



THEOLOGY IN COMMUNITY

FALLEN

A THEOLOGY OF SIN

Edited by CHRISTOPHER W. MORGAN

and ROBERT A. PETERSON

Contributions by D. A. Carson, Paul House, Robert W. Yarbrough, Douglas Moo,
Gerald Bray, John Mahony, Sydney Page, David Calhoun, Bryan Chapell

“These essays provide a very thorough mapping of sin’s ugly reality. Rarely do we meet such realism as we find here.”

J. I. Packer, Board of Governors’ Professor of Theology, Regent College

“In this fine little volume, Morgan and Peterson provide an excellent one-stop treatment of the doctrine of sin. As we have come to expect with all the volumes in this series, *Fallen* treats the doctrine of sin biblically, theologically, historically, and pastorally. This text should work very nicely for undergraduate or graduate students.”

Bruce Ashford, Provost, Dean of Faculty, and Associate Professor of Theology and Culture, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Sin is serious—that’s the thrust of this timely collection of essays and, more importantly, the teaching of the Scriptures. But in our postmodern society where there are no absolutes, and in an effort not to offend anyone concerning the issue of sin, we sometimes use other language: ‘done wrong,’ ‘erred,’ or ‘made a mistake.’ Here is a bold book that encourages us not to be afraid to talk, preach, or teach concerning the Bible’s understanding of sin and its effects both personally and societally. The Puritans were right—it is only when we have first grasped the depravity of the human heart that can we ever fully appreciate the greatness of the love of God in salvation.”

Trevor J. Burke, Lecturer in New Testament and Greek, Oak Hill Theological College, London

“Sin is the great spoiler. It spoils our relation to God, each other, ourselves, and our environment. This important volume shows not only that sin is the great spoiler but also how to understand sin biblically and to face the temptation that comes with it. Without this dark backdrop, the coming and cross of Christ make little sense. A team of excellent scholars has served the church so well in this work. I commend it highly.”

Graham Cole, Anglican Professor of Divinity, Beeson Divinity School

“Homiletical in arrangement, exegetical in essence, theological in content, and contemporary in expression, *Fallen* meets the need of the contemporary church to reflect on an often overlooked essential of the biblical story line and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Starting with a fresh note of application, the contributors skillfully and pastorally move through the topic, showing biblical foundations and offering fresh applications for the church today. *Fallen* helps believers rejoice in sin’s defeat through the cross of Christ, discern sin’s traces and impact on contemporary society, and warn us as believers, as Luther did, that we are at the same time just and sinner. A must-read for pastors, seminary students, and lay persons eager to learn more about the foundations of the faith.”

John D. Massey, Associate Professor of Missions, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“The doctrine of sin has never been a popular teaching, but it is an irreducible essential for every generation to grasp, or else the gospel will be redefined or rejected. Counterfeit Christianity heralds a message about a god without wrath bringing people without sin into a kingdom without judgment. The removal of sin removes the very guts of what makes the gospel good news. The book you hold in your hands is the most far-reaching, well-rounded modern treatment of sin that I have ever read. I commend it highly.”

Jason C. Meyer, Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota

"Sin is the inconvenient truth, the bad news that we are tempted to hurry past in our rush to get to the good news of the gospel. The authors of *Fallen* do not rush past this hard subject; they examine it carefully, patiently, and thoroughly in all its biblical, historical, systematic, and practical implications. Exceptionally well unified for a multi-author work, *Fallen* may be the most complete resource on the doctrine of sin in this generation and will certainly serve well as a comprehensive introduction to this neglected topic."

Fred Sanders, Associate Professor of Theology, Torrey Honors Institute,
Biola University

Praise for the Theology in Community Series

"I do not know another series quite like this one. Each volume is grounded in both the Old and New Testaments and then goes on to wrestle with the way the chosen theme has been developed in history, shaped the lives of men and women, and fits in the scheme of confessionally strong Christian theology. The volumes are characterized by rigor and reverence, and, better yet, they remain accessible to all serious readers. If we are to pursue more than unintegrated biblical data, but what Paul calls 'the pattern of sound teaching,' this is an excellent place to begin."

D. A. Carson, Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity
School

"This distinguished series brings together some of the best theological work in the evangelical church on the greatest themes of the Christian faith. Each volume stretches the mind and anchors the soul. A treasury of devout scholarship not to be missed!"

Timothy George, Founding Dean, Beeson Divinity School; General Editor,
Reformation Commentary on Scripture

"We live in a day of cloudy thinking about the most important matters of life. What is needed is meat, along with instructions about how to use a fork. In this series, Chris and Robert help us understand difficult doctrines by being both biblically faithful and culturally accessible. I highly recommend this series to all who want to know, love, and worship our great God."

Darrin Patrick, Pastor, The Journey, St. Louis, Missouri; author, *For the City* and
Church Planter

"This series offers students, pastors, church leaders, and educators alike a marvelous resource characterized by theological fidelity, biblical faithfulness, and pastoral insight. Confessional, evangelical, and historically informed, each volume engages the best of Christian thinking through the centuries while addressing the important issues of our own day. Chris Morgan and Robert Peterson are to be commended for designing these most helpful volumes, which will serve the church well for years to come."

David S. Dockery, President, Union University

"Robert Peterson and Chris Morgan have put together an elegant and edifying series of books. This series tackles some big and juicy topics on theology, ranging from kingdom to suffering to sin to glory. They have recruited some of the best theological thinkers in the world to explain what it means to have a 'faith seeking understanding' in our contemporary age. The volumes are full of solid teaching in biblical, historical, systematic, and practical theologies and contain a wealth of immense learning. A valuable resource for any thinking Christian."

