



## Chapter 7

### Sin

*God created us to be agents of love and goodness. Yet we misuse our agency individually and collectively. We take the gifts of creation and of self and turn them against God's purposes with tragic results. Sin is the universal condition of separation and alienation from God and one another. We are in need of divine grace that alone reconciles us with God and one another.*

#### Introduction

Sin is our personal and universal separation from God. This estrangement includes alienation from ourselves, each other, the creation, and our ultimate Source, God. Sin is never simply a wrong choice that individuals make, such as the decision to cheat, lie, or steal. These acts spring from a prior condition. That condition is what Christian theology means by "sin."

As a condition, sin is both personal and structural. Systems of abuse affect families and cultures over generations. Systems of privilege and racism become embedded, by human choices, in political and social orders, creating pain and misery for many over literally centuries. We are born into systems that generations of decisions have already shaped. We may not have created these conditions, but they form and influence us, and often some benefit from these conditions at the expense of others. At the same time, we find ourselves at some level responsible for both our choices and the wider conditions in which we make them. But the tragedy of human history is that, again and again, the powerful and privileged

refuse to admit complicity or act in ways that right wrongs. All of these experiences are captured by the word “sin.”

The authors of scripture understand sin as a power that corrupts God’s vision of creation, community, and life together in harmony. The creation remains very good in its essence, but at the same time biblical writers realize that something has distorted our capacity to image God’s image in us. Our way of being in the world is shadowed by selfishness and by patterns of behavior that promote not peace but destruction. For Christians, the doctrine of sin reminds us that we are not and cannot be God, and that we need something that we cannot simply give ourselves. In our separation from God, we cannot return either to our Ultimate Source or to childhood innocence by our own resources. We can only be graced into a new way of being. “Grace,” as used in this paragraph of the belief statement, identifies God’s love-in-action on our behalf as pure gift. In the gift of divine love revealed in Jesus Christ, we are met by resources that seek to heal our separation from God, others, the creation, and self. We experience reconciliation with God, one another, and with our place in creation. And we find ourselves empowered by the Holy Spirit for the work of mending the world.

### **Biblical Foundations**

Scripture is the basis of Jewish and Christian thought on sin. What is unique about scripture’s portrayal of sin is that generally it does not speak in abstractions but with stories about the human struggle of life together. These stories ring true to our own experience. The story of David and Bathsheba, for example (2 Samuel 11) realistically depicts the consequences of misguided desire and the abuse of power. The story of Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 36–50) illustrates the destructive potential of jealousy. Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son and his brother (Luke 15:11–32) vividly portrays the dark side of declaring independence from God but also of arrogant self-righteousness. The varied stories scripture tells about the human condition can illumine our common experience. Sin, it seems, not only separates us, but also ties us all together.

Christian theology traditionally looks to the second creation story in Genesis chapters 2 and 3, referenced in Chapter 6 of this commentary, for clues about the meaning of sin. One should note, however, that this story never uses the word “sin,” a concept later Christian traditions have typically overlaid on the story. Rather, Genesis 2–3 illustrates one way the

Hebrew people tried to understand the mystery of human experience as a kind of alienation from God and each other, in a world that still remained God's good creation. They told this story to help explain why so many things seemed amiss.

In Genesis 3, the ancient Hebrew storyteller paints a picture to illustrate how human reality became broken and distorted. The man, the woman, and a serpent are the main characters in this story. The woman and the man live in the Garden of Eden in a state of simplicity. But the serpent introduces curiosity and doubt into their experience. This ancient story vividly represents universal experiences in human life: the shift from childlike innocence to adult awareness; the experience of awakened desire and temptation; a consciousness of guilt; disobedience and deception; the tendency to evade responsibility; conflict with nature and the struggle of relationships. Without using the word "sin," the storyteller successfully describes the human experience of "missing the mark" that Christian theology often means when it uses that important word. At the same time, the story hints at the gracious character of God. God never stops caring for the wayward couple. God, who worried that the human being not be alone (2:18), reaches out after the disaster to clothe the man and the woman so they will not be vulnerable (3:20–21).

From that point, the consequence of an initial disobedience overflows into the story of Cain and Abel. When God prefers the offering of Abel to Cain's, Cain responds with violence and kills his brother. God's warning to Cain before he kills Abel exposes the essential nature of sin. It is like an animal that can overpower us: "sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Genesis 4:7). The text identifies sin and how it operates and, in doing so, defines an enduring aspect of the human condition after the exit from Eden. We can choose sin; but sin has a seductive power that quickly becomes larger than any single choice. The result in this tale is also true to our experience: enmity has generational consequences.

