

Sin: What It is and What It is Not

by George Otis Jr.

Every one who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness.

I John 3:4 (NASB)

The wrongness of the sinful act lies not merely in its nonconformity, or its departure from the accepted, appropriate way of behavior, but in an implicitly aggressive quality—a ruthlessness, a hurting, a breaking away from God and from the rest of humanity ... alienation or (an) act of rebellion.

Dr. Karl Menninger

The Earth is also polluted by its inhabitants, for they transgressed laws, violated statutes (and) broke the everlasting covenant.

Isaiah 24:5 (NASB)

In his definition of the nature of sin, Dr. Menninger goes on to say:

Sin has a willful, defiant, or disloyal quality; someone is defied or offended or hurt. The willful disregard or sacrifice of the welfare of others for the welfare or satisfaction of the self is an essential quality of the concept of sin.'

That's a fine definition, even coming from a man who makes no profession of faith in Jesus Christ. Even Webster's Dictionary gives a better definition of sin than do most "born again" Christians:

Sin is transgression of the law of God; disobedience of the divine will, moral failure. Sin is failure to realize in conduct and character the moral ideal, at least as fully as possible under existing circumstances; failure to do as one ought toward one's fellow man.

We have witnessed the arrival of the day when the church has begun to place more emphasis on the results of sin than on sin itself. We have observed the shocking metamorphosis of sin as it discards its old cocoon of personal, moral responsibility to take on the form of a sickness.

FALSE CONCEPTS OF SIN

Famous attorney Clarence Darrow delivered the following address to the prisoners in the Cook County Jail:

There is no such thing as a crime as the word is generally understood. I do not believe there is any sort of distinction between the real moral conditions of the people in and out of jail. One is just as good as the other. The people here can no more help being here than the people outside can avoid being outside. I do not believe people are in jail because they deserve to be. They are in jail simply because they cannot avoid it on account of circumstances which are entirely beyond their control and for which they are in no way responsible ... There are a great many people here who have done some of these things (murder, theft, etc.) who really do not know themselves why they did them. It looked to you at the time as if you had a chance to do them or not, as you saw fit; but still, after all you had no choice ... If you look at the questions deeply enough and carefully enough you will see that there were circumstances that drove you to do exactly the thing which you did. You could not help it....2

This address is supportive of the doctrine of causation, determinism or inevitability. During our investigation into the five major theological-philosophical errors concerning the nature of

sin, notice how this concept of causation and inevitability plays a prominent role.

SIN IS A SICKNESS

False Concept 1

This is precisely what we are currently hearing from all quarters. Psychologists, criminologists, lawyers, and sociologists are singing in unison for the rehabilitation of the unfortunate, sick element in our society. Punishment is out of the question because it is applicable only when an individual is responsible for what he does. We are living in an age when criminals possess more rights than victims; an era when a tolerant lawyer will enlist the expertise of a humanitarian psychologist to prove to an unbiased and just court that to prosecute constitutes cruel and unusual treatment.

Once again, Dr. Menninger asks:

Is no one any longer guilty of anything? Is it only that someone may be stupid or sick ... ? Is no one responsible, no one answerable for these acts? Anxiety and depression we all acknowledge, and even vague guilt feelings; but has no one committed any sin?

In a world of lenience, tolerance and rationalization of sin, will even the church of Jesus Christ fail to call sin what it is? Will we join the ranks of those who would make people pathetic rather than guilty? Where in scripture is sin spoken of as a sickness or disease? Where no choice is involved neither can there be accountability. This is certainly basic, elementary reasoning and only those seeking sanctuary from personal responsibility and accountability could possibly find issue.

SIN IS A SUBSTANCE

False Concept 2

Augustine, an early church father, formulated the doctrine of original sin and what is commonly known today as the Federal Headship Theory. Briefly, the Federal Headship Theory states that when Adam sinned he did so in proxy for the entire world. All men born thereafter entered the world replete with a sinful nature which was and is the causative source of their sins. Thus Adam's original sin was passed, on from generation to generation -- from parent to child.