Michael F. Bird, Lecturer in Theology, Ridley Melbourne College of Mission and
Ministry, Australia

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SERIES PREFACE

As the series name, *Theology in Community*, indicates, *theology* in community aims to promote clear thinking on and godly responses to historic and contemporary theological issues. The series examines issues central to the Christian faith, including traditional topics such as sin, the atonement, the church, and heaven, but also some which are more focused or contemporary, such as suffering and the goodness of God, the glory of God, the deity of Christ, and the kingdom of God. The series strives not only to follow a sound theological method but also to display it.

Chapters addressing the Old and New Testaments on the book's subject form the heart of each volume. Subsequent chapters synthesize the biblical teaching and link it to historical, philosophical, systematic, and pastoral concerns. Far from being mere collections of essays, the volumes are carefully crafted so that the voices of the various experts combine to proclaim a unified message.

Again, as the name suggests, *theology in community* also seeks to demonstrate that theology should be done in teams. The teachings of the Bible were forged in real-life situations by leaders in God's covenant communities. The biblical teachings addressed concerns of real people who needed the truth to guide their lives. Theology was formulated by the church and for the church. This series seeks to recapture that biblical reality. The volumes are written by scholars, from a variety of denominational backgrounds and life experiences with academic credentials and significant expertise across the spectrum of theological disciplines, who collaborate with each other. They write from a high view of Scripture with robust evangelical conviction and in a gracious manner. They are not detached academics but are personally involved in ministry, serving as teachers, pastors, and missionaries. The contributors to these volumes stand in continuity with the historic church, care about the global church, share life together with other believers in local churches, and aim to write for the good of the church to strengthen its leaders, particularly pastors, teachers, missionaries, lay leaders, students, and professors.

For the glory of God and the good of the church,
Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson

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INTRODUCTION

CHRISTOPHER W. MORGAN
AND ROBERT A. PETERSON

Invest in sin? One online investment broker advertises a novel stock portfolio called the “Seven Deadly Sins,” which organizes stocks around the vices of gluttony, sloth, vanity, greed, envy, lust, and wrath. This portfolio is built on the assumption that even in a sagging and unpredictable economy, there is one thing we can always count on—sin:

Even in tough times, consumers continue to partake in things that may not be considered particularly virtuous. From cigarettes to sex, burgers to Botox®—consumer indulgences require products and services from a wide range of publicly traded companies. Some luxuries see reduced demand during tough times. But smokers could keep smoking, drinkers keep drinking, and the lustful keep . . . lusting. Bad habits are hard to break. And when times are rough, who wants to even try? Nobody can predict the markets, but consumers are only human. And economic conditions may not be able to defeat their appetites for sinful stuff. . . .

So the portfolio proposes:

In the past, many investors who were interested in investing in sin, vice, and adult entertainment turned to individual stocks. Now with Motif Investing, you can invest in the Seven Deadly Sins motif, a carefully researched and balanced portfolio of stocks that may give investors diverse exposure to investing in sin, vice, and adult entertainment stocks.¹

While we are disgusted by such warped conclusions, their assumption is telling: the inevitability of sin. In a postmodern world in constant change, at least one thing seems constant—sin. Moreover, we agree with Reinhold Niebuhr’s famous remark: “The doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith.”² Obviously, Niebuhr is speaking ironically, but the point stands. Sin unmistakably

¹<https://www.motifinvesting.com/motifs/seven-deadly-sins#/overview>. Accessed October 13, 2012.

²Henri Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle*, NSBT, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 84. Quoted in Ted Peters, *Radical Evil in Soul and Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 326, from Reinhold Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature and His Communities* (New York: Scribner’s, 1965), 24.

recurs—in person after person, generation after generation, and society after society around the globe.

But has the world always been characterized by sin? And will it always be? More basically, what is sin? Where did it come from? What effects does it bring? Additionally, how does it relate to God and his purposes? How does it relate to the goodness of creation? And how does it affect humans created in the image of God? What is temptation? How is Satan involved in all this? Most importantly, what does God do about sin? Is there a way to conquer our sins?

These questions are timely and perennial and deserve straightforward answers. The chapters that follow attempt to provide answers based on God's Word interpreted in the context of the biblical story, taking into consideration the history of the doctrine of sin and attempting to systematize that doctrine, all with a view to applying the doctrine of sin to contemporary life.

Don Carson breaks the ground for this volume with "Sin's Contemporary Significance."

The roots of sin run deep in the soil of the biblical story. Paul House uncovers sin in the Old Testament in two chapters: "Sin in the Law" and "Sin in the Former and Latter Prophets and the Writings." Robert Yarbrough and Douglas Moo dig deep in the New Testament in "Sin in the Gospels, Acts, and Hebrews to Revelation" and "Sin in Paul," respectively.

From the soil of Scripture springs the plant—the biblical, historical, and systematic theology of sin. Christopher Morgan presents a fresh biblical theology in "Sin in the Biblical Story." Gerald Bray helpfully surveys "Sin in Historical Theology." And systematic theologian John Mahony rounds out this section with "A Theology of Sin for Today."

Next bloom the plant's flowers, specialized topics and applications of the doctrine of sin. Sydney Page warns us of our Enemy in "Satan, Sin, and Evil." David Calhoun offers wise counsel and encouragement for struggling believers (all of us at times!) in "Sin and Temptation." And Bryan Chapell tells of believers' necessary response to sin in "Repentance That Sings."

We invite readers to join us in a difficult but important task—to look sin in the face so as to understand its ugliness and to appreciate better its beautiful remedy in Christ.

