

**SIN:  
NOT THE WAY IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE**

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“Everything’s s’pposed to be different than what it is here.”

–Simon (Danny Glover) in *Grand Canyon*

In the 1991 film *Grand Canyon*, an immigration attorney breaks out of a traffic jam and tries to drive around it. He doesn’t know where he’s going and he’s alarmed to note that each street seems darker and more deserted than the last. Then, a nightmare. His fancy sports car stalls. He manages to call for a tow truck, but before it arrives, five local toughs surround his car and threaten him. Just in time, the tow truck shows up and its driver—an earnest, genial man—begins to hook up to the sports car. The toughs protest: the driver is interrupting their meal. So the driver takes the group leader aside and gives him a five-sentence introduction to sin:

Man, the world ain’t s’pposed to work like this. Maybe you don’t know that, but this ain’t the way it’s s’pposed to be. I’m s’pposed to be able to do my job without askin’ you if I can. And that dude is s’pposed to be able to wait with his car without you rippin’ him off. Everything’s s’pposed to be different than what it is here.

The driver’s summary of the human predicament is just about perfect. He understands the way things are supposed to be. They are supposed to include friendly streets that are safe for strangers. They are supposed to include justice that fosters peace, mutual respect and goodwill, deliberate and widespread attention to the public good.

Of course, things are not that way at all. Human wrongdoing or the threat of it mars every adult’s workday, every child’s school day, every vacationer’s holiday. The news online, the news from our friends, and our own experience give us all the examples we need. A college man plays the field and leaves behind him a string of hookups; the women can’t afterwards get him even to answer their texts. A fourth grader in a class of twenty-five distributes fifteen party invitations in a way that lets the omitted classmates clearly see that they have been excluded; her teacher notes but never ponders the social dynamics of this distribution scheme. A mother steps outside her marriage, wrecks it, and leaves her children to grieve over the end of their family story. From 1989 to 2006, the British pianist Joyce Hatto put out a dazzling set of recordings of some of the most beautiful and difficult music in the classical literature. She had become a prodigy at age 60.

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Music critics marveled that she seemed to have a different approach for each kind of music she recorded. No wonder. All of her output during this period had been stolen from the CDs of other pianists and sold as her own.

### *1. Shalom*

Lots of North Americans use the word *sin* only on dessert menus and when telling an inside joke. If they hear the word used seriously, they might conclude that they are in the presence of a Puritan. There are few contexts left in which the word is said and heard straight. A certain number of churches do have a part of the service in which there is confession of sin and assurance of pardon, but in many churches, even preachers mumble when it comes to sin. Such a downer, they think. How can you keep the customers happy if you talk about depressing topics?

So what to do? My purpose in this essay is to describe sin and to do so (mostly) seriously. Once we get into the topic, I think you'll accept that there is such a thing as sin. After all, it's hard to deny that bad things happen in the world and that people are sometimes to blame for causing them. If the word "sin" puts you off as a way of naming these bad things, I invite you to find another word ("wrongdoing," say, or "offense" or "what Wormtail and Voldemort do") and make the mental substitution as I write about sin.

In any case, the great writing prophets of the Bible were unafraid to diagnose sin as the oldest and deepest human problem. They talked about it all the time, often in contexts in which they protested injustice in the land. The prophets knew that sin has a thousand faces. They knew how many ways human life can go wrong because they knew how many ways human life can go right. (You need the concept of a straight line to tell when one is crooked.) These prophets kept dreaming of a time when God would put things right again.<sup>2</sup>

They dreamed of a new age in which human crookedness would straighten out. The foolish would be made wise, and the wise made humble. They dreamed of a time when the deserts would bloom, the mountains would run with wine, people would stop weeping and be able to sleep without a weapon under their pillow. People would work in peace and work to fruitful effect. A lamb could lie down with a wolf because the wolf had lost its appetite. All nature would be fruitful, benign, and filled with wonder upon wonder. All humans would be knit together in brotherhood and sisterhood; and all nature and all humans would look to God, lean toward God, and delight in God. Shouts of joy and recognition would well up from women in streets and from men at sea.

