

Is Christ an Agent of Sin?

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at The Oxford Presbyterian Church on the Fourth Sunday of Pentecost, June 15, 1986. Scripture Lessons: 1 Kings 19:1-8; Psalm 42; Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Is Christ an agent of sin? What a ridiculous question. That's like asking, "Is President Reagan an agent of the KGB?" Or, "Is South Africa's President, P.W. Botha, an agent of the NAACP?" Or "Is Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua a CIA agent?" It's ridiculous. Why would anyone seriously ask if Christ is an agent of sin?

How in the world did this accusation ever come about? It came about because Paul preached that God justifies the ungodly. God freely forgives sinners apart from anything they do, and this forgiveness is received through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Our good works do not contribute at all to standing in the sight of God.

Paul was not the first to teach this. Jesus, himself, proclaim it in word and deed. He accepted men and women as they were. He freely forgave sins. And in the parable of the two debtors he tells us that's what God is like. One debtor owed a large sum and the other a small sum, but neither could repay what he owed, and so the creditor freely forgave them both. The reason why the sinful woman loved Jesus so much is because she was so much more indebted to him than Simon the Pharisee. Her great love for Jesus was an indication of her gratitude to Jesus for accepted her where she was. So Paul wasn't preaching anything new when he said that God puts sinners in a right relationship to himself apart from anything they can do.

Paul's opponents were uncomfortable with this Gospel. "Paul!" they said, "you're giving people a Carte Blanche to sin. 'Go ahead and sin. The more

you sin the more you'll experience God's forgiveness.' If that's true, what's the sense of trying to live a good life? Preach that and the church'll be filled with riff-raff, like this woman of the city; this sinner! It'll be filled with people who don't take the holiness and justice of God seriously. Or, more likely, no body will come to church because why would anybody come to church if God forgives us freely apart from anything we do? Preach that and you make Jesus an agent of Sin."

What they said does have some truth, doesn't it? Here's a person who's a racist bigot but if he trusts in Jesus God forgives him without requiring him first to change his racist attitudes. Here are affluent American Christians who trust in Jesus who show little concern about people suffering the ravages of war, oppression, and famine. The editor of the pornographic magazine *Hustler* gets right with God. He trusts in Jesus and keeps on publishing *Hustler*. Here's a young man who goes to a revival service, raises his hand, walks down the aisle, kneels and asks Jesus to come into his heart. He's saved. He's got religion. He got right with God. But he doesn't go to church. He doesn't contribute to the work of Christ through the Church. He doesn't receive the sacraments. He doesn't pray. He's not concerned about evangelism or peace or social justice. But you ask him and he'll tell you the day and hour he got saved. Now tell me; doesn't that kind of preaching make Jesus a servant of sin?

"Certainly not!" Paul shouts.

But how can it be otherwise?

To answer that question Paul becomes autobiographical. He says, "I killed myself trying to keep all the rules and I still wasn't right with God. It was only when I gave up trying to keep the law that I really began to live for God. That old self-justifying person that tried to get himself

right with God died. I've been crucified with Christ; it's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

"Christ now lives in me," Paul says. One day, on the Damascus road, Christ knocked on the door of Paul and he let him into his life. Christ didn't first tell Paul to straighten up. He told Paul that he was accepted and loved right where he was.

And so Christ knocks on the doors of the lives of each one of us as we try to justify our own lives. When Christ knocks he doesn't say, "I'll come in when you've cleaned up your life. I'll come in if you start going to church regularly. I'll come in if you change your life-style. I'll come in if you get rid of some of the bad friends in your life. I'll come in if you stop all those sinful things that you're doing." He doesn't ask us to clean up our lives first. Instead, he says, "First, trust me. Just let me into you-life and let me do the cleaning up."

And so we ask Christ to come into our lives. It may be while we're fishing or playing tennis or golfing that we hear Christ's knocking to come in. It may be after we've put the kids to bed and we've got some time all by ourselves. It may be after an argument with a husband or wife or child. We may begin to hear that knocking when we feel that we've violated another life, a life which we loved and from which we now feel estranged. It may be that we hear his knock when we feel disgusted with our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, our lack of direction. Or we hear his knock when the longed-for perfection of life doesn't appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage.

We hear his knock and we open the door just a crack and begin to see Christ. He wants us to let him in further. So we invite Christ in. We lead

him into the living room and invite him to sit down in front of the fire place and talk. But after awhile Jesus says, "I'd like to see more of your life. Show me more of where you live."

We're embarassed. Some rooms in our lives are all messed up. We say, "Jesus, let me clean up first before I show you around."

But Jesus says, "No! I don't want you to clean up. I've come into your life for the very purpose of cleaning it up. Don't you know that you can't put your life in shape apart from faith in me? Trust me to come into every room in your life and I'll clean it up."

And so we begin to lead Jesus around the various rooms in our lives. We take him into the basement, the attic, the bedroom. We let him go through all the closets. He takes out all the skeletons and launders all our dirty linen and gets the cob-webs out of all the corners. He gets his hands and feet dirty as he goes around cleaning our lives up. He works so hard that he sweats as it were great drops of blood. He works himself to death to clean up our messy lives.

But there are still some places we don't want Jesus to go. We don't want him to know. But he says, "Let me in this closet?" Frightened, we tell him, "There are things in there so rotten that you must not enter; secrets, memories, attitudes, grudges, lusts."

But he assures us, "I already know what's in there. But I want you to know I love you so much that I gave myself for you on the cross. And I want you to know that if I live in you I want access to ever room, every closet, every hiding place in your life."

But still resisting, we say, "At least let me go in there by myself first and clean it up."

Fire flashes in the eyes of Jesus and there's anger in his voice and he

says, "If you could clean it up by yourself then you wouldn't need me. I wouldn't have had to die for you. There's nothing so rotten in your life that I'm unwilling or unable to clean up. And besides, I know that you could never begin to clean it up the way it should be. Trust me to do it."

And so we do. And then Jesus says to us, "I want to live in you all the time. Let me take control of your life and live it for you. Let me continue to clean it up. I do it freely because I love you."

Far from being an agent of sin for accepting us just as we are, Christ becomes an agent of righteousness, enabling us to be all that God wants us to be. Christ comes to live in us. He lives in us through his Spirit and in the church his body. He accepts us where we are and begins to put our life right. He justifies our ever having lived.

Nearly all of us hear this morning have been baptized into Christ's death and joined to him in his body the Church. We've been confirmed and have asked Christ into our lives. But human nature being what it is we so often find ourselves building up again the old system of law, trying to justify ourselves; trying to make excuses for ourselves; instead of frankly confessing that we've messed up again. But Jesus tells us, "Your sins are forgiven. Stop trying to justify yourselves. Stop trying to make excuses. You are accepted freely by my grace. Only I can justify your life. Trust me.

Amen

Let us pray: O God, give us grace to trust Christ that he accepts us as we are. Deliver us from trying to justify our own lives through our hard work or by blaming others or constantly blaming ourselves. Help us to believe that we are accepted by you. And out of gratitude for the forgiveness you have given us may we give to you our unabashed love and the sacrifice of our whole lives.