accomplished during the time of the Law : sin has been destroyed, death has been taken away. Sin had entered the world through Adam, and all men had died since Adam, even though they did not sin as Adam sinned (Rom. 5:14). Here was the mystery : as a result of one man's sin all suffered death. But the mystery of death as it had reigned from Adam to Moses was to some extent explained when the Law intervened, for in its light men saw their actions to be sinful, earning death. They then learned that the actions to which they were prone were actions against the will of God. ' Until the Law there was sin in the world, but sin was not imputed when there was no Law ' (Rom. 5:13). When they had received the Law they realised that it was sin, not God, that ruled their lives. By comparison sin had been dead, previous to the Law (Rom. 7:8), for now so many actions previously done in ignorance were no longer to be disguised ; what they might previously have taken as nothing more than the dictates of their nature were now recognised as the imperious demands of sin ruling within them. Faced with that fact they became the willing slaves of sin, for they offered their services knowing what they were about : ' Do you not know that in offering yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you become the slaves of the master whom you obey, either of sin unto death, or of obedience unto justice ? ' (Rom. 6:16). Death was no longer so mysterious : it was the inevitable reward of their slavery. Sin made use of God's Law to display its power and to exact a conscious service. The Law itself was certainly not sin (Rom. 7:7), but it revealed sin to man and thus enhanced sin's power ; it became very much alive when the Law was given, and the result was that the Law, destined to give life, in reality led men to death, for sin made use of it to seduce and kill. Sin had brought death even before the Law, but it now scored the far greater triumph of bringing death in spite of men's struggles, in spite of the fact that they knew whence death came. The Law had taught them what they wished to do, but they could not do it : ' In truth I do not understand what I do ; I do not do what I wish, but do what I hate . . . in truth

it is no longer I who accomplish the actions, but sin, which lives in me' (Rom. 7:16-17). 'Wretched man that I am! Who will free me from this body which vows me to death?' (Rom. 7:24).

Many readers of these difficult chapters in the Epistle to the Romans will consistently qualify the word 'death' with such words as 'spiritual' or 'of the soul' as they read. Was the omission of some such qualification just carelessness on Paul's part, or might he expect his readers to take it for granted? He did not mean such a qualification to be taken for granted at all. Evidently the church at Corinth did not take for granted the fact that there should be sickness and death among them so soon after becoming Christians; Paul did not take it for granted either, since he points out there is a special reason for it: they have been partaking of the Lord's Supper unworthily, and 'That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have fallen asleep' (1 Cor. 11:30). The sad fact was already emerging that even those who through Baptism had died to sin, could fall into sin again, just as the sad fact is with us that to this day Christians fall asleep in a manner so similar to universal death, that when Paul asserts that death has been conquered there are many who must make him speak of 'spiritual death' lest he should have been proved false. Yet to allow the great Christian paradox to influence our understanding of Paul's teaching will not solve that paradox, for the Christian is still in danger of 'spiritual death,' in spite of Paul's insistence that death has been swallowed up in victory. 'If we are dead to sin, how is it possible to continue to live in it?' (Rom. 6:2). When therefore Paul speaks of death it is not right to restrict his meaning. Death is the final end,¹ the final destruction of man, body and soul together; if it be permitted to enlarge on Paul's meaning it is only for the sake of including within it the human miseries and afflictions which are a foretaste of death. Paul speaks of Abraham's old age as death (Rom. 4:19), and there are other afflictions, such as blindness, lameness, leprosy, deafness, poverty (cf. Matt. 11:5). Death was present in life from the first day of a man's existence, 'For in sin my mother conceived me' (Ps. 51:7; Heb. 2:15; Rom. 8:15). The very uncertainty of life was one of the greatest triumphs of death: 'The sadness of the world produces death' (2 Cor. 7:10). The hand of death touched everything man did (cf. Heb. 9:14). In fact, all who did not follow Christ were dead whilst still living (cf. Matt. 8:22;

¹ Death, as Paul speaks of it here, is death as understood by the Jew, before it was destroyed by Christ: it is the Old Testament idea of Death: 'Death is the final separation from God. In Sheol they do not praise Yahweh,' A.-M. Dubarle, 'La condition humaine dans l'Ancien Testament,' *Revue Biblique*, 1956, p. 325. This article, of which I was not able to make use in discussing the Old Testament conception of sin, deals with that question admirably.