The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call *shalom*. In English we call it peace, but it means far more than just peace of mind or ceasefire between enemies. In the Bible *shalom* means universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight—a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as the creator

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<sup>2</sup> This is especially true of the prophet Isaiah in chapters 2, 11, 32, 42, 60, and 65.

and savior opens doors and speaks welcome to the creatures in whom he delights. Shalom, in other words, is the way things are supposed to be.

In a shalomic state, each entity has its own integrity, and each also possesses many edifying relations to other entities. The All Terrain Vehicle Sports Club, for example, might be related to the ecological health of forest streams by protecting them, by placing the streams off limits to members. “The way things ought to be” would also include in individual persons a whole range of healthy responses to other creatures—a spread of appropriate thoughts, desires, emotions, words, deeds, and dispositions. Gratitude, for example, is as fitting an emotional response to unexpected kindness as delight is to the velvety coat of a puppy or the honking of geese in a November fly-by.

Of course, the dreams of the Hebrew prophets are visionary: the regular bursting of high-altitude winery casks so that the mountains may stream with Chardonnay is not necessarily a feature of every ideal world. Nor is John Milton’s portrait of Eden or Thomas More’s of Utopia. Not everyone wants Milton’s “happy rural seat of various view,” for example, or More’s communist uniformitarianism. Still, every one of us does possess the *idea* of a world in which things are as they ought to be. Moreover, though we would wonder about some of its features (Would other people’s annoying music play any part in a perfect world? Would it, at least, be audible only to its own fans?), we would probably still agree on many of the broad outlines of a transformed world.

It would include, for instance, strong marriages and secure children. Nations and people groups in this brave new world would treasure differences in other nations and people groups. In the process of making decisions, men would defer to women and women to men till a crisis arose. Then, with good humor all around, the person more naturally competent in the area of the crisis would resolve it to the satisfaction of both.

Government officials would still take office (somebody has to decide which streets are cleaned on Tuesday and which on Wednesday), but to nobody’s surprise they would tell the truth and freely praise the virtues of other public officials. Broadband networks would be strong enough to enable quick downloads. Highway overpasses would be graffiti free. Professors would know students’ names while also leading such lively classes that students no longer felt like Facebooking their way through them. Nobody would un-friend anybody. Teachers of third graders would no longer make them sing “I am special; I am special; look at me; look at me” to the tune of Frère Jacques. Tow truck drivers and lost motorists would be serene on city streets, secure in the knowledge that, under the provisions of government and private foundation grants, former gang members are now all in law school.

Business associates would rejoice in each other’s promotions. Middling Harvard students would respect the Phi Beta Kappas from the University of Southern North Dakota at Hoople and would try to learn from them. Intercontinental ballistic missile silos would be converted into training tanks for scuba divers. All around the world, people would stimulate each other’s virtues. Blogs would be filled with well-written accounts of acts of great moral beauty and, at the

end of the day, people on their porches would read these accounts and call to each other about them and savor them with their single martini.

## 2. *Vandalism of Shalom*

Because God is at the pinnacle of shalom (“the webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight”) Christians usually define sin with reference to God. It’s a religious concept, not just a moral one. All sin has first and finally a Godward force. We could therefore draft a definition like this: *a sin is any act—any thought, desire, emotion, word, or deed—or its particular absence, that displeases God and deserves blame.* Then *sin* (no article) is the tendency to commit sins.

But once we possess the concept of shalom, we are in position to specify our understanding of sin. God is, after all, not arbitrarily offended. God hates sin not just because it violates his law but, more substantively, because it violates shalom, because it breaks the peace, because it interferes with the way things are supposed to be. (In fact, that is why God has laws against a good deal of sin.) God is enthusiastically for shalom and *therefore* against sin. Let’s say that evil is any spoiling of shalom, whether physically (by cancer, say), morally, spiritually, or otherwise. Moral and spiritual evil are agential evil, that is, evil that, roughly speaking, only persons can do or have: agential evil thus comprises evil acts and dispositions. Sin is, then, any agential evil for which some person (or group of persons) is to blame. In short, sin is culpable shalom-breaking.