Other biblical texts confirm the extent of sin's reach into all dimensions of human life. The poet in Psalms 14 and 53 openly cries out, "There is no one who does good" (Psalms 14:1, 3; 53:1, 3). King Solomon prays to God in 1 Kings 8:46, "there is no one who does not sin." Ecclesiastes drives the point even deeper. Sin reaches even to the righteous: "Surely there is no one on earth so righteous as to do good without ever sinning" (Ecclesiastes 7:20). As Jeremiah watched his people swerve from what would bring hope, the prophet cried out, "The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse — who can understand it?" (Jeremiah

17:9). More than mistakes or misdeeds, sin affects the heart, which, according to the Hebrew Bible, is the center of human life. A wounded, sick, or distorted center means that sin has a mysterious power to work beyond the choices of one person. Thus, the Hebrew Bible testifies of the indiscriminate impact of distorted choices throughout Israel's history.

In this context we understand better God's remedy, declared by prophets like Ezekiel: God yearns to give God's people a new spirit and new heart (Ezekiel 11:19–21; 18:31). Only the gift of a new heart—a revitalized center—can restore what sin has damaged: our mis-directed wills. In other words, the prophetic traditions of the Hebrew Bible came to believe that God must re-create the human spirit and human will, individually and collectively.<sup>1</sup> Human beings need God's help to re-center their lives on divine love, and it is God's will to bring about this renewal.

After the Babylonian Exile (587–538 BCE), the Jewish tradition responded to God's call to turn from sin to righteousness by following Torah, or God's law as it is found in the first five books of our shared scripture. According to a later rabbinic tradition, Torah alone contains 613 different laws or commandments. They cover essential matters of life and worship: what to eat and not eat, instruction on work and rest, rules for economic exchanges, sexual relations, arbitrating disputes, as well as instructions for worship that include rituals of purification and sacrifice. God's law, as Judaism came to understand it, expresses God's will for a life lived in right relationship with God and with the community. The covenant people are to write God's law in their hearts, to carry it on their bodies, and to observe it as they enter their homes. Through following the Law, they live out their part of the covenant with God.

However, as Judaism has always known, and as Christianity would discover, the covenant itself was initiated by God's own gracious redeeming act. For Israel, it was in the Exodus from Egypt. For Christians, it was in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In either case, it is held that humanity's redemption from sin can only happen because God first acts in liberating and renewing compassion. Living rightly is the proper response to a divine gift, freely given. The Hebrew Bible understands, and bears witness to, this deep theological truth, and in

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with Paul's language of Christ being the Last or Second Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45) and becoming a new creation in Christ in 2 Corinthians 5:17. See also Jesus' action of breathing on the disciples after his resurrection in John 20:19–23, which is reminiscent of God's act of breathing life into human being at creation in Genesis 2:7.

doing so prepares us for the central revelation found in the New Testament.

The Christian faith holds that God's pivotal act of liberation from sin comes in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In the Gospel of John, John the Baptist declares of Jesus: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Jesus was aware of the impact of sin. To marginalize others is to act sinfully. Thus, Jesus reached out to victims, those who were ostracized by their illnesses, poverty, or decisions, and offered them restoration, hospitality, and healing (Luke 7:36–50). He also reached out to the victimizers; he challenged their hostility and insensitivity, and their refusal to see their own sin (John 7:53–8:11). He also opposed the kind of sin that was embedded in ethnic prejudices and financial practices. For example, he spoke directly to a Samaritan woman (John 4) and overturned the moneychangers' tables in the Temple (see Mark 11:15–19). Jesus also criticized assumptions that limited the dignity of women (Luke 10:38–42). In the final moments of his life Luke portrays Jesus forgiving his executioners and promising salvation to a penitent thief (Luke 23:32–43). Jesus confronted sin in all its forms, but he consistently preached mercy instead of legalism and practiced compassion instead of condemnation.

Paul was one of the ablest early interpreters of the meaning of Christ. His letters leave us some of the Bible's richest reflections on the nature of sin. He cared deeply about how God's revelation in Jesus Christ aligned with the best of Jewish tradition. Paul had inherited from some of those traditions a conviction about the universal effect of sin in the cosmos. He confirmed the Old Testament witness referred to earlier that no one is exempt from sin: "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). His experience of Christ as Risen Lord, sent to reconcile the world, expanded his previous understanding of sin. Paul understood sin as a power to which the whole human race was captive. Sin in this sense expressed itself in human relations primarily as selfishness. When Paul lists the "works of the flesh" in Galatians 5:19–21, he is not disparaging bodily life. In his theology, rather, the body is essential to our humanity. Instead, the "works of the flesh" are deeds originating from the deep well of humanity's self-centeredness. The essence of sin for Paul is self-worship, whether active or passive. If God is not the center, then the self and its interests have become an idol.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See John Ziesler, *Pauline Christianity*, rev. ed.; the Oxford Bible Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 78–79.