SIN'S CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE

D. A. CARSON



At first blush it may seem as if this volume has the ideal order rather badly reversed. Would it not be the part of wisdom to work through the biblical and theological material on sin before reflecting on its contemporary significance? Certainly a good case could be made for such a traditional ordering. So what defense can we offer for the fact that the editors in their wisdom have placed this essay first?

In fact, the editorial decision displays considerable insight—a kind of homiletical insight. A preacher may, of course, reserve the application of the message for the end of the sermon; alternatively, he may interweave application all through the sermon. On some occasions, however, that preacher is wise who sets the stage for the exegesis and biblical theology by displaying the relevance of the topic at the beginning of the address. Especially is this the case if for any reason the subject has become unpopular, or if it is often misconceived or induces cringe factors. In such cases, displaying the significance of the topic may constitute a compelling introduction to it.

It may be worthwhile to distinguish the topic's intrinsic and contemporary significance. These two cannot, of course, be kept absolutely separate. Nevertheless, under its intrinsic significance we ought to recall what place sin holds in the Bible, in the entire structure of Christian thought; under its contemporary significance, we shall probe in what ways the Bible's teaching on sin addresses some of the characteristics of our own age and historical location. The former is the more important heading, for it laps into the latter. Indeed, to outline ways in which sin is intrinsically important to a biblically faithful grasp of the gospel is to argue for its perennial significance and therefore *is also* to display its contempo-

rary significance. Only then are we better positioned to reflect on ways in which a mature grasp of sin speaks prophetically and powerfully to our own cultural context.

Sin's Intrinsic Significance

There can be no agreement as to what salvation *is* unless there is agreement as to that from which salvation rescues us. The problem and the solution hang together: the one explicates the other. It is impossible to gain a deep grasp of what the cross achieves without plunging into a deep grasp of what sin is; conversely, to augment one's understanding of the cross is to augment one's understanding of sin.

To put the matter another way, sin establishes the plotline of the Bible. In this discussion, the word *sin* will normally be used as the generic term that includes iniquity, transgression, evil, idolatry, and the like, unless the context makes it clear that the word is being used in a more restricted sense. In the general sense, then, sin constitutes the problem that God resolves: the conflict carries us from the third chapter of Genesis to the closing chapter of Revelation. Before the fall, God's verdict is that everything he made is "very good." We are not told how the Serpent came to rebel, but the sin of the first human pair introduces us to many of the human dimensions of sin. We find rebellion against God, succumbing to the vicious temptation to become like God, an openness to the view that God will not impose the sentence of death on sinners (and thus the implicit charge that God's word cannot be trusted), defiance of a specific command (that is, transgression), the sacrifice of intimate fellowship with God, the introduction of shame and guilt, eager self-justification by blaming others, the introduction of pain and loss, and various dimensions of death. The fourth chapter of Genesis brings us the first murder, and the fifth chapter the refrain, "and then he died." The following four chapters bring us the judgment of the flood and its entailments, but humanity is not thereby improved, as the eleventh chapter makes clear.

It would be easy to keep running through the drama of the Scripture's story line, carefully observing the shape and depth of sin in the patriarchal period, in the years of the wilderness wanderings, in the time of the judges, in the decay of the Davidic monarchy, and in the malaise of the exile and the frequent sinful lapses among those who returned. Those whom Jesus confronts in his day are no better. The apostle Paul's massive indictment against all humanity (Rom. 1:18–3:20) sets the stage for one of the deepest statements about what the cross achieved (3:21–26). Indeed, so much

of what the triune God discloses of himself is revealed in the context of showing how each member of the Godhead contributes to the salvation of God's elect—their salvation from sin. It is not for nothing that the very first chapter of the New Testament establishes that the child born of the Virgin Mary will be called "Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21).¹ Very little of the tabernacle/temple system of the old covenant makes sense unless one understands something of sin; certainly none of its antitype does, worked out with stunning care in the epistle to the Hebrews. Whether one considers the theme of God's wrath or the particular objects of his saving love, whether God thunders from Sinai or weeps over Jerusalem, whether we focus on individual believers or on the covenantal identity of the people of God, whether one stands aghast at the temporal judgments poured out on Jerusalem or stands in rapt anticipation of the glories of the new heaven and the new earth, the substratum that holds the entire account together is sin and how God, rich in mercy, deals with sins and sinners for his own glory and for his people's good.

Sin "offends God not only because it becomes an assault on God directly, as in impiety or blasphemy, but also because it assaults what God has made."² Sin is rebellion against God's very being, against his explicit word, against his wise and ordered reign. It results in the disorder of the creation and in the spiritual and physical death of God's image bearers. With perfect justice God could have condemned all sinners, and no one could have justly blamed him. In reality, the Bible's story line depicts God, out of sheer grace, saving a vast number of men and women from every tongue and tribe, bringing them safely and finally to a new heaven and a new earth where sin no longer has any sway and even its effects have been utterly banished.

In short, if we do not comprehend the massive role that sin plays in the Bible and therefore in biblically faithful Christianity, we shall misread the Bible. Positively, a sober and realistic grasp of sin is one of the things necessary to read the Bible in a percipient fashion; it is one of the required criteria for a responsible hermeneutic.

It may be helpful to lay out a handful of the theological structures that are shaped by what the Bible says about sin and that in turn shape our understanding of sin.

¹Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture references in this chapter are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

²Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 16.