This definition may strike someone as disappointingly formal: it tells us how an act qualifies as sin, but it doesn’t tell us which acts qualify in this way. And, of course, questions about whether particular acts count as sin are old and numerous. Take a case. Suppose you are a dinner guest of a beaming but shaky host. As the evening progresses, you discover that his tastes and achievements in cookery lie at a discouragingly low level. At some point he asks you in front of six other guests how you like his Spam, Velveeta, sauerkraut, and lima bean casserole. The table falls silent, faces turn to you, and your host waits expectantly. Now what? You have to make a decision on the spot, so you do. You do not tell the brutal truth (“Your casserole sucks”). Nor do you evade (“I didn’t know a casserole like this was even possible!”). You lie. Indeed, you lie winningly.

Have you disturbed shalom or preserved it?

Questions of this kind often arise when more than one moral rule applies to a given act and when obeying one rule apparently means disobeying the other. Thus, in the present example, “Tell the truth” appears to lead one way and “Be kind” another.

But maybe this is overly dramatic. Maybe we have a setting here in which shalom is better served by following custom than by agonizing over the applicability of moral rules. Maybe in some social settings a murmur of approval over a doubtful casserole is only a formality, only a customary nicety. Maybe it possesses no more moral force than “Dear” at the start of a letter to the IRS.

Obviously, many moral dilemmas rise to a far more serious and sometimes even agonizing level. It's bad enough to know the will of God and to flout it. But what if you cannot *tell* how to build shalom and please God? Christians derive their vision of shalom from Scripture, from reading good and evil within creation, from centuries of reflection on Scripture and creation, and from whatever wisdom God grants. Often the yield from these sources is pretty plain: generally speaking, robbery, assault, malicious gossip, fraud, blasphemy, pride, envy, idolatry, lust, greed, and perjury break the peace, while justice, charitable giving, embracing, praising, harvesting, encouraging, repenting, thanksgiving, complimenting, truth-telling, and worshiping God build it.

But how about killing another human being? Everybody agrees that *unjust* killing is a culpable disturbance of shalom; but which killings count as unjust? Slaying your parents to speed up the inheritance process surely qualifies, but how about slaying the marauder who forces your side door, enters your family home at 3 a.m., and threatens your fourteen-year-old sister with rape? Is it, so to speak, all right with God if you use force to defend your household and repel the invader? How much force? May you, for instance, blast away with a shotgun? Only after warning first? What if there isn't time? If you do shoot, must you aim someplace other than the torso or head? Does it matter whether the invader is drunk or crazy? Suppose there are three invaders and you are terrified: do these facts bear on your blameworthiness in the eyes of God if you shoot? As a citizen, are you morally obliged to prepare nonlethal defenses in advance and to practice them?

Outside household defense, what about the famous hard cases that crop up in the abortion, euthanasia, human sexuality, and war debates *no matter what position you take on them?*

Fortunately, even if I could, I needn't try to resolve all this before continuing. Christians may disagree about various hard cases, just as people would in other religions or in no religion. Still, the general outlines of a Christian theory of sin remain pretty clear. This is where the definition comes in. "Culpable shalom-breaking" suggests that sin is unoriginal, that it disrupts something good and harmonious, that (like a housebreaker) it is therefore an intruder, and that those who do it deserve reproach. To get our bearings, we have needed to see first that sin is one form of evil (an agential and culpable form) and that evil, in turn, is the disruption of shalom.