1 John 3:14; John 5:21, 25). 'The wicked are dead, even during their life' (Berakoth, 18b).¹ Death has a wider meaning, indeed, than the end of physical existence upon this earth, and it is never a 'natural occurrence,'² once God revealed that everlasting life was the reward which He offered, not only for his chosen people as a people, but for each chosen individual. But it never concerns the soul exclusively, since the revelation would have been speaking in riddles if it had cleaved man into a body and soul as though they were quite separate parts—belief in the resurrection of the body is no accidental or superfluous element of the Christian Faith.

It is because of the intimate relation between sin and death that sin was conquered and death destroyed through the death and resurrection of Christ. In him God made the final assault, and through him the final victory was won. Christ's death bore the external resemblance of sin's usual victory: so much so that St Paul could speak of Our Lord having been made sin (2 Cor. 5:21). In Christ God as it were beat sin at its own game, for sin was given every chance with Christ. Although the sinless Son of God was outside the power of sin, he nevertheless took flesh, and submitted that flesh to the treatment sin usually metes out to man: he allowed his body to be afflicted by hunger and fatigue; to be beaten with whips, and even crucified. Death would seem to have triumphed. But he rose again, and Paul could say: 'O death, where is thy victory?' (1 Cor. 15:55). God chose to redeem us in a manner which underlined the power of sin most vividly. Could there have been a more convincing way of proving to man that sin had been conquered and death destroyed? All the powers of sin and its final onslaught, death, had failed. Christ, the first-born from the dead (Col. 1:18) is the living proof that God had finally and perfectly fulfilled His promise to free men from evil. Those promises which had fed the hope of His chosen people for hundreds of years, and of which He had on so many occasions given partial proof, were now completed. And just as sin had won its mastery over mankind through the one man, Adam, so now mankind had mastered sin through the one man, Christ.

But how could men share in the victory of Christ? They had shared in Adam's defeat by sharing in his nature, by being born of Adam, by being in a real sense so many Adams. To share in Christ's victory, then, men must become so many Christs. It now becomes true to say of man that as Adam he is doomed to death, but as Christ he has triumphed over death. To this day there is no victory over sin unless a man become Christ; only through Christ is there remission

¹ Quoted in C. Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux*, II, Paris 1953, p. 147

² cf. Bultmann, *Theol. Wört.*, III, p. 14

of sins. It is so easy to be part of Adam : everyone born into this world is adam. But for the remission of sin he must be born a christ.

2 *Remission of sins through Baptism* 'For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ' (Gal. 3:27). It is the constant teaching of St Paul that through Baptism we become part of the body of Christ, and thereby die to sin (cf. Rom. 6:3-7). And from the beginning both the power of Christ and the reception of Baptism had been proclaimed as the means whereby sin would be destroyed. When St Peter had finished the first Apostolic preaching of the Gospel his hearers had asked what they must do, and he had replied : 'Repent and let each of you be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins' (Acts 2:38). If remission of sins is to be obtained through Christ (cf. Col. 1:14 ; Ephes. 1:7) then in practice we share Christ's victory over sin by Baptism, which destroys sin and gives us a new life, a sinless life. The remission of sins is therefore essentially and primarily through the Sacrament of Baptism. It is impossible to treat of the nature and effects of Baptism here,¹ but it is vital to remember the part played by Baptism in the remission of sins if we are to understand the dilemma which faced the early Church, the doubts and the difficulties which arose, and the way in which the Church came to the complete realisation of the full import of the power which Christ had given to his apostles.