Sin Is Tied to Passages That Disclose Important Things about God

First, sin is deeply tied to any number of illuminating passages that disclose important things about God. Consider Exodus 34:6–7, where God intones certain words to Moses, who is hidden in a cleft of rock on Mount Sinai. Moses is neither permitted nor able to gaze directly on God; should he do so, he would die (33:20). He is permitted to see no more than the trailing edge of the afterglow of the glory of God. But he *is* permitted and able to *hear*: God discloses himself to Moses supremely in words, and those words are simultaneously moving and puzzling (the italicized words draw attention to what is puzzling): “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, *and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin*. Yet *he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation*.” Here is the God who forgives “wickedness, rebellion and sin,” yet who “does not leave the guilty unpunished.” Is this some sort of strange dialectic? Alternating procedures, perhaps? The tension is not finally resolved until Calvary. Certainly the focus of this strange tension is sin.

Or consider the words of David after his seduction of Bathsheba and his cold-blooded arrangements to murder her husband. Brought low in brokenness and repentance, he not only begs God for mercy (Ps. 51:1) but tells him, “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (v. 4). At one level, of course, this is blatantly untrue: David has sinned against Bathsheba, her husband, her child, his family, the military high command, and the nation as a whole, which he serves as chief magistrate. Yet there is something profound in David’s words. What makes sin *sin*, in the deepest sense, is that it is *against God*. We let ourselves off the hook too easily when we think of sins along horizontal axes only—whether the horizontal sins of socially disapproved behavior or the horizontal sin of genocide. What makes sins really vile, intrinsically heinous—what makes them worthy of punishment by God himself—is that they are first, foremost, and most deeply sins against the living God, who has made us for himself and to whom we must one day give an account. In other words, this psalm of repentance from sin discloses important things about sin’s relation to God.

Or we might remind ourselves of the fourth Servant Song, including the words:

Surely he took up our pain
 and bore our suffering,
 yet we considered him punished by God,
 stricken by him, and afflicted.
 But he was pierced for our transgressions,
 he was crushed for our iniquities;
 the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
 and by his wounds we are healed. . . .
 Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
 and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin,
 he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
 and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. (Isa. 53:4–5, 10)

Here is penal substitution by Yahweh's own design, taking our suffering, our transgressions, our iniquities, our punishment, and our sin.

Again, once we recall how in John's Gospel the word *world* commonly refers to the human moral order in deeply culpable rebellion against God (that is, the word *world* commonly means "this sinful world"), the words of John 3:16 shout matchless grace. God's love for the world is to be admired not because the world is so big but because the world is so bad. God so loved this sinful world that he gave his one and only Son—and the context shows that the locus of this gift is not in the incarnation only but in Jesus being "lifted up" in death (cf. "lifted up" in vv. 14–15, and the consistent use of ὑψώω in John). The plan of redemption for this sinful world is driven by God's undeserved love, most magnificently expressed in the gift of his Son, whose death alone is sufficient to lift the sentence of condemnation (vv. 17–18). To reject such love—that is, to continue in sin—is to remain under the wrath of God (v. 36). Even this handful of verses says much about God, his character, his redemptive purposes, his love, and his wrath—and the axis around which these themes revolve is sin.

One could easily draw attention to hundreds of passages where similar dynamics prevail between God and sin, but I shall restrict myself to one more. Toward the end of his famous chapter on the resurrection, Paul raises two rhetorical questions in words drawn from Hosea 13:14: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Cor. 15:55). Then he answers his own questions: "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (vv. 56–57). In other words, the death-dealing power of sin has been defeated by God's resurrection of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Once again, then, the display of what God has

done, supremely in the resurrection of his Son, is occasioned by sin and all its brutal power.

Sin is deeply tied to any number of illuminating passages that disclose important things about God, and if about God, then about the salvation that God has wrought in Jesus Christ.

Sin Is Tied to the Work of Satan

Second, sin is radically tied to the work of Satan and of demonic forces. Otherwise put, sin has a cosmic/demonic dimension. The first human descent into sin is stimulated by the Serpent (Genesis 3), later identified as Satan himself (Rev. 12:9). The text in Genesis does not tell us how it happened that *he* first sinned, but the opening lines of Genesis 3 make it clear that, since he was made by God, the Serpent has no independent status akin to God's but in darker hue. And since everything in the creation that God made was "very good" (1:31), one assumes that this was also true of the Serpent: when he was created, he was good. The obvious inference is that the Serpent had himself fallen at some point antecedent to the fall of Adam and Eve—an inference that Jude is prepared to draw (v. 6).

It follows, then, that sin has dimensions that stretch beyond the human race. I am not referring to the consequences of *human* sin that stretch beyond the human race—the corruption of the entire created order, the subjection of the created order to frustration, bondage, and decay (Rom. 8:20–21). Rather, I am referring to the sin of rebellious heavenly beings, of angels themselves. Although Scripture says relatively little about this wretched reality, the small windows it does provide into this antecedent fall are highly illuminating. Part of our own struggle is "against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 6:12): there is a cosmic, indeed heavenly, dimension to the struggle, glimpsed again in the first two chapters of Job.

Three further characteristics of this angelic, nonhuman sin function in the Bible to provide something of a foil to the way human sin plays out: (1) the initial human sin infected the entire human race and brought down the wrath of God upon the entire human race; the initial angelic sin corrupted those who sinned, while the rest remained unaffected. Whether this fundamental difference in the way sin is structured in the two races turns on the nonorganic and nongenerating nature of angelic existence (according to Jesus, angels do not marry: Matt. 22:30) is nowhere made explicit. (2) In God's grace, there has arisen a redeemer for fallen human beings but none for angels: "For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descen-

dants" (Heb. 2:16; cf. 2:5). The horde of demons lives utterly without hope: they know there is an "appointed time" for their endless, conscious torment (Matt. 8:29; cf. Rev. 20:10). None of them discovers that the words "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28) are for them. At very least, the recognition of this truth ought to engender in redeemed men and women awestruck humility and gratitude at the sovereignty of grace. (3) No text depicts angels as having been made *imago Dei*, the way this claim is made of human beings (Gen. 1:26–27). Moreover, to sweep these three observations together, the culminating blessing for God's redeemed image bearers, once their sin has been entirely done away with, is the beatific vision: they will see his face (Rev. 22:4)—unlike the highest order of angelic beings, who in the presence of God constantly cover their faces with their wings (Isa. 6:2; cf. Rev. 4:8).