Shalom naturally includes not only a healthy relation of people to people and of people to nature and of nature to God, but also the proper relation of people to God. In the Christian view, human beings ought to love and obey God as children properly love and obey their parents. Human beings ought to be in awe of God at least as much as, say, a middle school basketball player is in awe of Kobe Bryant. They ought to marvel at God's greatness and praise God's goodness. In the Christian view, failure to do these things—let alone indulging in outright scorn of God—is sinful because it runs counter to the way things are supposed to be. Godlessness is anti-shalom. Godlessness spoils the proper relation between human beings and their maker and savior. The great North African Christian thinker St. Augustine famously stated the relation like

this: “O Lord,” prayed Augustine, “you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”<sup>3</sup>

Let me add that sin offends God not only because it bereaves or assaults God directly, as in impiety or blasphemy, but also because it bereaves and assaults what God has made. Sexists and racists, for example, show contempt both for various human persons and also for the mind of God. God loves not only humankind, but also human kinds. In the cramped precincts of their little worlds, sexists and racists disdain such differences in kinds.

In sum, shalom is God’s designed plan for creation and redemption; sin is blamable human vandalism of these great realities and, therefore, an affront to their architect and builder.

Of course, such ideas annoy certain contemporary people. The concept of a design to which all of us must conform ourselves, whether we like it or not, appears absurd or even offensive to many. Metaphysical naturalists, for example, who believe in wholly unguided evolution may think that human concepts, values, desires, and religious beliefs are, like human life itself, metaphysically untethered to any transcendent purpose. They are the product of such blind mechanisms as natural selection for survival, working on random genetic mutation. To such metaphysically naturalist believers, there isn’t any “way it’s supposed to be” or anyone like God to sponsor and affirm this state of affairs. Thus, there isn’t anything like a *violation* of the way it’s supposed to be, or anything like affront to God, or anything therefore equivalent to sin. In particular, sin makes no sense if human life, taken as a whole, is purposeless—only “the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms,” as Bertrand Russell once put it—for at its core human sin is a violation of our human *end*, which is to build shalom.

Moreover, whether or not they believe in purely naturalistic evolution, people who think of human beings as their own centers and lawgivers reject the whole idea of dependence on a superior being. Indeed, they find this idea entirely distasteful. To them, the proposal that we ought to worship someone who is better than we are, that we ought to study this person’s will and then bend our lives to it, that we ought to confess our failures and assign life’s blessings to this person—the notion that we ought to take this posture toward any other person at all—is humiliatingly undemocratic, an offense to human dignity and pride.

Not incidentally, the same pride that resists God and the superiority of God resists objective moral truth as well. Such truth (i.e., that some acts are right and some wrong regardless of what we think about the matter) stands against the freedom of human beings to create their own values, to make up the moral truth as they go along, to socially construct good and evil.

Serious Christians think that modern attitudes of this kind are themselves old and famous exhibits of human self-deception. Humans notoriously suppress truth they dislike, St. Paul wrote (see esp. Romans 1:18). In the biblical view, not only do we sin because we are deluded; we are also deluded because we sin, because we find it convenient to misconstrue our place in the

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<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* (trans. and with an introduction by Henry Chadwick; New York: Oxford, 1992), 3 (1.1.1).

universe and to reassign divinity in it. (Of course, Christian believers engage in these misconstruals and reassignments, too, only less consistently than stable secularists.)

Our thinking gets bent and our learning along with it. Nicholas Wolterstorff, a prominent philosopher, observes that when we try to learn something we bring to the task not only certain “hard-wired capacities for perception, reflection, intellection, and reasoning,” but also mental software, programming formed outside of school, including a whole range of beliefs, assumptions, and commitments.<sup>4</sup> Nobody pursues purely “objective” learning. Everybody pursues “committed” and “socially located” learning. In fact, everybody’s learning is “faith-based,” and this is so no matter what his scholarly or professional field. The question is never *whether* a person has faith in something or someone, but in *what* or *whom*.

