

## ARTICLE 4

# Sin and Evil

### Sin and Its Consequences

We believe that the first humans yielded to the tempter and fell into sin. Since then, all people disobey God and choose to sin, falling short of the glory of God. As a result, sin and evil have gained a hold in the world, disrupting God's purposes for the created order and alienating humans from God and thus from creation, each other and themselves. Human sinfulness results in physical and spiritual death. Because all have sinned, all face eternal separation from God.

### Principalities and Powers

Sin is a power that enslaves humanity. Satan, the adversary, seeks to rule creation and uses sin to corrupt human nature with pride and selfishness. In sin, people turn from God, exchanging the truth about God for a lie, worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator. Sin opens individuals and groups to the bondage of demonic principalities and powers. These powers also work through political, economic, social, and even religious systems to turn people away from holiness, justice, and righteousness. Whether in word, deed, thought, or attitude, all humans are under the domination of sin and, on their own, are unable to overcome its power.

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Genesis 3; 6:11-12; Psalm 14:1-3; 36:1-4; 52:1-7; 58:1-5; 82; Isaiah 53:6; Ezekiel 16:49-50; Amos 2:4-8; Mark 7:20-23; John 8:34, 44; Romans 1:21-32; 3:9-18, 23; 5:12-14, 18-19; 6:23; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 2:1-3; 6:12; 1 Peter 5:8-9; 1 John 1:8-10; Revelation 12:9.

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## COMMENTARY

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The reality of sin and evil can be traced throughout the biblical story and is clearly seen in our own experience. Our understanding of sin and evil grows out of both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

### **Sin and its Consequences (Old Testament)**

The Genesis account of creation and the fall lays the foundation for the biblical view of sin and evil (Genesis 1-3). God created the world and pronounced it good. Sin and evil subsequently intruded on and corrupted this good creation when Adam and Eve yielded to the Tempter and chose to disobey God's command. From the beginning of the Bible, therefore, sin and evil are problems that require a solution. This contrasts with other views of evil, such as the perspective portrayed in the Babylonian creation myth which reflects the prevailing worldview during the time of Genesis. In that explanation, where the world was created from the murdered body of a god, evil was understood to be intrinsic in the fabric of creation. Evil and sin were considered facts of life to be endured, not problems to be solved.

The account of the fall also illustrates that sin violates God's purposes for human relationships. Not only does sin result in alienation between God and people, it also produces alienation between individuals, between the genders, and between people and creation. The ultimate consequence of sin is death (Genesis 2:17; Romans 6:23). Sin's consequence of alienation requires a solution of reconciliation (Genesis 3).

Furthermore, the account of the fall illustrates that it is the nature of sin to disguise itself as desirable (Genesis 3:6; 2 Corinthians 11:13-15). The result, however, is that sin mars the image of God within humans. Every aspect of human nature is affected by sin. No single aspect—such as reason, sexuality, or the physical body—should be identified as the primary carrier of sinfulness (Genesis 3:14-19; Romans 1:21-32). Since every aspect is affected, no human faculty—such as reason or conscience—provides an undistorted point of contact with God. Sin's consequence of depravity requires a solution in which God takes the initiative.

The stories of the people of Israel wandering through the wilderness describe the many times they were guilty of rebellion against God; they were called a rebellious and stiff-necked people. The issue was one of denying authority to Yahweh. Either they chose to oppose God's authority directly

by disobedience, or they chose to undermine God's authority indirectly by grumbling and complaining (Deuteronomy 1:26- 27; Psalm 78: 8, 17-20, 40-42, 56-57). This rebellion provoked the Lord to anger and resulted in condemnation and punishment of individuals and of the people as a whole. The problem of rebellion was addressed by Moses' repeated intercession to God for gracious forgiveness and by the people's renewed commitment to submit to the authority of Yahweh (Deuteronomy 9:6-10:13).

Humanity continues to face the temptation to rebel against God by denying God's ultimate authority. The so-called modern worldview, for example, is apt to place the authority of autonomous human reason above the authority of God. The postmodern worldview tends to undermine any form of ultimate authority, including the authority of God to rule our lives. Under the guise of liberation from all submission, the postmodern view tempts people to the sin of rebellion against God.