The New Testament teaches that through our sharing by Baptism in Christ's final victory, we are essentially freed from all sin, we are new creatures, we are members of God's kingdom, we are saved. Suffice it to wait for the coming of the Lord when there will be the new heavens and the new earth. Since the remission of sins is essentially through the Sacrament of Baptism, then essentially there is no call for any further remission : the baptised are sinless. The emphasis of the New Testament is naturally upon the final break with sin through Baptism, and therefore the very real, but in a certain sense accidental possibility of Christians falling back into sin during their time of waiting is less explicitly considered. There is, indeed, no question of this possibility being either denied or wholly ignored by the New Testament. St Paul realised that in spite of the death to sin which is brought about by Baptism, sin is not yet wholly destroyed, and that there is danger of sin among the saints who form the body of Christ ; and St Peter warns his readers : 'Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour' (1 Pet. 5:8). Yet we may ask why the Church when faced with the problem of the lapsed Christians found any

¹ cf. D. M. Stanley, 'Baptism in the New Testament,' *Scripture*, VIII (1956), pp. 44-57

difficulty in solving it. Many would consider the teaching of St Paul to be quite explicit and quite clear, not only on the possibility of forgiveness of sins committed after Baptism, but also on the precise way in which this remission is to be accomplished.

3 *Remission of sins committed after Baptism* The degree of clarity may, however, be questioned, and thus the doubts of some of the earlier Christian writers viewed more indulgently. Does St Paul deal explicitly with the situation in which the baptised Christian has so sinned that he is cut off from the body, and does he explicitly state how such a sinner is to be readmitted to the body for the forgiveness of his sin? In 2 Thess. 3:14 the brethren are advised not to associate intimately¹ with anyone who does not obey Paul's instructions. They are to avoid him in order to shame him, *and* they are not to treat him as an enemy, but reprove him as a brother. In 2 Cor. 2:5-11 Paul speaks of someone whom they have now punished sufficiently, for an offence which is unknown to us, and whom they should now forgive and console lest he drown in grief. But these examples hardly suggest cases of such grievous sin that the offender is completely cut off from the body, and therefore stands in need of readmission. Paul does not call their offences 'sins,' and there is no clear teaching about readmission to the body of Christ. But we have a clearer example in 2 Cor. 12:21, where Paul envisages the possibility that if he goes to Corinth he will grieve many² of those who have previously sinned and who did not repent for the impurity they had done. If, as seems certain, Paul is referring to sinners among the Christian community, then he recognises here, not only the possibility of grievous sin among Christians, but also their repentance, and the forgiveness of their sins. He does not mention, however, what means they will use in order to secure forgiveness.

In 1 Cor. 5:1-5 St Paul deals with a case of incest among the brethren. A member of the church at Corinth has taken for himself the wife of his father. Whether it was a putative marriage or simply concubinage matters little; the woman was the man's stepmother, and such a union was forbidden by the Law and was punishable with stoning (Lev. 18:8). This was an act of impurity abhorred even by pagans, as Cicero shows when he refers to Sessia's marriage with her son-in-law Melinus, and it would lose none of its wickedness if the woman were no longer the wife of the sinner's father at the time this union took place.³ But Paul's indignation is really directed against the

¹ The same word is used of association with the impure, in 1 Cor. 5:9.

² Or 'grieve over many,' cf. *Bible de Jérusalem, ad. vers.*

³ cf. Robertson & Plummer, *Corinthians I.*

church at Corinth for allowing such a man to remain one of their number. He therefore decrees, though he cannot be actually present, that they gather together, and in union with him present in spirit, hand over the offender to Satan 'for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.' This is commonly interpreted to mean that the handing over of the sinner to Satan is for the destruction of the sinner's flesh, and the final salvation of the sinner's spirit. In other words Paul gives instructions for the excommunication of the incestuous man : he must be removed from the midst of the Corinthian church, and thereby cut off from the body of Christ ; but this excommunication would not imply final damnation since he may be saved on the day of the Lord. Thus Paul would here teach the possibility of forgiveness of sin committed after Baptism, and the means would be the handing over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh. This latter phrase has caused great difficulty to commentators. Many understand it as the mortification of the flesh at the hand of Satan, a punishment which would last for a time, but which would leave the opportunity for reconciliation with the Church after due penance had been done. But others point out that *olethros* implies something more violent than what is implied by the word 'mortification,'¹ and that it signifies not only physical affliction but complete destruction.² Nevertheless it is difficult to believe that Paul would envisage the salvation of a man who died outside the body of Christ, and we must either understand 'destruction of the flesh' as a punishment which is not fatal, and which gives the sinner the opportunity of reconciliation with the Church, or we must consider the possibility of a different interpretation of the text altogether.