We identify with our own social group and filter our learning through its membership requirements. So the rich do social science one way and the poor another, and it seems that neither is able to see things from the perspective of the other nor even wants to. Or scholars commit to godlessness, convinced that God would cramp their freedom or intellectual integrity. With remarkable candor, Richard Lewontin, a Harvard biologist, once confessed his faith in materialism:

Our willingness to accept scientific claims that are against common sense is the key to an understanding of the real struggle between science and the supernatural. We take the side of science *in spite* of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, *in spite* of its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, *in spite* of the tolerance of the scientific community of unsubstantiated just so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but on the contrary, that we are forced by our a priori adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counterintuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.<sup>5</sup>

It would be hard to find a clearer demonstration of the fact that scholars who believe in God are not the only ones to guide their scholarship by their faith commitment. And atheism at the base of the learning pyramid is only one exhibit of how thinking and learning have gotten bent. People feel estranged from the persons and movements they study, and their estrangement often stems from resentments with a spiritual base. So people form rival schools, with rival systems and worldviews, trying hard not merely to win their way, but also to defeat or even humiliate somebody from another school. The result is the well-known envy, rivalry, and sheer

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<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Abraham Kuyper on Christian Learning” (New Haven: unpublished, 1997), 15–17.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Lewontin, “Billions and Billions of Demons,” *The New York Review of Books* (January 7, 1997): 31.

cussedness of a good deal of the academic enterprise, which is in these ways merely typical of the human enterprise.

Obviously, more education won't fix what's wrong with education. Nor will any other merely human corrective. Such fixes are tainted with the same corruption that needs fixing.

### ***3. The Human Race “Has a Habit” Where Sin Is Concerned***

God's original judgment on creation was that it was “good,” even “very good.”<sup>6</sup> God made a paradise, and we can still find signs of it. Christians still sing “This is My Father's World” and do so with gusto:

This is my Father's world, and to my listening ears  
All nature sings, and round me rings the music of the spheres. . . .  
This is my Father's world: he shines in all that's fair;  
In rustling grass I hear him pass—he speaks to me everywhere.

It's a good hymn, but it gives us only half the picture—only paradise and not paradise lost. As matters stand, creation still declares the glory of God, but it also declares the tragedy of fallenness, of chaos, of painful carnivorousness. On a bluebird day in May, “All nature sings and round me rings,” and you can probably recall a few bluebird days that delighted you and filled you with longing. But nature also includes animals that tear each other up and animals that rape each other or kill each other for sport. Some animal parents devour their own offspring. Creation speaks out of both sides of its mouth now. It still sings and rings, but it also groans. As St. Paul says, “the whole creation has been groaning” for release from its “bondage to decay” (see Romans 8:21–22).

The whole creation includes us. To see human decay, all you have to do is look around town, look around the world at CNN online, check out some of the more violent fights on YouTube. You'll find both hostility and indifference. In fact, you'll find hostility packaged up as entertainment and indifference treated as normal. (In Scripture it's just as evil and perhaps more common to turn one's back on God or neighbor as to attack them.) Every day's news shows us a new assortment of merciless dictators, negligent contractors, remorseless killers. Year after year we see new film footage of old miseries—for example, of refugees forced out of their houses and onto long marches by soldiers who are “simply following orders” in conflicts fueled by long memories and short tempers. As others have noticed, human depravity is the one part of Christian doctrine that can be *proved*.

That is how it was on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, when the whole world looked into the face of terror. The men who flew airliners into New York's World Trade Center and Washington's Pentagon planned the attacks for maximum death and destruction, not only to those who fell under direct assault, but also to the spirit of a watching Western world, forced to

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<sup>6</sup> This judgment stitches together six days of creation in Genesis 1.



see spectacular images of its own vulnerability. Words like “evil” seemed suddenly resonant again as the world’s acoustics changed in a single day.

Philosophers notice such things as well as everybody else. They notice that evil is the main human problem. Even when these thinkers reject God, they recognize that the world is out of joint and that human beings, too, are “alienated” or “divided” or “repressed.” Human beings live irrationally, as philosophers put it, or “inauthentically.” The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer described the human condition in a particularly bleak way. “If we want to know what people are worth morally,” said Schopenhauer, “we have only to consider their fate as a whole and in general. This is want, wretchedness, affliction, misery, and death.”<sup>7</sup>

Human life is not the way it’s supposed to be. And so the world’s great thinkers often diagnose the human predicament and prescribe various remedies for it. They diagnose ignorance and prescribe education. They diagnose oppression and prescribe justice. They diagnose the conformism of “bad faith” and prescribe the freedom of authentic choice. A few look at the world, fall into a depression, and put their prescription pad away.