Paul occasionally speaks of humans as “slaves of sin” (Romans 6:17–20). In other words, even though we are creatures made in the image of God, we are in the grip of a power that is not part of our true identity as human beings. This power has brought separation and death to humanity. God’s law was very important to Paul’s Jewish past. Even as a Christian apostle, he still sees the law as holy, just, and good. But now, it reveals our predicament, by showing us the extent of our captivity to self-centeredness: “[If] it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’ But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness” (Romans 7:7–8). In Paul’s view we can see our situation of alienation but cannot overcome it. If we try to pursue righteousness as the solution, our self-centered motives simply rebuild the barriers. This is so because, once more, our actions place the self at the center, not God. To paraphrase Paul’s desperate question in Romans 7:24, “Who will liberate us from our human predicament?”

Paul finds the solution in the death and resurrection of Christ. Baptism frees us from sin’s ownership and for life in the Spirit (Romans 6:1–13). This is so because baptism unites us to Christ’s death. In his death and resurrection, Christ bridges sin’s estranging power in our lives. God is not a passive bystander in this event, nor does Paul think Christ dies to satisfy God’s anger. Instead, Paul sees all that happened through Jesus as God’s own revelatory action, done in love. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “For our sake [God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” In other words, Christ himself experiences humanity’s alienation and separation. Christ becomes what we were in order to make us into what he is: the expression of God’s justice in the world. Only God could do such a miraculous thing.

The divine gift we receive in Jesus Christ defines what righteousness is. To be “righteous” is to be in sound and whole relationship with God. This new relationship is lived out in loving communion within Christ’s body, the church. It flourishes by faith, hope, and love: faith, God’s gracious gift, love for all, and hope for the final healing of all creation (Romans 8:18–25). In Christ risen, Paul glimpses what the prophets once hoped for: the New Creation, which is the answer to creation’s wounded predicament: “So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was

reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us....For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:17–19, 21). In Christ, God has acted to end the separation and alienation sin constructs in human life (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). The church acts as God's ambassador, representing a whole new state of affairs.

Scripture witnesses to God's boundless love and concern for human well-being, as well as for the wholeness of creation in its entirety. Stated simply, the God of the Bible ceaselessly reaches out to humanity in relationship-restoring love, seeking to liberate us from all that separates us from each other, from our own truest self, and from the Divine.

### Tradition

Christian tradition comments abundantly on the human condition. Indeed, the stubborn reality of human evil is obvious and in need of careful analysis. This is true even when we resist the very idea of sin, which is part of the problem. Across the centuries, thinkers have pondered this puzzle of our existence: how can we who bear God's image act in ways so utterly alien to the love of God?

Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) was one of the most influential Christian writers of all time. He was a perceptive observer of the human condition. As astute reader of scripture and observer of human activity, Augustine sought constantly to understand the concept of sin, both in his life and as it touched people in the late Roman Empire. His spiritual autobiography, the *Confessions*, has been widely read since the fifth century. In this book Augustine narrates the story of his personal transformation from a pleasure-seeking, but conflicted philosopher to a Christian disciple. In the light of his later Christian faith, he reflects in this book on past scenes from his life. One incident he recalls happened when he was sixteen years old.<sup>3</sup> As a late-night prank he and some friends robbed pears from a neighbor's tree and fed them to pigs. As a reflective Christian leader in his later years, Augustine probes why he did this. He admits he had better pears in his garden. He was not hungry. He knew it was wrong. The act was malicious, and yet he realizes he loved the malice

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<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions*, intr., trans., and notes Maria Boulding, O.S.B, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Hyde City, NY: New City Press, 1997), II, 67–73.

of it. Human beings are thus capable of loving evil for its own sake. Even in our most loving relationships, Augustine observes, we seek to satisfy the self and not necessarily to love the other for their own sake. This pride and self-centeredness overflow into every area of life, and our hearts are a mass of warring loves. Empires, dictators, possessive lovers, and well-intentioned families leave a trail of human wreckage. Something is deeply wrong with human beings, and they cannot fix it themselves. This is the intended meaning of the idea of “original sin.”