Augustine, an early church father, however well-intentioned he may have been, began what would become centuries of confusion and misunderstanding over the concept of sin. He taught that sin was fundamentally a physical rather than a moral problem.

When we analyze the situation in the Garden of Eden we see that when Adam sinned he became depraved in two ways:

- 1) Morally-his soul disobeyed God
- 2) Physically-his body began to fail

Augustine and subsequent theologians failed to distinguish between these two types of failure.

Physical (metaphysical) depravity-This gives man the bias or the bent toward being sinful, but is not in itself sinful. In other words it is an influence to, but not a cause of sin. This depravity comes by inheritance not choice.

Spiritual (moral) depravity-This is what we do with our situation. It involves unintelligent responses to influences and suggestions. This is sin, but it is not inherited-it comes by choice, it is created.

Men today for the most part acknowledge that it is sin when they make wrong choices. The snag is that they attribute these wrong choices to a 'sinful nature' which they receive physically at birth. It is a basic fact that everything in the universe is inherently matter or inherently moral. According to the theory that subsequent to Adam's fall, sin has inevitably been transmitted from parent to child, sin is evidently matter or substance-a physical factor.

How could we have stooped and acquiesced to these theological and philosophical absurdities which have crept into the Church? The Word of God is to be presented in such a way that 'every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God' (Romans 3:19). If I am born with an inability to obey God, then can you conceive of a better excuse for not obeying Him? If I can't obey God, then why should I be disturbed that I'm not obeying Him? Yet the Word of God declares emphatically that all men are without excuse! This indicates that all men are responsible for their own choices, which implies they are free to make their own choices.

If I was born with an inability to do what God says, how can we justify eternal punishment with the love of God?'

This dilemma is readily discerned by some, but the great majority try to ease the pressure and present God's justice by viewing His intention in sending Christ to let all 'off the hook' who would respond to His call. The flaw in this argument is that it destroys the aspect of grace (getting something we don't deserve) in Christ's advent by virtue of the fact that, according to this position, God was under obligation to send Christ to assure all men a 'fair shake.'

The Federal Headship Theory, which we have briefly discussed, is an extremely widespread doctrine which is difficult to explain

logically. The important factor, however, is whether or not the Bible will allow the representational theory of transmission of sin. Let's look.

Then the word of the Lord came to me saying,
"What do you mean by using this proverb concerning the land of Israel saying, 'The fathers eat the sour grapes, but the children's teeth are set on edge'?"

"As I live," declares the Lord God, you are surely not going to use this proverb in Israel any more.

"Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die.

"But if a man is righteous, and practices justice and righteousness ... if he walks in My statutes and My ordinances so as to deal faithfully he is righteous and will surely live," declares the Lord God.

"Then he may have a violent son who sheds blood ... he will surely be put to death; his blood will be on his own head.

"Now behold, he has a son who has observed all his father's sins which he committed, and observing does not do likewise ... he keeps his hand from the poor, does not take interest or increase, but executes My ordinances, and walks in My statutes; he will not die for his father's iniquity, he will surely live.

"As for his father, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother, and did what was not good among his people, behold, he will die for his iniquity.

"Yet you say, 'Why should the son not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity?' When the son has practiced justice and righteousness, and has observed all My statutes and done them, he shall surely live.

"The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself."

Ezekiel 18:1-5,9-10,13-14,17-20 (NASB)

The various biblical words used to describe human sin leave absolutely no doubt whatsoever as to sin's true nature. We search in vain for any evidence that would indicate that sin is a substance or anything other than a wrong moral choice. We will further pursue the matter of biblical vocabulary later in this chapter.

SIN IS A SLIP

False Concept 3

There are a great many evangelists, Sunday school teachers and pastors who convey an almost accidental picture when they describe the tragedy of Adam and Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden. The way the story is often told, we find a couple walking in tender loving fellowship with God, and then, all of a sudden falling into sin. This is certainly a misleading word. I personally cannot recall having ever purposely fallen. The implications of the term "the fall" are certainly less arresting than would be the case with, say, 'the rebellion.' The idea that it is possible to simply slip and fall into sin must be dispensed with all rapidity lest we find ourselves clouded by its influence.