There is at least one way in which the outcome of the sin of Satan and his minions is akin to the outcome of the sin of unregenerate, unrepentant human beings: it ends in eternal conscious suffering (Rev. 20:10; cf. 14:11). Satan does not stop being Satan and become wonderfully pure and holy when he is finally and forever consigned to the lake of fire. Forever he will be evil and will be punished. Similarly there is no scrap of biblical evidence that hell will be filled with purified human beings. Its denizens will still pursue self-justification rather than God's justification, they will still love themselves while hating God, and they will continue to receive the punishment that is sin's just due.

Sin Is Depicted in Many Ways

Third, so far I have primarily used the generic word *sin*, but sin is depicted by many words, expressions, and narrative descriptions. Sin can be seen as transgression, which presupposes laws that are being transgressed. Sometimes sin is portrayed as a power that overcomes us. Frequently sin is tied ineluctably to idolatry. Sin can be envisaged as dirt, as missing the target, as folly, as tied to the "flesh" (a notoriously difficult concept to capture in one English word), as unbelief, as slavery, as spiritual adultery, as disobedience. Sin is the offense of individuals, but it is profoundly social and multi-generational: the sins of the fathers are visited on the children to the third and fourth generation, and sins committed in the days of Hezekiah carry their own inescapable entailment in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. The Bible frequently depicts sin in terms of the guilt of individuals; at other times it shows how the sins of some parties turn others into hopeless victims.

Some of the most powerful depictions of sin occur in narratives where the word is not used because it is not necessary to use it. One thinks, for example, of the description of the interchanges among Joseph's brothers as they debate whether to kill him or sell him, and again as they lie to their father. More potently, the final major narrative in Judges depicts such soul-destroying, God-dishonoring corruption and decay that even the ostensible "good guys" in the story are shockingly obscene. One simply cannot make sense of the Bible without a profound and growing sensitivity to the multifaceted and powerful ways the Bible portrays sin.

Sin Is Enmeshed in Theological Constructions

Fourth, just as sin is depicted by many words, expressions, and narrative descriptions (the point I have just made), so also is it enmeshed in powerful theological constructions. These constructions are so numerous and rich that to treat them in any detail would demand a very long book. Here I can merely list a few such constructions, in no particular order of importance.

1) *Anthropology*. The first two chapters of the Bible depict sinless human beings; the last two depict transformed, forgiven, sin-free human beings. All the chapters in between depict or presuppose sinful human beings, with the exception of those that describe the humanity of Jesus and insist he is utterly without sin. For the rest of us, we read descriptions of our sinfulness that set out sin's universality and sweep (e.g., Rom. 3:9–20) and its connection with Adam our federal head (e.g., Romans 5). Out of such evidence spring theological formulations that try to summarize what the Bible says in few words: we speak of original sin and total depravity, carefully explaining what we do and do not mean by such expressions. With the sole exception of Jesus the Messiah, we certainly mean not only that all human beings between Eden before the fall and resurrection existence in the new heaven and the new earth are not only sinful, but that sin is not an optional characteristic loosely tacked on to otherwise unblemished beings but a pervasive power and guilt and tragedy that define all human experience, crying out for grace.

2) The opening paragraphs of this essay point to some of the links between sin and *soteriology*. One might press on to *pneumatology*, especially the fundamental division of fallen humankind into those who are merely "natural" and those who have the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:10b–15).³ The ef-

³Cf. Abraham Kuyper, *Wisdom and Wonder: Common Grace in Science and Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian's Library Press, 2011), 80: "It is clear that with its antithesis between a 'natural' man and a 'spiritual' man, Scripture is not merely referring to a person who does and another who does not take Holy Scripture into account.

fect of the Spirit's work is observable in all who have been born of God, even if the mechanisms are obscure (John 3:8). The Spirit produces the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23), which stands over against the acts of the flesh (vv. 19–21), which is another way of describing sin. At the moment I shall restrict myself to a few comments on just one element of God's saving plan, namely, *conversion*. In the sociology of religion, as in popular parlance, conversion signals the change of allegiance from one religion to another. A Buddhist becomes a Muslim, or the reverse; a Taoist becomes a Christian, a Christian becomes an atheist, an atheist becomes a Hindu—in every case, we commonly say that the person has converted. We may even use the language of conversion when a person changes denominational allegiance: we speak of a Baptist converting to Roman Catholicism, or the reverse. In confessional Christianity, however, conversion has a much more precise focus. Phenomenologically, when a person truly becomes a Christian, he or she has changed religious allegiance, and so we may still use the conversion word-group in a purely descriptive fashion, but underlying the outward phenomenon is supernatural transformation. In biblical terminology, a person has passed from darkness to light, from death to life. That person has been born again, born from above; once-blind eyes now see, the lost sheep has been found, “natural” has been overtaken by supernatural. Relationally and forensically, a sinner has been reconciled to God; eschatologically, that person already belongs to the kingdom that has been inaugurated and consequently lives in the sure and certain hope of the transforming resurrection and the consummation of all things. The final outcome will be perfection, for no sin or taint of evil will be permitted in the new heaven and the new earth. In such usage, of course, conversion cannot rightly be applied to people when they swap religious allegiances. It can be applied only to those who become Christians in the strongest NT sense of that word. In short, the transformation inherent in conversion in this theological sense is inescapably tied to God's plan and power to confront sin in an individual's life and ultimately destroy it utterly.