Christians think that the usual diagnoses and prescriptions catch part of the truth but that they do not get to the bottom of it. The human problem isn’t just ignorance; it’s also stubborn pride. It’s not just oppression; it’s also corruption. That’s why newly liberated victims of oppression often end up oppressing others. The human problem isn’t just that we timidly conform to prevailing modes of life; it’s also that nothing human can jolt us out of our slump. Even a move to a pristine backwoods in British Columbia won’t save us because we carry our trouble with us.

The real human predicament, as Scripture reveals, is that inexplicably, irrationally, we all keep living our lives against what’s good for us. In what can only be called the mystery of iniquity, human beings from nearly the beginning have so often chosen to live against God, against each other, and against God’s world. We live even against ourselves. An addict, for example, partakes of a substance or practice that he knows might kill him. For a time he does so freely. He has a choice. He freely starts a “conversion unto death,” and for reasons he can’t fully explain, he doesn’t stop until he crashes.<sup>8</sup> He starts out with a choice. He ends up with a habit. And the habit slowly converts to a kind of slavery that can be broken only by God or, as they say in the twelve-step literature, “a higher power.”

According to Genesis 3, sin appeared very early in the history of our race. In this chapter our first parents try to be “like God, knowing good and evil,” and succeed only in alienating themselves from God and from each other. They choose to believe the tempter rather than their maker and turn their garden into a bramble-patch. The good and fruitful earth becomes their foe (see Genesis 3:17–18; cf. 4:12–14) and their own sin then rises in a terrible crescendo. Adam and Eve’s pride and disbelief trigger revolt, scapegoating, and flight from God (see Genesis 3:4–5, 10, 12–13). Their first child ups the ante: Cain resents and kills his brother Abel, launching the history of envy

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<sup>7</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea* (London: Everyman, 1995), 216.

<sup>8</sup> Patrick McCormick, *Sin as Addiction* (New York: Paulist, 1989), 152.

that leads to murder. Like his parents and the rest of the race, Cain refuses to face his sin (“Am I my brother’s keeper?”), and God exiles him to a place “east of Eden” (see Genesis 4:9, 16). In a phrase that suggests the restlessness of all who are alienated from God, Cain becomes “a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth” (see Genesis 4:12), a murderer who now fears other murderers, and has to be saved from them by a mysterious mark that God places upon him.

Among these strangers (Genesis hasn’t the slightest interest in telling us where they came from), Cain starts a family and passes sin down the generations like a gene. At the sixth generation, the Genesis narrator pauses to snap a picture of a homicidal braggart by the name of Lamech, the Bible’s first terrorist: “You wives of Lamech, listen . . . I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold” (Genesis 4:23–24).

From there, the history of sin and corruption moves on, down the ages, in a cast of billions. Each new generation and each new person reaps what others have sown and then sows what others will reap. This is true not only of goodness (much-loved children can offer a sense of security to their own spouses and children), but also of evil, which each generation not only receives but also ratifies by its own sin. Terrorists, for example, do not think of themselves as others think of them—irrational zealots consumed by some nameless malice that has turned them into enemies of the peace established by decent people. Like Lamech, they think of their violence as retaliation. And because they have long memories, terrorists may think of themselves as redressing grievances that are decades or even centuries old.

The glory of God’s good creation has not been obliterated by the tragedy of the fall, but it has been deeply shadowed by it. The history of our race is, in large part, the interplay of this light and shadow.