It is important to refresh our memories as to the difference between what transpired in the Garden and a legitimate mistake. We determined earlier that an individual's intentions were examined by the courts in order to ascertain whether or not his actions were willed. If the action was not willed, then the individual is not dangerous to society. Thus the consequences connected with a murder conviction are far more severe than with a manslaughter conviction because, in the former, there is a premeditated, injurious design involved. Adam and Eve's sin can never be referred to as a slip or ignorant mistake. God gave ample instruction concerning what they were to do and not to do in Eden and included sanctions or consequences to support His

words. We read that 'the woman being deceived was in the transgression . . .'" (I Tim. 2:14). We are not dealing with a woman who in her naivete had no understanding of what she was doing, but rather we see a transgressor, one who was voluntarily deceived, breaking and violating known laws. Then, too, Adam voluntarily transgressed with his wife. I'm persuaded that it would be far more accurate and descriptive if we would refer to the incident in the Garden of Eden as "The Jump" As Floyd McClung has said, 'Every mistake is not a sin, but every sin is a mistake.'

SIN IS A SUGGESTION

False Concept 4

Temptation is a universal problem. It is not confined to continents, races or economic classes. Temptation has many faces. It spans the scale from the subtle to the blatant, and seems to have an uncanny knowledge of our susceptibilities. Biblical accounts of temptation range from the well-known flight of Joseph from the seductive advances of Potiphar's wife to the crashing downfall of David with Bathsheba. Compare these to the person who says, "I never have a problem with temptation-I just always give in"!

There are a great number of people who assume that the battery of temptations entering their minds are solicitations of the devil, and their desire to comply emanates from their "sinful nature." This is a common but serious error. God designed human beings replete with many astonishing endowments. Some of these attributes, our emotions, enable us to sense, feel and respond to the thoughts in our mind. Eve's desire for the fruit which her mind perceived as being "a delight" was not a product of any sinful nature. Nor was her desire for further knowledge wrong in itself. There is no necessity of a sinful nature in order to be subject to temptation.

Gordon Olson has given what I consider to be one of the finest definitions of sin:

Sin is an unintelligent abuse of God-given endowments of personality."

With this definition in mind, let us remember that it is God who has made us the way we are. It is God who has created appetites and desires within us. It is God who formed our emotions to respond to what our minds contemplate. There is no sin in desiring to fulfill or gratify a God-given appetite. Sin enters the picture when we abuse our endowments by trying to gratify ourselves in an illegal manner or proportion.

Thoughts should not be classified as sin either. It was necessary for Jesus to have comprehended the words of the devil in order for it to have been a legitimate temptation. Again, things cannot be evil and sinful for they are the product of God.

All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

John 1:3

If we respond to temptation by treating it as though it were sin or indicative of sin, then we are forced into the uncomfortable position of considering Jesus an ally in sin since He too was subject to temptation. A suggestion or temptation is not in itself sinful. Things in themselves are not sinful, for sin manifests itself in unintelligent abuse of an otherwise good thing.

This is especially critical for those who have been suffering under an unnecessary load of condemnation because they have been tempted. When confronted with a strong desire, it is essential to take hold of the thought and give it a long, analytical

look. Then ask yourself if it is possible to wisely gratify that desire. Remember, God does not disapprove of pleasure associated with gratification, but He does mind an unintelligent quest for pleasure in order to gratify yourself at the expense of others. It's probably worth mentioning that all so-called 'secret sin' is ultimately at someone else's expense. When we realize that God wants us to be happy and fulfilled, then we will recognize His restraints as blessings designed to increase our enjoyment of life.