In the Old Testament, God initiated a covenant with the people of Israel to establish a relationship with them. This covenant outlined a vision of justice and righteousness for the coming kingdom of God. Allegiance to God meant following the law which included religious, social, and moral prescriptions. At one level, sin or transgression meant missing the mark or failing to live up to the objective standard of the law. Both deliberate rebellion and accidental transgression of the law resulted in condemnation from God. Sin's consequence of condemnation required a solution of forgiveness that God provided in the Old Testament through the sacrificial system.

Sin, however, was not confined to individual disobedience to Yahweh or to a particular law. Throughout the historical books and the prophets, we see that Israel's sin as an established nation consisted chiefly of idolatry. Idolatry meant that Israel broke the covenant relationship with Yahweh by turning away from God and by adopting the gods of other nations as well as the religious, social, and moral patterns they represented. Sin therefore involved collective rejection of Yahweh's covenant, which led to participation in systems of injustice. In response to their corporate choice, Yahweh handed Israel over to the power of these nations, who conquered and abused them.

Sin's consequence of enslavement requires a solution of liberation. In the Old Testament, God saved the people from the powers that enslaved them by raising up judges or saviours to liberate the people and by offering them a renewed relationship with God (Judges 2:11-19; Daniel 9).

The Old Testament covenant theology taught that God would deal with evil within history. In other words, God would resolve the problem of evil by raising up a righteous nation and a righteous king. By the time of the New Testament, some within Israel considered this present world to be so corrupted by Satan, death, and the forces of evil that only the direct, radical

intervention of God from outside history would be able to deal adequately with sin and evil.

### **Powers and Principalities (New Testament)**

Sin is a power. Paul differentiates between sins and sin. He depicts sin as ruling over this present age, enslaving all creation and all people except Jesus and putting them under the power of death (Romans 3:9-12; 6:6, 12-23; Ephesians 2:1-3; 6:11-12). Sin is like a magnetic field that pulls all creation into its force and no human attempt, not even following the gift of God's revealed law, can break that force and free those within its grasp (Romans 3:20; 7:5-25; Galatians 2:16).

Adam's sinful action allowed the power of sin to gain entrance into the world and consequently to pull all people except Jesus into its rule (Romans 5:12-21). This understanding of original sin must be balanced by an emphasis on human responsibility. All people except Jesus choose to submit to the power of sin by behaving sinfully; all have sinned (Romans 3:23). Often it is through the human pursuit of prestige, power, and security that people choose to turn away from God and allow the power of sin to gain a hold in their lives.

The synoptic Gospels depict the power of evil as embodied in unclean spirits which exert great physical and moral influence over people. The chief of these demons is called Satan, the devil, or Beelzebub (Matthew 12:24-29). In the wilderness, Jesus resisted Satan by challenging him with the truth of Scripture. In his ministry, Jesus confronted and cast out unclean spirits and gave his disciples power to do likewise.

Paul uses the language of powers and principalities. Though not all necessarily evil, powers and principalities can be enemies of God and thus they can corrupt and enslave humanity (1 Corinthians 15:24-25; Ephesians 6:12). Groups, nations, and structures are susceptible to demonic forces. Structures such as governments, military forces, economic systems, educational or religious institutions, family systems, and structures determined by class, race, gender, or nationality can incite people to do evil they would not have chosen on their own. Such systems exercise a collective, enduring power far more destructive than the sum of the individuals who support or comply with them.

Sin and its consequences are described and developed from the beginning of the Scripture to the end. Sin is an enormous problem that produces results of alienation, depravity, condemnation, and enslavement.

Although God provided ways of dealing with sin throughout the Old Testament, God's final solution to the problem of sin was to send Christ into human history. In his obedient life, death, and resurrection, Jesus broke

the power of sin and death. In Christ, God raised up a Saviour with power that is stronger than sin and who can liberate God's people from submission to the lordship of sin. God took the initiative and provided forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration through Christ.

Even though the power of sin is broken, humanity continues to experience the effects of sin and evil. We look to God's radical intervention in this world through Christ's final triumph to bring the problem of sin to its absolute solution.