According to Genesis 3 and Romans 5, our whole race “has a habit” where sin is concerned. Near the beginning of our history, we human beings broke the harmony of paradise and began to live against our ultimate good. As Genesis 3–4 reveal, from nearly the beginning we have rebelled against God and then fled from God. We once had a choice. We now have a near-compulsion—at least that’s what we have without the grace of God to set us free. Over the centuries we humans have ironed in this near-compulsion with the result that each new generation enters a world that had long ago lost its Eden, a world that is now half-ruined by the billions of bad choices and millions of old habits congealed into thousands of cultures across all the ages. In this world even saints discover, in exasperation, that whenever they want to do right “evil lies close at hand” (Romans 7:21). We are “conceived and born in sin.” This is a way of stating the doctrine of original sin, that is, that the corruption and guilt of our first parents have run right down the generations, tainting us all. As the author Garry Wills writes, none of us has a fresh start:

We are hostages to each other in a deadly interrelatedness. There is no “clean slate” of nature unscribbled on by all one’s forebears. . . . At one time a woman of unsavory

enough experience was delicately but cruelly referred to as “having a past.” The doctrine of original sin states that humankind, in exactly that sense, “has a past.”<sup>9</sup>

Evil is what’s wrong with the world. As Simon says in the movie, it’s not the way it’s supposed to be.

#### 4. *Parasite*

The Bible’s big double message is creation and redemption. The fall into sin intervenes, but never as an independent theme. St. Paul, the Bible’s chief theologian of sin and grace, therefore, speaks of sin in terms of what it is *against*. Sin is anti-law, anti-righteousness, anti-God, anti-Spirit, anti-life. Paul’s message is that God has shown free and lavish grace to sinners in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Faith in this God, in this Christ, and in their grace is the only hope of human redemption. Accordingly, grace, faith, and righteousness, together with the means of expressing and acquiring them—cross, resurrection, Spirit, justification, baptism into Christ—these topics cluster in the center of Paul’s interest. As for sin, Paul knows that sin lures, enslaves, and destroys, that Christ died to redeem us from it, and that our sin must therefore be dreadful, but he never does tell us exactly where sin comes from. Nor does he try to define the nature of its power and transmission.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps one reason is that in the biblical worldview even when sin is devastatingly familiar, it is never normal. It is alien. It doesn’t belong in God’s world. Sin is always a departure from the norm and is assessed accordingly. Sin is deviant and perverse, an *injustice* or *iniquity* or *ingratitude*. Sin in the Exodus literature is *disorder* and *disobedience*. Sin is faithlessness, lawlessness, godlessness. Sin is both the overstepping of a line and the failure to reach it—both transgression and shortcoming. Sin is a missing of the mark, a spoiling of goods, a staining of garments, a hitch in one’s gait, a wandering from the path, a fragmenting of the whole. Sin is what culpably *disturbs* shalom. Sinful human life is a caricature of proper human life.

So the biggest biblical idea about sin, expressed in a riot of images and terms, is that sin is an intruder, a notorious gate-crasher. Once in the world, the only way for it to survive is to become a parasite on goodness. Think this over. The intelligence of Nazi commanders came from God. The truth portion of an effective lie (maybe 90% of it) makes the lie plausible. The physical power of a guilty assailant comes from the gift of good health. In the Harry Potter series, the Dark Lord, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, could not be an evil genius without being a genius. Nothing about sin is its own; all its power is sucked from goodness. “Goodness,” says C. S. Lewis, “is, so to speak, itself: badness is only spoiled goodness. And there must be something good first before it can be spoiled.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Garry Wills, *Reagan’s America: Innocents at Home* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987), 384.

<sup>10</sup> See Stephen Westerholm, *Israel’s Law and the Church’s Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 160.

<sup>11</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (repr., New York: Macmillan, 1977), 49.

Here Lewis reproduces the old Augustinian idea that evil “has no existence except as a privation of good.”<sup>12</sup> Good is original, independent, and constructive; evil is derivative, dependent, and destructive. To be successful, evil needs what it hijacks from goodness.