Nevertheless, even in this twisted situation, our souls yearn for truth and wholeness. Augustine’s life gave clear testimony to the power of sin and to the discovery that God had never abandoned him, even amid his worst actions. God seeks us even when we have turned away. In fact, it is only because God seeks us that we can find the way to God. Ultimately, Augustine found God’s love more satisfying and attractive than the attractions of self-centered wishes and actions. He expressed the twin mysteries of sin and the beauty of God’s grace in this famous line:

Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new,  
late have I loved you.  
Lo you were within,  
but I outside, seeking there for you,  
and upon the shapely things you have made I rushed headlong,  
I, misshapen,  
You were with me, but I was not with you...<sup>4</sup>

The essence of the human condition for Augustine is that we habitually resist being with that which our hearts most want: God. Augustine’s experience taught him that he was unable to make a decisive move away from this resistance and toward Christ without some help. Grace made possible what for him was humanly impossible. Finally, Augustine knew liberation from compulsion and estrangement. God’s grace was the believer’s best and only hope.

Augustine’s encounter with the ideas of a British monk named Pelagius deepened his convictions about sin and grace. Pelagius preached an optimistic view of human capacity. If God expected perfection from humanity (Matthew 5:48), then it must be entirely possible. Pelagius said, “No one knows better the measure of our strength; and no one has a better understanding of what is within our power than he who endowed us with the very resources of our power.”<sup>5</sup> Pelagius’ view was that if a human being ought to do something, then they could do it. While Pelagius saw

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<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions*, X. 262.

<sup>5</sup> W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 674.

grace as a help to the Christian believer, he believed that humanity possessed an unlimited freedom of the will. He did not imagine that self-centeredness had already damaged our wills or held us captive. Unlike Augustine, Pelagius did not think there was anything really wrong with human beings that a stern warning and good self-motivation could not fix.

The church officially rejected Pelagius' teachings. His understanding of sin was superficial, and in his theology Christ's redemptive role was not clear. But his ideas endure, and many Christians still think in Pelagian terms. Unfortunately, Pelagius' views perpetuate individualistic ideas of salvation and the common good: "I only need myself" or "I can do it all myself." Indeed, the aphorism, "God helps those who help themselves" is little more than a popular re-expression of a claim Pelagius advocated. The Christian tradition Augustine represented, on the other hand, saw humanity's condition as more complex and impaired. In light of humanity's profound brokenness, Augustine understood that we need much more than a little bit of help from God to become more fully what God intends us to be. We need the full, divine measure of grace that Christ embodies.

Christian tradition has often pictured sin as rebellion or defiance that deserves punishment. This view has roots in the Bible. But it is not the only way biblical authors or theologians from the Christian tradition understand the human condition. One remarkable thinker from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries followed a different line of thought. Julian of Norwich (1342–1413), whose real name is unknown, was a hermit who lived in a small hut attached to St. Julian's church in Norwich, England. In 1373, during a time of severe suffering in England, she experienced a series of visions she titled "Revelations of Divine Love." Through insights received in one of these visions, she portrays the human predicament not one of sin and guilt, but of woundedness. Human beings are like a servant who while responding to their master's request have fallen into a ditch and been injured. In our wounded condition our injuries consume us, and we lose sight of God's loving gaze on us. Our pain and sorrow evoke blame in us; but God does not look at us as blameworthy. God has only compassion for wounded humanity. According to Julian, Christ's Incarnation and Passion are the means by which God enters into humankind's woundedness. Christ clears our sight so we can see the loving gaze of God again.<sup>6</sup> Julian's fresh perspective on the human

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<sup>6</sup>Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist, 1978), 267–78.

condition brings balance to other views of sin. Human beings never cease to be the object of God's compassion. Injury as a state all human beings share in captures a broader dimension of our condition than traditional views of sin as defiance can.

Protestant reformer Martin Luther struggled with the reality of sin in his life. His quest to find a God of love and forgiveness amid personal awareness of separation and guilt led him to the Bible, especially to the Pauline letters. Paul's view of sin as a power that holds humanity captive rang true for Luther. As the reformer pondered scripture and his experience, he came to understand sin not simply as mistakes or offences. Sin affected the character of the whole person. In his *Lectures on Romans*, Luther describes this situation colorfully. Our nature, he wrote, is "curved in upon itself."<sup>7</sup> We try to bend everything to self-interest and end up being bent in on ourselves. In this way we misuse the gifts of God. To use a modern image, what characterizes the human condition is our desire for everything to orbit around the self. Faith in Christ frees us from this tendency. Luther's spiritual breakthrough came when he discovered the deep truth of Paul's message: humans have a restored relationship with God by faith in Christ, not by doing all the right things. God justifies human beings by faith, not by works. Faith in Christ is the passport from slavery to freedom, from fear to love of God and others. But Luther made an extra important discovery. Faith in Christ brings forgiveness and a new direction but does not magically rid us of sin.