3) *Sanctification*. For present purposes we shall exclude such categories as positional or definitional sanctification. That leaves us with

Its pronouncement goes much deeper by positing the distinction between having and not having received the Spirit of God . . . (1 Cor. 2:12). This corresponds entirely with what Jesus himself said, that ‘unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he *cannot enter the kingdom of God*’ (John 3:5). If you agree that the kingdom of God is definitely not identical to the institutional church, but rules our entire world-and-life view, then Jesus' declaration means that only one who has received the inner illumination of the Holy Spirit is in a position to obtain such a perspective on the whole of things, one that corresponds to the truth and essence of things.”

the theological concept of growing in holiness—a notion that can be expressed in many ways without using the term *sanctification*. For example, in Philippians 3 Paul does not hold that he has already attained full maturity in Christ; rather, he presses on “to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (v. 12). What he strains toward, what lies ahead, is “the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (v. 14)—resurrection existence (vv. 11, 21), which is opposed to the “enemies of the cross of Christ,” whose “destiny is destruction” and whose “god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame” (vv. 18–19). Those who are “mature” should adopt Paul’s view, follow his example, and “live up to what we have already attained” (vv. 14–17). In other words, sanctification works now in Paul and in other believers the beginnings of what will finally be achieved in the ultimate glorification. That includes firm allegiance to the gospel that eschews all “confidence in the flesh” (v. 3) and is passionate for “the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith” (v. 9). In other words, sanctification is bound up with the “putting to death” of sin,⁴ with conformity to Jesus, with moral and spiritual transformation now in anticipation of the climactic transformation to come.

4) *Sin and the law*. John tells us that “sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4). Although some have dismissed this pronouncement as a singularly shallow definition of sin, in fact it is painfully insightful once we remember whose law is in view. Conceptually this is not far removed from the dictum that whatever is not of faith is sin, once we recall who is to be the object of our faith; nor is it far removed from Jesus’ insistence that the most important command is to love God with heart and soul and mind and strength, once we perceive that this is invariably the one command that is broken whenever we break any other command of God. Sin’s odium lies in its defiance of God.

Yet the relationship between sin and the law is complex. It runs along several axes. The first we have just articulated: sin is breaking God’s law and therefore defying God himself. This includes failing to do what God commands and doing what God prohibits. In the words of the General Confession, “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us.” Conceived along another axis, however, the

⁴The old word, of course, is “mortification,” but that word has taken on such a different meaning that it is now almost unusable in the sense it had in the KJV.

law actually provokes sin, prompting it to lash out. In other words, sin is so rebellious of heart that commands and prohibitions, far from enabling sinners to overcome their sin, have the same effect as a rule does in the mind and heart of an immature teenager. Tweaked again, the law can be seen to operate not only on this psychological plane but along the axis of redemptive history: sin leading to death is abundantly present long before the giving of the law at Sinai (Rom. 5:13–14), such that when law is thought of as the revelation given through Moses, the law is relatively late on the scene. But another of its many functions is to establish complex structures of tabernacle/temple, priesthood, sacrificial system, and festivals such as Passover and Day of Atonement, all designed to establish trajectories taking us to Jesus, who is the ultimate temple, the ultimate priest, the ultimate sacrifice, the ultimate Passover, the ultimate bloody offering on the final Day of Atonement. Thus the law brings in Jesus, who destroys sin; it brings us to the gospel, which alone is the power of God that brings salvation.⁵ The law has many roles in relation to sin, but it does not have the power to free the sinner from its enslaving power and its consequences.⁶

It would be easy to demonstrate sin's links with every important theological construction grounded in Scripture. As important as they are, the

⁵For a useful and thought-provoking analysis of the different ways in which the apostle Paul analyzes the law, see Brian Rosner, *Paul and the Law: Keeping the Commandments of God*, NSBT (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, forthcoming).

⁶It is very easy to skew these matters away from the subtle nuances of Scripture. I cannot resist citing extensively from Archibald Alexander, a passage to which Fred Zaspel has drawn my attention: *Thoughts on Religious Experience* (repr. Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, 2009), 336–38:

When persons are truly converted they always are sincerely desirous to make rapid progress in piety; and there are not wanting exceeding great and gracious promises of aid to encourage them to go forward with alacrity. Why then is so little advancement made? Are there not some practical mistakes very commonly entertained, which are the cause of this slowness of growth? I think there are, and will endeavour to specify some of them.

And first, there is a defect in our belief of the freeness of divine grace. To exercise unshaken confidence in the doctrine of gratuitous pardon is one of the most difficult things in the world; and to preach this doctrine fully without verging towards Antinomianism is no easy task, and is therefore seldom done. But Christians cannot but be lean and feeble when deprived of their proper nutriment. It is by faith that the spiritual life is made to grow; and the doctrine of free grace, without any mixture of human merit, is the only true object of faith. Christians are too much inclined to depend on themselves, and not to derive their life entirely from Christ.