There are good reasons for thinking that Paul is here concerned entirely with the good of the community, the body of Christ, which in spite of Baptism is still in danger of corruption. It is part of Paul's general teaching that the body's weakness arises from the flesh : the body in so far as it is weak and corruptible is 'flesh,'³ whilst in its incorruptible aspect it is 'spirit.' By Baptism we die to the flesh and live to the spirit. That is the ideal ; in practice the body of Christ shows signs of still being to some extent 'flesh.' In this particular instance we have a member of the body falling into grievous sin.

¹ 'Renan, Godet and Goudge regard the expression as meaning sentence of death by a wasting sickness.' *Op. cit.*, p. 99., fn.

² *cf. Theol. Wört., sub voce.* Other examples of the use of this word support this interpretation, *cf.* 1 Thess. 5:3 ; 2 Thess. 1:9 ; 1 Tim. 6:9.

³ But the mention of Satan as the agent of this destruction, prevents us from understanding 'flesh' as the individual's sinfulness ; in such an interpretation Satan would be the direct instrument of this sinner's justification.

He is still in the midst of the body ; he will, if left there, corrupt the whole body. It is therefore necessary to excommunicate him, which is equivalent to handing him over to Satan, in order to destroy the 'flesh' which has again shown itself in the body of Christ. If this is done, then the genuine body of Christ, which is 'spirit' will be saved on the day of the Lord. This interpretation fits in well with the context, for Paul continues to speak of the corrupting influence of sin upon the body, using the metaphor of the leaven. The terms flesh and spirit are replaced by leaven and new dough. There is only one lump of dough, that is one body of Christians, just as there is only one loaf (1 Cor. 10:17). The destruction of the leaven, therefore, is for the sake of the one lump of unleavened dough, the Church, and not for the sake of the individual Christian. They are, each one of them, 'unleavened,' but only as members of the one body. The leaven which they must get rid of is the corrupting influence within the Church : in this instance the incestuous man whom they have allowed to remain in their midst. In such a context the 'flesh' to be handed over to Satan for destruction may be compared to the leaven which must be purged, and the 'spirit' to the new dough.

This interpretation supposes that Paul could speak of the body of Christ, in its essentially incorruptible aspect, as 'the spirit,' when compared with its accidentally corruptible aspect in the present world, which he calls 'the flesh.' The antithesis spirit and flesh, in the sense of the incorruptible person (both body and soul) as distinct from the corruptible, is common enough in reference to Christians. Before Baptism we were 'in the flesh'; but now we are 'in newness of spirit' (Rom. 7:5-6), and we walk now, not according to flesh but according to spirit (Rom. 8:4). 'You are not in flesh but in spirit, if God's spirit dwells in you' (8:8). The spirit of Him who raised up Jesus from the dead dwells in us (8:10). The spirit comes to the aid of our weakness (8:26). We, as baptised Christians, live by the spirit ; we are guided and strengthened by Him ; we have the first-fruits of the spirit ; the spirit is our essential characteristic. But the spirit is not regarded primarily as possessed by each individual for himself ; the spirit is one. In 1 Cor. 12:4 ff. Paul insists that the various charisms are all due to one and the same spirit, just as a physical body is one, though it is composed of many limbs ; the body of Christ, composed of many members, is one. In one spirit we were baptised into one body (1 Cor. 12:13) ; we are the body of Christ because God has sent into our hearts the spirit of His son (Gal. 4:6). We are 'one body, one spirit' (Ephes. 4:4). Paul's use of 'the spirit' for the body of Christ is unusual enough, but it is called forth by the antithesis with 'flesh.' To speak of the destruction of the *flesh* in order that the *body*