The self's habitual inward curve remains in the Christian's life. Its presence can work to our advantage, however by reminding us of our constant need of Christ. Freedom comes from grasping that Christian discipleship is not about being or becoming morally perfect. As Christians, Luther argued, we are "at the same time righteous and sinners."<sup>8</sup> God's redeeming power ever works for our benefit even though we are imperfect and continue to sin. The life of discipleship is a kind of life-long recuperation from selfishness and the church is the "hospital" that aids our recovery: "So then, this life is a life of cure from sin; it is not a life of sinlessness, as if the cure were finished and health had been recovered. The church is an inn and an infirmary for the sick and for convalescents."<sup>9</sup> The gospel declares that God has graciously embraced

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther: Lectures on Romans*, newly trans. and ed. by Wilhelm Pauck, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 159–60.

<sup>8</sup> *Lectures on Romans*, 120–21.

<sup>9</sup> *Lectures on Romans*, 130.

our full humanity. It calls not for people who are perfect, but for people who trust God's love and grace.

Some of these traditions have shaped Community of Christ's views of sin. Our movement arose on the American frontier in a period of intense religious discussion and revival. Historians call this period the Second Great Awakening and date it from about 1790 to 1840. Sin and conversion were the chief themes of much debate in this period. Joseph Smith Jr. and the early Restoration movement shared the widely held view of sin as captivity. The Book of Mormon describes the human condition in terms familiar to revivalist preachers: human beings are "encircled by the bands of death, and the chains of hell, and an everlasting destruction awaited them" (Alma 3:13). But in the context of a newly formed American democracy, there was a strong tendency to think of sin only in individual terms. In 1842 Joseph wrote a short summary of the church's beliefs for a Chicago newspaper. On sin he stated, "We believe that men will be punished for their own sins and not for Adam's transgression."<sup>10</sup> Joseph intended this statement to differentiate the church from other denominations, and not present a comprehensive theology. However, his description of sin leaves much unsaid. For example, it does not account for the prior condition that would lead individuals to choose sin. That task would fall to later thinkers and leaders in the church.

Frederick M. Smith tried to articulate a more comprehensive understanding of sin. For this task, he found the theology of the Social Gospel movement a helpful influence. Social Gospel theology was a late nineteenth-century movement in American Protestantism. It sought to understand the gospel in light of the new social and economic realities people faced in modern industrial countries. One of its most important advocates was the Baptist theologian, Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918).<sup>11</sup> As he ministered among the impoverished workers of New York City, Rauschenbusch began to see much then-current Christian theology as inadequate to the task. It did not address the social or economic conditions in which people lived, conditions that shaped their lives.

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<sup>10</sup>"Church History," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 709. Reprinted in *The History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints*, vol. 2: 1836–1844 (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1896), 570.

<sup>11</sup> On the Social Gospel see "Social Gospel." in Van Harvey, *Handbook of Theological Terms* (New York: Macmillan, 1967). On Walter Rauschenbusch, see Robert T. Handy, "Walter Rauschenbusch," in *A Handbook of Christian Theologians*, ed. Dean G. Peerman and Martin E. Marty (Cleveland, OH: Collins/Fount, 1965), 192–211.

Traditional Protestant preaching saw sin in merely moral, individual terms, and salvation as a promise for a better life in heaven. This pale reflection of the gospel gave comfort to industrialists and bankers, and encouraged their exploitation of workers and the poor. Rauschenbusch believed these views compromised Jesus' message about the kingdom of God, with its roots in the Hebrew prophets' message of justice for the poor. Rauschenbusch further believed that human existence is essentially *social*, not individual, and that sin is a collective and institutional experience that impacts and even shapes individual choices. To tell people struggling in inhuman living and working conditions not to act brutally, without working to change their social situation is absurd. It misses what Jesus meant when he called his disciples into the kingdom of God, which was to be a whole new state of affairs. Rauschenbusch held that the Christian church would become irrelevant if it failed to "Christianize the social order." Justice, fairness, good wages and working conditions, education, and social advancement belonged to the church's message of salvation. Sin is more than personal choices. It refers to broader forces that influence persons' actions.