SIN IS THE STATUS QUO

False Concept 5

In a book on major biblical themes, Lewis Sperry Chafer reveals the following thought:

... every child of Adam is born with the Adamic nature, (and) is ever and always prone to sin, and ... it remains a vitally active force in every Christian's life. It is never said to be removed or eradicated in this life....¹²

How interesting that the nation's number one purveyor of stylized selfishness, Robert Ringer, should say a similar thing....

You will always act selfishly, no matter how vehemently you resist or protest to the contrary, because such action is automatic. You have no choice in the matter.¹³

I remember getting into my car after work and discovering a note taped to my steering wheel. It was an apology from one of the secretaries who'd had a rough day and had made some rather terse remarks. It read in part: "I'm sorry for having snapped at you-please forgive me for being human. "

Have you ever heard someone say after they did something wrong, "Well, I'm only human"? We are told today that sin is 'only

human." Sin is kind of a natural thing by implication. "It's just my nature.' I'm sure you have noticed Christians wearing buttons on their lapels or bumper stickers on their automobiles with slogans like "Christians aren't perfect-just forgiven"!

This was the attitude that former President Carter displayed in his Playboy interview. Commenting on adultery, he stated: "I've committed adultery in my heart many times... this is something which God realizes I will do... and He forgives me for it.'

Several years ago I was speaking at a youth missionary retreat in the mountains of southern California. I was talking with a camper who had several questions concerning sin. We were sitting on the bunks reading from I John when another young man entered the cabin to hear these words: "Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not. . . ." (I John 3:6) With red-faced indignation, he proceeded to tell me that it was impossible to live without sin, that even Christians expect to sin every day in word, thought and deed. I paused for a moment and asked this young man if he believed sin was the most powerful force in the universe. He didn't think so. What was the purpose of Christ's mission? Was it not to set the captives free, to seek and to save that which was lost? Isn't the message of the gospel, the good news, that Jesus has come to transform us by the renewing of our minds? He came not just to save us from hell, the penalty of sin, but from that which actually binds us-our sin itself!

Why do we preach a message of defeat? Why do we declare a doctrine of continuing bondage? The Bible states:

Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin....

1 John 3:9

That ye may approve things that are excellent, that ye may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ.

Philippians 1:10

And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.

1 John 2:3

Whosoever abideth in him (Christ) sinneth not....

1 John 3:6

Where do we get the idea that sin is only natural and human? Whenever a polygraph test registers a lie, it proclaims that sin is not natural! Whenever one feels remorse, sorrow, or guilt it tells us with eloquence that sin is not natural! To those who are of the opinion that the only thing that separates a Christian from the world is forgiveness, I can only surmise they have little time for the Word of God.

The arrogant slogan 'Christians aren't perfect-just forgiven' brazenly flaunted in the face of the world, is more accurately read, 'My conduct is similar to yours-only I'm forgiven and you're not!' What joy do you think God derives out of a 'relationship' of that sort? Has He expressed in your relationship, or through His Word, that sin is the status quo for a Christian? What is the blood of Jesus Christ worth? Where is the power in the blood? Is it possible that we have actually accepted the fact that the love of God displayed on Calvary is an anemic force compared to the mighty power of sin?

WHAT IS SIN?

In order to effectively deal with an enemy, it is of utmost importance to be thoroughly and accurately briefed on the qualities and characteristics of the foe. That sin is the deadliest of all foes need hardly be debated. With the defeat and elimination of sin, the cessation of war, crime and cruelty would necessarily follow.

Christianity now has to preach the diagnosis, in itself very bad news, before it can win a hearing for the cure, . . . a recovery of the old sense of sin is essential.¹⁴

As long as sin remains an elusive, undefined phantom it is no surprise that its victories over humanity continue to escalate.

SIN IS CALCULATED

Sin is a transgression of God's moral law, the intent to live supremely for oneself at whatever the cost. It is a premeditated, calculated choice to live in a manner contrary to your original design. There is absolutely no ignorance involved in sin.

Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth.

John 9:41

Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.

James 4:17

If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin; but now they have no cloak for their sin If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin: but now have they both seen and hated both me and my Father.