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## PASTORAL APPLICATION

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In the church, we believe that sin is a concept that must be understood with reference to God and God's plan for creation. It is not simply a moral term to describe what a society considers to be wrong. For example, when a shopkeeper defrauds a customer, this is not merely breaking the law but also an instance of faithlessness to the customer and to God. Sin is any act, thought, desire, emotion, word, or deed, or the absence of these, that displeases God.

### Sin and its Consequences

God is not arbitrarily offended. God has initiated a covenant with humanity, an agreement which establishes a relationship between God and people. Living rightly within this covenant relationship leads to *shalom*, a concept from the Old Testament prophets webbing together God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and peace. Throughout the Scriptures, God outlines the expectations of the covenant relationship which promote His plan of *shalom* for creation.

In the church, we regularly remind ourselves of who God is through our worship. Spiritual leaders must also take seriously the task of teaching and reminding the church of what pleases and displeases God. North American society is moving away from concrete definitions of right and wrong and toward a definition of morality in terms of relativism and tolerance. For many in society, moral tolerance is now the only good, and moral intolerance the only evil. In this context, it is increasingly important for the church to be intentional about teaching the biblical view of sin.

Sometimes pastors are hesitant to provide clear teaching about sin because of abuses of this teaching in the past. In the history of the Mennonite Brethren, some churches have defined sins with a list that goes beyond the Scriptural definition, banning activities such as dancing, playing cards, buying insurance, or choosing a spouse from another denomination. Jesus cautions about legalistic definitions of sin by pointing out that it is not outward activity that defiles a person but what comes from the heart. Keeping this advice in mind, the church must still provide concrete teaching about what constitutes sin.

Throughout the history of God's people, the defining of sin has played an important role in forming the character of the followers of God. In the Old

Testament, the list of Ten Commandments plays a central role by describing in condensed form the conduct that accompanies a covenant relationship with God. In the New Testament, the church (Acts 15:28-29) and Paul (Ephesians 4:25-5:20; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-6) instruct new Christians coming from a pagan background with other lists of sins. Around the 13th century the church taught that seven deadly sins were fatal to spiritual progress: pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth.

### **Personal Dimension of Sin**

While being firm in teaching about sin, pastors also need to pay careful attention in their counselling to discerning the situations of individuals. For many spiritual leaders and others in power, for example, pride is a common and dangerous manifestation of sin. Liberation theologians remind us, however, that pride is often a sin of oppressor groups. These oppressor groups can assume that pride is a root cause of sin for everyone, and often warn the oppressed against the pitfalls of pride as well. In reality, the opposite may be true. The root cause of sin for many oppressed people may not be pride but attitudes of passivity and self-depreciation. To overcome sin, the oppressed need to develop a healthy sense of pride, not be taught to confess it as sin.

While some come to the church with a shallow view of sin, others come carrying burdens of guilt. Any church with a high view of discipleship and ethics will have among its members those who are burdened by feelings of guilt that they do not measure up to the standards. In dealing pastorally with these individuals, it is important to realize that not all guilt is bad. Guilt may be a means of grace, the work of the Holy Spirit convicting an individual of sin and leading to genuine repentance.

False guilt comes when a person has truly repented but has not been able to accept forgiveness or to forgive themselves. The injury of wounded psyches and broken relationships is often very deep, with lifelong effects. The journey toward forgiveness is neither automatic nor immediate. The church must walk patiently beside those struggling to forgive and to be forgiven, challenging them with the hope that complete forgiveness is God's way and a true possibility. Increasingly pastors are referring individuals seeking God's forgiveness and freedom to Christian counsellors, who can provide more in-depth, long-term support.

The church should model and encourage the discipline of daily personal repentance and acceptance of forgiveness. In the worship service, many congregations incorporate into the pastoral prayer a time for silent, personal confession followed by thanksgiving and acceptance of forgiveness from God.

### **Social Dimension of Sin**

In the church, we believe that one member's sin affects the spiritual health of the entire congregation. To be part of the body of Christ means we run counter to the individuality of our culture and take responsibility to lovingly bring to one another's attention the sins we discern. Pastoral counselling, Bible studies, and care groups can provide ongoing support for persons struggling to live a life of Christian freedom.