F. M. Smith saw the clear affinities of Social Gospel theology with the faith of Community of Christ. He saw phrases Rauschenbusch used, like "Christianizing society," as akin to our concept of building Zion.<sup>12</sup> He focused on the social implications of Jesus' message, and insisted that the church's message must affect society, not just the individual. "The teachings of Jesus were social in significance," he said, "to be sure...there is always strong appeal for personal righteousness, but a more than casual analysis of those appeals reveals a strong social content and bearing."<sup>13</sup> When in the same lecture Fred M. Smith states, "We are our brother's keeper, not his destroyer," it is clear he sees the human condition as one of shared responsibility. The struggle of human life cannot be reduced to individual errors and choices. We need a doctrine of sin that gives us expanded vision of our complicity in the travail of the world.

Ultimately, the reality of sin touches every human being. That is why the church's belief statement notes that "We take the gifts of creation and of self and turn them against God's purposes with tragic results. Sin is the universal condition of separation and alienation from God and one

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<sup>12</sup> See Frederick M. Smith's 1924 radio sermon "Christianizing Society" in Norman D. Ruoff, *The Writings of President Frederick M. Smith*, vol. 1: *Theology and Philosophy* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1978), 147–60.

<sup>13</sup>From a 1923 radio lecture, "Social Ideals of the Church," Ruoff, 102.

another." Sin and redemption are not simply personal matters. They have social and cosmic dimensions. In the past century, we have witnessed and participated in genocides, world wars, the rise of nuclear weapons, racism, sexism, oppression on a massive scale, idolatrous nationalism, and the degradation of the ecosystem. We cannot understand these events apart from a clear and realistic doctrine of sin. A doctrine of sin helps us understand our explicit or implicit support for structures of violence and systems that degrade life. It helps us grasp our passivity before evil. It allows us to analyze our refusal to embrace peaceful community with others and the creation itself.

At the same time, the church has a message of good news for sinners. To quote Paul, "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Romans 5:20). The church proclaims that in Christ we find forgiveness, acceptance, and the power to live God's peace here and now. Sin does not outmatch God's grace: this is the good news of the gospel. Grace really is quite "amazing." It frees and empowers us to act in transforming ways on behalf of the world.

Community of Christ teaches that God embraces the whole creation in Jesus Christ. We see "sin" as any attitudes, actions, and systems that deny the worth of persons and obstruct shalom. Whatever works against God's reign of justice and peace is sin. As many feminist theologians have noted, sin can take the form of actively working against God's love for creation, but it can equally be expressed as passivity before or acquiescence to injustice.<sup>14</sup> Refusing to take racism and sexism seriously or denying their existence is as much an expression of sin as is directly harming or denigrating others. As Nicola Slee eloquently observes, "Because right relations are those which are mutually empowering, sin occurs whenever a person or group uses or abuses an individual, group or natural resource for their own purposes, thereby disempowering, degrading and all too often destroying who or what was used."<sup>15</sup> Sin in human experience must be addressed, and the gospel promises to address it, in all its forms. Recent counsel to the church reminds us of God's good news to sinners: "Jesus Christ, the embodiment of God's shalom, invites all people to come and receive divine peace in the midst of the difficult questions and struggles of life. Follow Christ in the way that leads to

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<sup>14</sup> Especially see Nicola Slee, *Faith and Feminism: An Introduction to Christian Feminist Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003), Chapter 4, "Deadly Innocence? Sin in Feminist Perspective," 37-47.

<sup>15</sup> Slee, *Faith and Feminism*, 46.

God's peace and discover the blessings of all of the dimensions of salvation" (Doctrine and Covenants 163: 2b). "Rooted and grounded in love" (Ephesians 3:17), Community of Christ will actively counter self-centeredness, brokenness, and injustice in the world. In this way we will seek the kingdom of God.

### **Application for Discipleship**

It may seem an outmoded idea or even make us uncomfortable, but disciples need to think about sin. Religious or spiritual people are prone to self-deception, usually about our goodness. A realistic understanding of our own capacity to deny the deepest truths we know fosters humility. Christian history sadly reveals how often the Church and the churches have represented evil, not good in the world. The following words from the Doctrine and Covenants make this amply clear for our own time:

There are subtle, yet powerful, influences in the world, some even claiming to represent Christ, that seek to divide people and nations to accomplish their destructive aims. That which seeks to harden one human heart against another by constructing walls of fear and prejudice is not of God. Be especially alert to these influences, lest they divide you or divert you from the mission to which you are called—Doctrine and Covenants 163:3c

Sin affects all hearts but has great power over those that claim not to be so affected. This is because sin thrives most as a form of self-deception. It is vital to our prophetic identity, then, to practice self-criticism, which is another word for "repentance."