John 15:22,24

It is most enlightening to look at the various scriptural words used to describe sin. When the root words are analyzed in the original biblical languages (Greek-N.T.; Hebrew-O.T.), the overwhelming evidence is that man is a rebel choosing to violate known requisites. Here is a sampling:

- * To act perversely, to twist and distort
- * To be stubbornly disobedient
- * To refuse to serve God
- * To act treacherously or deceitfully
- * To be rebellious
- * To be lawless, to refuse to conform
- * To be obstinate or uncompliant
- * To deviate from the right
- * To be ungodly, to act impiously
- * To be unjust, to refuse to do right.

Does the Word of God describe sin as a weakness or as rebellion? There are many Christians who derive a certain amount of satisfaction from their sin. Their conscience, of course, refuses to grant peace when they are living in this abnormal condition. The solution to this situation has been a gross rationalization of their conduct and adherence to the soothing concept that they are unable to obey God! This is but a calculated act of treachery and deceit in the continuing insurrection against God's standard and authority.

SIN IS CRUEL

The ruthless, defiant, aggressive characteristics of sin that are the headlines of our race will undoubtedly become our epitaph unless the world we live in can be revived. To the ears of the celestial Listener, earth cries ... and before the eyes of her Maker ... earth bleeds.

The cruel nature of sin is nowhere depicted more graphically than in the treacherous dealings of King David toward Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba. It wasn't enough for the king to have taken Uriah's wife to satisfy his lust. David, caught in his own web as a result of Bathsheba's pregnancy, sent for Uriah, who had been away fighting for Israel. The idea was to use Uriah's expression of love for his wife to cover up the king's sin. Uriah's

integrity, however, was not a factor that David had reckoned with. The loyal soldier slept with the servants at the door of the palace rather than enjoy what his comrades on the battlefield could not.

When David's desperate attempts to urge Uriah to move home with his wife failed (in spite of David's success in making him drunk), the king, driven to cover his sin, finally settled on a surefire plan. The following morning David sent Uriah off carrying his own death warrant. The king's instructions were immediately understood by his military captain, Joab, and the cruel scheme unfolded. Uriah was placed on the front lines of the battle.

The loyal Uriah probably never noticed his own army quietly retreating behind him as he fought with renewed vitality and determination after his privileged audience with the king. Left exposed and alone, Uriah became the target of the enemy. The king, receiving the news of Uriah's death and heaving a sigh of relief, "graciously" allowed Bathsheba time to mourn her dead husband before making her his own property.

After hearing a story like this one, it doesn't require much effort to become incensed and indignant over man's inhumanity to man. If Uriah had deserved such treatment, the Bible account would not have stirred such pathos. We tend to see sin as a cruel and reprehensible phenomenon in proportion to the goodness and innocence of the victim. In light of this, don't you find it mystifying that people, at least Christian people, are not revolted over what sin has done to God?

He came unto His own and His own received Him not.

John 1:11

... They have forsaken me the fountain of living waters....

Jeremiah 2:13

I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded.

Proverbs 1:24

O my people, what have I done unto thee? and wherein have I wearied thee? testify against me.

Micah 6:3

And when he was come near, he beheld the city and wept over it.

Luke 19:41

Often I have pictured God, the Mighty Ruler of the universe, sitting on His throne with His face buried in His hands, weeping. Sitting on that throne is all the incomprehensible power of the universe under absolute control. Yet the adulterous behavior of His beloved touches the heart and feelings of this mighty yet gentle Being and the response causes the hosts of heaven to marvel.

Where is there a more poignant sound than that of Jehovah sobbing? Who will stand by God in His hour of grief?

SIN IS CONTINUOUS

Unfortunately the parade of depravity continues to march down the corridors of human history without fatigue. It is but a brief respite when God leaves His weeping over Adam's race to rejoice over an obedient saint. He made them right but they've all gone wrong. The planet is in the hands of a race of rebels who have defiantly snatched their lives away from God. They demand liberation from God's "celestial colonialism."