Because sin is a breach of a covenant relationship, the consequences of sin spread beyond the individual who is committing the sin. When a relationship has been violated, personal repentance is not always sufficient to restore the relationship. Churches also need to facilitate reconciliation between people.

The practice of the Lord's Supper emphasizes the need for forgiveness to be a regular part of all Christian relationships. The invitation to communion emphasizes that participation is for people who are in right relationship with God and with each other. It is the responsibility of the church to teach that if church members have sinned against another and have not asked for forgiveness and reconciliation, they should abstain from Communion until they have confessed their sins to individuals wronged and have asked for forgiveness.

Jesus' teaching on church discipline in Matthew 18 places the responsibility for making relationships right not only on the offender, but also on the one who is hurt. The gospel instructs us to show love to all involved. We show love to the victim by actively supporting the one who may feel powerless to confront an offender who will not listen. We show love to the offender by limiting knowledge of the offence to persons or groups involved with helping bring about true repentance. It is in keeping with these principles of forgiveness that churches often call in trained Christian mediators to help resolve complex conflicts.

In the case where the believer has openly done something wrong, the New Testament illustrates that a public confrontation is in order. In Galatians 2, Paul admonishes Peter publicly because he sinned publicly. When a person refuses to repent of a sin after being openly challenged by the entire congregation, that person is to be put out of the church in order to encourage the person to rethink his or her position. Churches need to take this discernment very seriously. God gives the covenant community of the church a large role to play in the actualization of forgiveness. "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18). When the church gathers in the power of the Holy Spirit to discern the forgiveness of sins, God is there among them and will bring to pass what they discern together.



## Life in the World

In the world where people do not live by the covenant relationship that God has established, Christians are frequently confronted by people who sin. Many of the Psalms are cries to God by people who feel that they have been grievously wronged. The Scriptures counsel God's people to trust God to protect them and not to take revenge themselves.

In response to sin in the world, the church also proclaims the message of liberation from the enslaving powers of sin. In a society which understands genetic disposition, addiction, victimization, and multinational corporate structures as powers which are greater than individual human will, the good news of the gospel comes in the form of liberation. Christians have the responsibility to take liberation from sin beyond the walls of the church. For example, some congregations have made public demonstrations in response to war; others attempt to shape political bills to promote justice; still others do long-term one-on-one work with people who need help overcoming addictions. By the work of Christ through the church, God addresses situations of hopelessness and despair.

The message of Jesus' liberation of people from the power of sin goes hand in hand with the message of Jesus' liberation of people from the power of evil spirits that controlled them. Jesus cast demons out of people and gave his disciples the power to do the same. When the demons did not listen to Jesus' disciples, he instructed them to pray and fast. There is still a place in the church for casting demons out of people—however, much care must be taken.

Today it is easy to take one of two extreme positions on the subject of demons. The first is a complete denial of the existence of personal forces of evil. The danger of this position is that

if we regard evil as impersonal, we may underestimate the depth of that dominion which behaviour patterns, ideologies, and institutions exert over lives. People may regard these forces merely as a pressure which may be resisted or rejected. They may discover too late that they are borne along by an intentionality which they are powerless to break (Finger, vol. 2, 163).

The second extreme is a view that demons are everywhere or that all problems are caused by these personal forces of evil, and that exorcism in the name of Christ is the only solution for these sins. The problem with this position is that it can cause much damage when put into practice. Many of our sins are caused when a God-given characteristic becomes unbalanced. For example, a healthy view of oneself made in the image of God can

become pride; a healthy appreciation for God's gift of sex can become lust. Attempts to identify and exorcise demons without true spiritual discernment can damage the healthy, God-given characteristics of one's personality. Often, rather than the instant solution suggested by exorcism, God's way of liberation comes through accepting forgiveness and following biblical guidelines for long-term discipleship, thus allowing the Holy Spirit to shape our lives to God's glory.

In response to the reality of sin, the good news is that Jesus offers hope through forgiveness and liberation. The challenge for the church is to continually accept and actualize this forgiveness and liberation in ways that represent God's kingdom here on earth.

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