At the same time, disciples must acknowledge the constant need to focus on God's goodness and love, and on God's desires for the world. We feel the tension between who our loving God made us and who we actually are, between our essential being as bearers of the image of God, and our actual existence as those who live in separation from God. We confess we are not the agents of love God desires us to be. We fall short, even in our best moments. Luther spoke truly when he said Christians are at the same time righteous and sinners. This double-sided reality may tempt us to slide into frustration and to despair at our inadequacy. It may also prevent us from becoming graced agents for change in the world. It is important not to let candid judgments of ourselves become a further occasion for self-centeredness, by disabling us from a trusting relationship in God's grace. Focusing only on our sin can itself become a form of "curving in on ourselves." It is helpful to remember that the Bible and Christian tradition contain a long lineage of simple, sinful people who heard God's call in their heart and responded willingly: "Here am I." Our

participation in this great work rests on God's grace, not on our lack of limitations.

The sin that distorts human hearts also corrupts the deep structures of our political and economic life. Paul claims that creation itself is in bondage and is waiting for "the revealing of the children of God" (Romans 8:19–21). The book of Isaiah affirms that God's standard of righteousness for public life is justice (Isaiah 1:16–27). For a disciple of Jesus Christ, justice is not simply a matter for government and courts. In the biblical sense, it is God's will for the world's wholeness. As God's grace is working out salvation from sin in every sphere, so God calls us to work for right and just relationships in our political life, and to live responsibly in society.

If we believe we are made in God's image and redeemed by Christ for lives of purposeful action, then we cannot be satisfied with selfish pursuits and chronic estrangements. To "be vulnerable to divine grace" (Doctrine and Covenants 163:10b) opens us to claim the spiritual hunger within. It opens us to the boundless prior reality of God's love and our need for repentance. Confession of sin and expression of our yearning for personal and societal wholeness signifies grace already at work within us. We will not justify or excuse ourselves, for grace delights in our honest self-appraisal. But we trust God's gracious love alone, which opens us to humility and acceptance.

Deep communion with God elevates our humanity, and simultaneously can break our hearts as we become deeply aware of the injustices that bind creation. We are tempted to turn away from the brokenness we see or to fix everything at once through a frenzy of service. This lure of supposing that all depends on us can drain compassion and energy. It is good to recall from the second creation story that the primal sin was to try to be "like God" (Genesis 3:4). Our rightful and necessary struggle against injustice can trick us into placing ourselves in God's position at the center of creation. But once again, the church is called back to the gift of redeeming grace, revealed as Christ's acceptance of us in our limitations and with our perplexity at the tasks before us. Discipleship must keep itself rooted in God's loving kindness. The sheer goodness and love of God promote humility as we seek in our own partial ways to do God's will in and for the world.

God desires the flourishing of all things. Sin disfigures creation. Before the harsh reality of sin, as outlined by the sixth paragraph of the Basic Beliefs statement, it might be easy to isolate from one another, be suspicious, and become unwilling to seek the common good. But the

church knows that this is not the whole story of our existence. God's very heart has been revealed in Christ, and this revelation has claimed and begun to renew us. Indeed, only God's heart can empower us to live in the kind of love that will never abandon the world and never give up on God's preferred future for creation. Sin and selfishness abound, yet in Christ God has commenced renewing all things. The church hears the Spirit whisper a call to adventure on the path that leads to wholeness for all things. Divine love and acceptance and God's call to participate in the mending of the world open us to discovering the hidden depths of our own humanity.

### Conclusion

Within the Christian imagination there is a deep tension between what is and what is not yet, between the world we know and the future reign of God. Humility before the reality of sin and God's more-than-sufficient love helps us not be overcome by this tension. We live in permanent vulnerability to and need of God's grace. We first expressed our need of this grace in baptism, where we accepted Christ's love for us and consented to become instruments of the Spirit in a world that is not yet what it can be.

Sin wounds, but the Spirit makes whole. Taking up the image of God's self-emptying love revealed in Christ's cross, we will become a voice for victims. Taking up Jesus' proclamation of repentance, we will open ourselves to the revolutionary change God's kingdom of peace requires. Taking up our prophetic call, we will speak out against injustice, self-righteousness, and self-centeredness in all their forms, in all arenas of human living. The words of Edith Sinclair Downing's hymn speak our own truth:

We are the ones the world awaits to live the words we pray.  
God, grant us courage that we dare to practice peace each day.  
We must confess that Jesus' words "They know not what they do"  
Expose our shared complicity as we our sins review.<sup>16</sup>

Community of Christ trusts in a God of grace for the salvation and transformation, not only of our humanity, but of all creation.