There is a spurious legal religion, which may flourish without the practical belief in the absolute freeness of divine grace, but it possesses none of the characteristics of the Christian's life. It is found to exist in the rankest growth, in systems of religion which are utterly false. But even when the true doctrine is acknowledged in theory, often it is not practically felt and acted on. The new convert lives upon his frames rather than on Christ, while the older Christian is still found struggling in his own strength and, failing in his expectations of success, he becomes discouraged first, and then he sinks into a gloomy despondency, or becomes in a measure careless. At that point the spirit of the world comes in with resistless force. Here, I am persuaded, is the root of the evil; and until religious teachers inculcate clearly, fully, and practically, the grace of God as manifested in the Gospel, we shall have no vigorous growth of piety among professing Christians. We must be, as it were, identified with Christ—crucified with him, and living by him, and in him by faith, or rather, having Christ living in us. The covenant of grace must be more clearly and repeatedly expounded in all its rich plenitude of mercy and in all its absolute freeness.

four I have mentioned barely introduce the possibilities. In other words, it is impossible to engage in probing, biblically faithful theological reflection without thinking deeply about sin.

Reflection on Sin Is Necessary to Understand Suffering and Evil

Fifth, another way to demonstrate the ubiquity of sin in all serious theological discussion is to outline its place in theological analysis that is rather more synthetic and second-order than the kinds of theological constructions I have mentioned so far. I shall provide only one example. On three or four occasions during the last eight or ten years, I have given a rather lengthy lecture on theodicy. I never called it that; it was always titled something like “How Christians Should Think about Suffering and Evil” or something of that order. What I tried to do was to sink six major pillars into the ground. These six pillars, taken together, provided (I said) an adequate foundation to support a distinctively Christian way of reflecting on evil and suffering. The six had to be taken together. One pillar by itself was totally inadequate, and even four or five pillars were dangerously weak and left the structure poorly supported.

The interesting thing is that all of the pillars have to do with sin. The first pillar I label “Lessons from the Beginning of the Bible.” This covers creation, in which God makes everything, institutes marriage, assigns human beings their responsibilities to reign under God, surrounds them with an idyllic setting and above all his own presence, and pronounces everything “good.” The narrative proceeds to the fall, to the onset of idolatry, sin and its short- and long-term effects (including both death and alienation from God), and the curses pronounced on the various parties and what they mean. The brutal fact is that human beings have forfeited their right to expect their creator-God to love and care for them, so that if he does so, it is because he is infinitely kinder than they deserve. Theological reflection on the way these themes are teased out across the Scriptures reminds us that all the wars, hatred, lust, covetousness, and all the transgression, idolatry, sin, and its grim consequences, spring from human rebellion. Even what we call “natural disasters” are first and foremost an implicit call to repentance (Luke 13:1–5). Far from being something God created, sin is rebellion against the creator-God. The implications for theodicy are many, starting with the fact that God does not owe us blessing, prosperity, and health. What he owes us is justice, which in itself guarantees our ruin. My point for the purpose of this essay, however, is that this pillar, this “fix” in the biblical landscape, is tightly bound up with

sin. One cannot think long about the complexities of theodicy in a biblically faithful way without wrestling with what the Bible says about sin.

And that is just the first pillar. The second is “Lessons from the End of the Bible,” where we must think about hell, the new heavens and the new earth, resurrection existence, the New Jerusalem—a world where nothing impure will ever enter. One does not proceed very far before one recognizes that the discussion is again circling around the topic of sin. The third pillar is “The Mystery of Providence.” Here one wrestles not only with many texts that talk about God’s sovereignty but also with texts that talk about God’s sovereignty *over a world highly charged with sin*. It would be easy to work through all six pillars and summarize their contribution toward the support of a well-formed and biblically faithful theodicy, but the point, in every case, is that these pillars make no sense if one tries to abstract them from profound reflections on sin. In short, sin is ubiquitous in all serious theological discussion that takes its cues from Scripture.

To summarize: if we are to think realistically about the relevance of the doctrine of sin to today’s culture, we must begin with its intrinsic significance—the place sin holds within the matrix of biblically determined theological reflection.

Sin’s Contemporary Significance

Under this heading I shall focus on some of the ways in which a biblically faithful doctrine of sin addresses some of the characteristics of our own age and of our own historical location. I shall briefly mention three.

We Live in a Time of Extraordinary Violence and Wickedness

First, only thirteen years have elapsed since we closed out the bloodiest century in human history. There was not just one holocaust: add to the Nazi slaughter of Jews the Stalinist starvation of twenty million Ukrainians, the Maoist slaughter of perhaps fifty million Chinese, the massacre of between a quarter and a third of the population of Cambodia, tribal slaughter of Tutsis and Hutus, and various ethnic cleansings. How shall we calculate the damage, material and psychological, of terrorism in all its forms, of unrestrained consumerism, of all the damage done by drug abuse of many kinds, including alcoholism? The digital revolution that ushers in spectacular improvements in research, data handling, and communication also brings us access to instant porn, with untold damage done to man/woman relationships in general and to marriages

in particular.⁷ Shall we add the cruelty of racism, the exploitation of the weak, and greed and laziness in all their forms?⁸ And what of those massive and ubiquitous sins that are primarily the absence of particular virtues—*unholiness, impiety, prayerlessness, unloving hearts, ingratitude*?

Despite the massive evidence that surrounds us on every side, many in our generation have come to think of themselves as essentially good people. Pollyannaish outlooks abound. If there are bad things in the world, they are primarily what other people do—other religions, other races, other political parties, other generations, other economic sectors, other subcultures. Doubtless every generation thinks of itself as better than it actually is, but in the Western world *this* generation has multiplied such moral blindness to the highest degree. For example, one of the reasons the founding fathers of the United States constructed a Constitution with division of powers and a system of checks and balances was that they believed steps had to be taken to curtail pervasive sin, especially the lust for power. By contrast, many in our society are not even aware of the dangers that lurk everywhere when one block or another of government or society gains too much sway.

