THE SIN UNTO DEATH

Problem Texts (11)

F. F. Bruce

The question is: what is a 'sin unto death', and how does it differ from a sin which is 'not unto death'? I have avoided the RSV wording, because it speaks of a 'mortal sin', and that is liable to confuse the reader, as though the distinction were that between mortal and venial sins in western moral theology, stemming from the mediaeval schoolmen. (In this sense mortal sins are deliberate and persistent, and deprive the soul of sanctifying grace.) It would be anachronistic to read this distinction into the New Testament.

Is it known by the result?

The distinction between the two kinds of sin is one which John's readers were expected to recognize. But how could they recognize it except by the result? A sin which resulted in the sinner's death would certainly be a 'sin unto death'. We may think of the incident of Ananias and Sapphira: when Peter exposed their sin, it was public, and so was their penalty. We may think again of the incestuous man of *1 Cor. 5:1–13*, if 'the destruction of the flesh' in verse 5 is to be understood in the most literal sense. Then there are the believers of *1 Cor. 11:30*, whose uncharitable conduct at the Lord's Supper led to the death of some. John does not forbid his readers to pray for such people, but he does not encourage them to do so: if they have died, they cannot be restored. But for one who sins in any other way, let them pray:

> 'more things are wrought by prayer
> Than this world dreams of.'

Could it be apostasy?

That seems to me to be the most probable explanation of the text. But of course there are other ways of understanding it: in particular, it has been suggested that the 'sin unto death' is apostasy—specifically, the apostasy of those who had abandoned the primitive and authentic message and established a new basis for faith and life to replace 'that which was from the beginning' (*1 John 2:18–23*). This suggestion may well be right: we may recall what was said last month about the irretrievable apostasy envisaged in *Heb. 6:4–6*. But how does the praying believer know that the apostasy is irretrievable—how can it be known, when the sin is committed, that it is 'unto death'? The believer is not given a 'God's-eye view' of such a situation, so as to know infallibly whether a person is past praying for or not. In the absence of such infallible knowledge, let prayer continue to be offered.

> 'If any one sees his brother committing a sin which is not unto death, he shall make request, and God will give him life for those whose sin is not unto death. There is sin unto death; I do not mean that one should pray for that. All unrighteousness is sin, but there is a sin which is not unto death'
> (*1 John 5:16, 17*).

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In the closing years of his life George Müller is recorded to have prayed daily for the restoration (the son of a friend of his) who had given up the evangelical faith of his youth: he was convinced, he said, that the man's experiences in the spiritual wilderness would, by divine overruling, make him a more effective defender of the faith when once he was restored. But he never was restored, either before or after Müller's death. Yet a Christian in such close rapport with the Lord's mind as Müller enjoyed received no guidance that he should stop praying for that man. I think, therefore, that the former suggestion is better.

Postscript: 'when that which is perfect has come'

With regard to the meaning of *1 Cor. 13:10*, discussed in our June issue, the most recently published commentary on *1 Corinthians*, by Gordon D. Fee (Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1987), says this of the view that the charismatic signs were to cease with the completion of the New Testament revelation: 'Given its classical exposition by B. B. Warfield, this view has been taken over in a variety of ways by contemporary Reformed and Dispensationalist theologies' (p. 645, n. 23). Dr. Fee's reference, I think, is to Warfield's *Counterfeit Miracles* (1918: reissued by the Banner of Truth Trust, 1972). In chapter 1 ('The Cessation of the Charismata') Warfield maintained that such miraculous signs as are recorded in the New Testament authenticated the apostles as the divinely-authorized founders of the church and ceased at the end of the apostolic age. Any miracles recorded since then, he held, are *ipso facto* 'counterfeit miracles'.

On further reflection I also wonder if Brethren attitudes have not been influenced by Sir Robert Anderson's argument published at the end of the nineteenth century in *The Silence of God*. His view was that the miraculous phenomena of apostolic Christianity served as a public witness to the truth of the gospel only during the 'transitional period' when 'the testimony was addressed to the Jew, but ceased when, the Jew being set aside, the gospel went out to the Gentile world' (p. 162). Although Sir Robert's ultra-dispensationalism has not been generally accepted, some of its concomitants entered into the world-view of many Brethren of an earlier generation.