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<sup>16</sup> "We Are the Ones the World Awaits," *Community of Christ Sings* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 2013), 305.

## For Further Reading

Gary A. Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall Temptation: Two Biblical Studies* (London: SCM Press, 1959).

Paula Fredriksen, *Sin: The Early History of an Idea*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), Chapter 7: "Humanity as Creature, Sinner, and New Being in Christ," 143–67.

Nicola Slee, *Faith and Feminism: An Introduction to Christian Feminist Theology* (London, UK: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003).

Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2000).

## Testimony by Stassi Cramm

I have taught the Basic Beliefs of Community of Christ in various settings both inside and outside the USA. In almost every situation, the conversation in the class comes to a screeching halt when we get to the topic of "sin." No one wants to talk about sin. I suppose in many ways, I don't want to talk about sin and perhaps the class is simply reflecting my own discomfort.

To admit that I am sinful is to be willing to accept that I sometimes unintentionally, and yes, sometimes intentionally, hurt others or work against God's purposes in the world. It also means admitting that I am part of larger systems that bring harm to others and the earth. I know this to be true, but it is not something I want to linger on. And I don't want to throw back the curtains and allow the light of day to shine in on all of my sinfulness with others watching. After all, maybe they haven't figured out all of my failings.

In some classes, people want to keep the discussion more abstract. They want to make a list of what is sinful. Some feel that we should have a Community of Christ vice list which we could all use to evaluate

ourselves (and others) about our sinfulness. I know there are some absolutes that we can agree on that are sinful, but I suspect the more prevalent sins (or at least the ones more prevalent in my life) would not be universal.

When I reflect on sin as something that separates me from God and others, I realize this is a fine line. For instance, when my husband is talking to me and I continue to work on my computer, I suspect at times that becomes a form of sinfulness. Or when something happens and I let my temper get the best of me, I know this is sinful. I also have a growing awareness of how my desire to stay in my comfort zone can cause me to turn a blind eye to larger societal issues that are sinful.

What I've come to learn about sin is that talking about it is important. I need to be honest with myself and others about where I fall short of being the person God calls me to be. I also need to seek out others' perspectives. I've learned that sometimes I can't see my own sinfulness and I need trusted friends or family to be my mirror. Identifying my sinfulness is a necessary step in creating pathways for confession, repentance, and forgiveness. The same is true for communal sin. Only through honest conversations can we collectively identify and change explicit and implicit systems that bring harm to others and the earth, thus drawing closer to God as a community.

I've also learned that sometimes I'm not ready to change nor am I ready for the world to change. I am prone to self-deception that I'm doing my best and the world is doing its best; but sin is present in my life and in the world. Honest conversations and growing understanding of "the other's" experience motivate me to accept change.

I confess there is a gap between who I am and who God created me to be just as there is a gap in society. I am grateful for faithful disciples who are willing to honestly identify individual and collective sin and find ways to do better. I am also thankful for a God who generously extends grace while patiently guiding our transformation.

### **Spiritual Practice: Prayer of Examen**

*The Prayer of Examen invites us into sacred review by searching our memories and seeking God's presence in all things. Through this prayer, we become aware of the Spirit's presence and invitation in the entirety of our human experience.*

**Pray for Light:** Begin by taking a few deep breaths and imagining yourself in God's gaze of unconditional love and grace. Pray for the light to illuminate the spaces in your life where God is seeking to be revealed.

**Offer Gratitude:** For what are you grateful this day? Where have you been most aware of the presence of God?

**Review Memories:** Allow memories to surface within you (of the past day, week, or month) regardless of whether they seem mundane or significant. Pay attention to how you felt as you engaged the different aspects of your day, spent time in relationships, and carried out responsibilities.

**Confess and Reconcile:** Gently and honestly notice the places in your memories where you felt most disconnected from God's presence. What patterns of thought or behavior restricted your response to God's call? What situations or relationships need reconciliation? The aim of this movement of the prayer is not to induce shame, but to stoke our awareness of thoughts and actions contrary to our deep desire for connection with God, others, and creation.

**Discern the Future:** Take a few moments to consider your future. Anticipate the circumstances and decisions that lie ahead. Imagine what life could look like as you become more available to God's invitation in every moment, in all things. Close your time of prayer by offering your life, and your future, to God.

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. In what ways have you "sinned and fall[en] short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23)? How have these behaviors separated you from God and others?
2. Write your own definition of sin. How easy or difficult is it for you to experience God's forgiveness and love while acknowledging your sin?