In short, the first and most obvious *contemporary* significance to preaching a robust doctrine of sin is that it confronts the almost universal absence of such teaching. In other words, the first *contemporary* significance of biblical teaching on sin is not that it meshes nicely with contemporary worldviews and therefore provides a pleasant way into thoughtful interaction but precisely that it confronts the painfully perverse absence of awareness of sin.

Across the stream of redemptive history, this was one of the primary functions of the law: to bring conviction of sin. Although many preachers in the Reformed tradition have treated Galatians 3 as if it mandates that the way to preach the gospel to individuals is to begin with the law, assured that the law is our “guardian” (παιδαγωγός, Gal. 3:24) to bring us to see our need of Christ and of grace, careful examination of the context shows that the focus of the chapter is not on the role of the law in the conversion of the individual but on the role of the law in the drama of salvation history. If Paul’s understanding of the promise given to Abraham is correct (vv. 1–4), one may well ask why the law was given at all (v. 19). Why not run very quickly from promise to fulfillment? In various places Paul gives

⁷The essay by Robert Yarbrough in this volume makes many of the same points.

⁸Cf. especially Brian Rosner, *Greed as Idolatry: The Origin and Meaning of a Pauline Metaphor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

several complementary answers to that question, but part of the answer is that the law in Scripture “locked up everything under the control of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe” (v. 22). Yet the fact that the law covenant should reign for almost a millennium and a half shows how important it was to God to get across the persistence, repetition, heinousness, enslaving power, and odium of human sin and the utter incapacity of human beings to break free from it. How else will human rebels cry to God for grace and accept by faith what was promised? Not dissimilarly, a generation that is singularly unaware of its sin while being awash in sin desperately needs a robust doctrine of sin to begin to understand redemption.

Postmodernism's Reluctance to Identify Evil

Second, today there are fewer books published defining and defending postmodernism than there were fifteen years ago. In Europe almost no one reads Michel Foucault anymore, let alone Jacques Derrida. Some American undergraduates are still prescribed toxic doses of postmodernism, but graduate students have increasingly turned away from the brew. As a sophisticated epistemological and cultural phenomenon, postmodernism in many parts of the Western world has passed its sell-by date. Yet nevertheless the detritus of postmodernism can be seen everywhere. Among the most noticeable pieces are those that are reluctant to identify evil, largely on the assumption that right and wrong, good and evil, are nothing more than social constructs. Such an environment may not appear to be the ideal cultural context for talking about sin. The related ill of moral relativism does not seem very conducive to virile reflection on what the Bible says about sin.

Once again, however, it is the need for it that makes biblical reflection on sin so desperately relevant. The deep cultural animus against the category of sin means that many preachers much prefer to talk about weaknesses, mistakes, tragedies, failures, inconsistencies, hurts, disappointment, blindness—anything but sin. The result is that biblical portrayal of God is distorted, as is his plan of redemption. Getting across what the Bible says about sin in this culture is, of course, extremely difficult. Looked at another way, that very difficulty is a measure of the need and therefore of the contemporary significance of robust treatments of sin.

The Supreme Virtue of the New Tolerance

Third, an array of issues has surfaced that cannot easily be addressed without a well-shaped biblical doctrine of sin. One of these is the current

focus on tolerance—but a tolerance newly defined and newly positioned.⁹ It is the new positioning that captures our attention at the moment. In the past, tolerance in any culture was discussed *relative to some broadly agreed or imposed value system, religious or otherwise*. Once the value system was in place in the culture, questions inevitably arose about how far one might vary from it before facing legal, judicial, or other coercive sanctions. Within limits, many cultures have concluded that some degree of dissent may actually be a good thing; only the most despotic of regimes allow almost no tolerance for those who disagree. But that means that the value system itself is the important thing; the virtue of tolerance is parasitic on the value system itself. And any society, no matter how tolerant, draws limits somewhere.¹⁰ In much of the Western world at the moment, however, there is very little culture-wide consensus on right and wrong, good and evil, holiness and sin, while tolerance has been elevated to the highest spot in the moral echelon. It's not that we have self-consciously taken that step; rather, for reasons I've tried to outline elsewhere, tolerance has become more important than truth, morality, or any widely held value system. Tolerance becomes the supreme good, the supreme god in the culture's pantheon, in a sphere of existence that often argues by merest clichés¹¹ and that has very few other widely agreed desiderata. The complicating irony is that those who hold tenaciously to the supreme virtue of this new tolerance are by and large extremely intolerant of those who do not agree with them.

My purpose in indulging in this excursus is to point out that the overthrow of this new intolerant tolerance depends hugely on finding a value system that cherishes something more than this new tolerance. It is difficult to hold a mature and sustained debate on, say, the wisdom or otherwise of providing for homosexual marriage in law when one side, instead of wrestling with issues of substance, dismisses the other side as intolerant and is cheered on in the culture for doing so. Unchecked, this new tolerance will sooner or later put many people in chains. For it to be challenged, there must be a cultural value system deemed more precious, a higher good, than the new tolerance itself. And one of the necessary ingredients for achieving this end is the reconstitution of a robust view of sin, and therefore of good and evil, in the culture.

⁹ Cf. D. A. Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

¹⁰ For example, Western culture is extremely open to diverse sexual activity, but all Western countries draw the line at the practice of pedophilia.

¹¹ Cf. especially Jonah Goldberg, *The Tyranny of Clichés* (New York: Sentinel, 2012).



To sum up: the contemporary significance of biblical teaching on sin is best grasped, first, when the place of sin within the Bible itself is understood, and, second, when we perceive how desperately our culture needs to be shaped again by what the Bible says about sin.



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