In the case of the individual who has chosen to live a life of selfishness, no decision or activity subordinate to this wrong motive of heart may be considered other than 'filthy rags.' No

matter how "good" our deeds may seem on a human level, as long as our supreme purpose in life remains unchanged "all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6).

Sin is a choice to seek and maintain our happiness supremely in an unintelligent supposition that this is of paramount importance. This state of sin and rebellion persists until exposed in an encounter with the cross of Jesus Christ.

SIN IS CORROSIVE

Sin is a moral cancer and it tends to spread once it starts. It must be recognized as an extremely dangerous, highly active corrosive that eats away at the human personality. The longer sin continues, the less actual control we have over our lives.

The year 1973 was an especially exciting one for me, as I spent the early months with Youth With A Mission in Switzerland. I have fond memories of the impromptu sledding "expeditions" after evening lectures. After bundling up, several fellows would trudge about half a mile to a local slope puffing their sleds behind them. Even though the slope provided an adequate angle for the average sledder to get a full quota of excitement, the winter sky continually covered the hills with extra coats of snow. As a result, the first few trips down the slope were somewhat less than exhilarating. Each successive run, however, compressed the newly fallen snow eventually carving out a "slide" that gradually gained our respect. In time, the slope became so slick and treacherous that nobody could manage to remain connected to his sled. It was then that our tired but happy group knew it was time to turn in. This is precisely the manner in which sin, persisted in, manifests itself. In the end it becomes extremely difficult to slow down the train of accumulated indulgences.

SIN IS CAPTIVITY

As sin carves its moral slide, each time down becomes easier and easier. We find ourselves inundated by habits.

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

Ephesians 2:1-3 (NASB)

Thayer's Greek Lexicon tells us that 'nature' in verse 3 is the result of habit. God has admonished us to allow our minds to dwell upon only that which is wholesome (Philippians 4:8), because as a man "thinketh ... so is he' (Proverbs 23:7). In other words:

- * Our thoughts and choices become actions
- * Our actions become habits
- * Our habits become our nature and character
- * Our character becomes our destiny

The great danger of sin is that we become slaves to appetites and desires without even noticing what is happening.

Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?

Romans 6:16

A sinful nature develops in our lives through habitual self-indulgence and subsequently affects everything we do. Paul mentions this situation and the impossibility of fighting it in our own strength in the seventh chapter of Romans. Thus we concur

that though a sinful nature is present, it originates by choice. For example, the junkie bound by heroin addiction cannot help but crave drugs now, but the origin of the addiction began with his choices.

We have discovered that there are certain emotional gratifications in life that are pleasurable. However, since emotions cannot be experienced directly but rather respond to what the mind thinks upon, the mind therefore is harnessed to produce thoughts that will result in emotional gratification.

Emotions can be a hard taskmaster, resulting in an abnormal imbalance, and a chaos of personality. This is slavery. This is captivity. The freedom that the world proclaims only leads to bondage. There is no reason to secretly envy the men and women of the world.

But the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked.

Isaiah 57:20-21

... the way of transgressors is hard.

Proverbs 13:15

GUILT AND RESPONSIBILITY FOR SIN

In this day no one is left without a cause to champion. Everyone has a matter in need of attention and justice. The world offers plenty of exploitation, deprivation, unhappiness and brutality to go around. But who is responsible for the groanings of the planet? Is it politicians, corporate executives, scientists? Is it a nation, a race, a society?

It is the Church, those who profess the name of Christ, who must hold forth light or the world will surely perish on the rocks of sin.

They will be crushed by the tide of their own folly and neglect if the light of the gospel does not penetrate their clouded minds. The sinner must realize and confess that it is he himself who is fully to blame. Dr. Menninger declares, 'If the concept of personal responsibility and answerability *for ourselves and for others* were to return to common acceptance, hope would return to the world with it!"¹⁶

They did not see fit to acknowledge God or approve Him or consider Him worth knowing....

Romans 1:28 (Amp)