may be saved, would perhaps have been a paradox too jarring even for Paul. But in any case, it does seem significant that in other instances where there is question of at least the possibility of offences among the brethren, such offences are said to be against the spirit, or in other words, to endanger the spirit in some way. Paul urged the Ephesians to preserve the unity of the spirit by the bond of peace : one body and one spirit (4:3). Any kind of injury to our fellow-members grieves the holy spirit of God by whom we have been sealed for the day of deliverance ; lack of fraternal charity injures the spirit which is the life-giving power of God, His Spirit. In 1 Thess. 5:12-22 Paul exhorts them not to offend one another, but to show fraternal charity in all things ; and he ends by telling them not to quench the spirit, and not to depreciate prophecies. Here the spirit may perhaps be limited to the source of prophetic inspiration ; yet this one spirit within the Church may be harmed, even in its prophetic manifestations, by offences against fraternal charity. Whilst therefore we admit that the actual turn of phrase is difficult, this interpretation seems preferable, mainly because of the context, and also because it offers a more acceptable meaning for the word 'destruction.' The opening verses of this pericope make it clear that Paul's preoccupation is with the community rather than the individual sinner ; the verses which follow are obviously concerned with preserving the community from corruption through contact with a sinful member. But if this interpretation be correct we are deprived of the clearest example in the New Testament of how the individual sinful Christian is to be saved from the effects of his sin.

Yet this question grew more and more pressing. An increasing number of Christians who had been washed, sanctified, and justified (cf. 1 Cor. 6:11), and who were dead to sin, unfortunately fell into grievous sin once more. These sinners, particularly in time of persecution, fell away from the Body of Christ, and their Baptism seemed as it were annulled. But they sought readmission, they sought forgiveness of their sin and reinstatement in the Kingdom of God. Was this possible ? There was ample witness in the Scriptures that God willed not the death of the sinner, but rather that he should be converted and live, and God's mercy and compassionate forgiveness became increasingly emphasised. But how was the Church to dispense the mercy of God ? By what means was the sinner to be readmitted into the Body of Christ for the forgiveness of sin ? Was there any way of reiterating this effect of Baptism ? There was no doubt concerning the impossibility of any repetition of the Sacrament of Baptism. Was then, the power of forgiving sins given to the Apostles when they were sent to make disciples of all nations and baptise them

in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to be frustrated by sin ?

(*To be concluded*)

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THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC (GEN. 22)

The sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22) is not included among the passages most frequently discussed in modern literature on Genesis. There are a certain number of difficulties, however, which modern readers sense. They find the picture of God's temptation of Abraham to sacrifice his only son repulsive.¹ The horror which human sacrifice excites makes it hard for them to see how God could utter such a command even when it is not seriously intended, or how Abraham could have accepted such a command as a true divine revelation; and they find metaphysical evasions based on 'God's supreme dominion over life' vacuous. H. Junker has written that such a command in modern times would be a sure sign that the alleged revelation was not genuine²; our modern reader wonders whether our moral and religious world is so different from that of Abraham that this would not be an equally valid sign in the world of Abraham. Or he may wonder whether it is not also a valid sign that such a narrative is certainly not historical. Even if this were admitted, it would not solve his problem; for he wants to know how the narrative is religiously significant, whether it is historical or not. These questions indicate that an investigation of the literary, historical, and theological character of the passage may be rewarding.

Modern critics almost unanimously attribute the story to the Elohist strand of narrative in the Pentateuch. They hasten to add that they do not thereby imply that the narrative is homogeneous; indeed, there are some evident signs that it is not. Thus vv. 15-18, in which the 'angel of Yahweh' addresses Abraham 'a second time,' recapitulating the promises of a great progeny in commonplace terms derived from other passages of Genesis, are with scarcely any doubt

¹ An example of this may be seen in the following extract from a letter to *The Sunday Times* of 28 October 1956: 'The other day my granddaughter, aged nine, was told in school the story of Abraham and Isaac, and how "God had told Abraham to sacrifice his son." Surely no-one believes this barbarous doctrine nowadays? I assured her that God never asked or told anyone to make such a sacrifice, but that in olden times priests had preached that doctrine.'—Ed.

² H. Junker, 'Die Opferung Isaaks,' *Pastor Bonus*, LII (1941), p. 29