In one of his novels, Stephen Vizinczey gives us William T. MacArthur, “the most infamous defense attorney in the whole city of New York.” The interesting thing about MacArthur, says the narrator, is that he could bribe judges and suborn witnesses successfully because in these endeavors he was entirely dependable: “William T. MacArthur’s word was his bond. It was precisely for this reason that he could obstruct justice so effectively.” And the narrator comments that the only people who really succeed at judicial corruption are those who can be trusted.<sup>13</sup>

The smartest blows against shalom are struck by people and movements of impressive resourcefulness—that is, by people and movements gifted by the very God and with the very goodness that their sin attacks. They also hope to gain something good by sinning. The defiant “Evil, be thou my good!” of Milton’s Satan is rare. People may rebel literally for the hell of it, but this is rare. Usually, they are after peace of mind, security, pleasure, *Lebensraum*, freedom, excitement. Evil needs good to be evil. Satan himself, as C. S. Lewis explains, is *God’s* Satan—a creature of God who can be really wicked only because he comes from the shop of a master and is made from his best stuff.

The better stuff a creature is made of—the cleverer and stronger and freer it is—then the better it will be if it goes right, but also the worse it will be if it goes wrong. A cow cannot be very good or very bad; a dog can be both better and worse; a child better and worse still; an ordinary man, still more so; a man of genius still more so; a superhuman spirit best—or worst—of all.<sup>14</sup>

Because it is a parasite, sin multiplies right along with goodness. Faithful parents tend to reproduce themselves, but so do faithless ones. Generous acts congeal into character traits, but so do selfish ones. People who long for God want to satisfy their appetite and also to sharpen it, but the same is true of sex addicts.

Sin is fruitful just because, like a virus, it attaches the life force and dynamics of its host. A child’s natural trust of father belongs among the springs and roots of a good creation. A faithful father accepts his small daughter’s trust and love, strengthens them, and tries to extend them toward God and out toward the world. A sexually abusive father also accepts his daughter’s trust and love, but he uses them to bind his daughter to his lust. Sooner or later, he converts trust to shame, and love to resentment. He corrupts his relationship with his daughter.

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<sup>12</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.7.12.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Vizinczey, *An Innocent Millionaire* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly, 1983), 307–8.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 53.

## 5. Corruption

Measuring the damage of the fall, the Belgic Confession states that by our original sin we human beings have “separated ourselves from God, who is our true life” and have “corrupted our entire nature” (article 14). The Confession means to tie all of us in with Adam, Eve, Cain, and Lamech as their descendants. The first sin of Adam and Eve has spread and congealed into *original sin*—a tendency of the whole race, for which we bear collective guilt. All of us are now bent toward sin. We have in the world not just sins, but sin; not just wrong acts, but also wrong tendencies, habits, practices, patterns that break down the integrity of persons, families, and whole cultures.

What are the ingredients in corruption? First, a corrupted person turns God’s gifts away from their intended purpose. She *perverts* these gifts. For example, she might use her excellent mind and first-class education not to extend the reach of God’s kingdom, but just to get rich. She wants to get rich not in order to support terrific projects in the world, but just to move up the social ladder. We ordinarily think of a prostitute as someone who rents her body. But a person can also rent her mind for a high hourly rate, and she perverts it if she rents it because she wants to feel superior to the people who bag her groceries and park her car.

Second, a corrupted person joins together what God has put asunder. He *pollutes* his relationships with foreign elements that don’t belong in them. We all know that it’s possible to pollute a river by dumping toxic waste into it. But it’s also possible to pollute our minds with things that debase them. It’s possible to pollute worship by bringing into it unredeemed elements from Vegas lounge shows (the special music is done by a Christian performing artist lying on *top* of the piano). It’s possible to pollute friendships with social ambition and college sports with taunting. A father who sexually abuses his daughter pollutes his relationship by adding sex to it. Good things have a kind of integrity, a kind of oneness or “this-ness.” A polluted event or relationship is one that has been compromised by introducing into it something that doesn’t belong there. Now the event or relationship isn’t just “this,” but “this and that.”

Take the case of idolatry. Like an adulterer, an idolater corrupts a relationship by introducing a third party into it. (In Scripture, idolatry and adultery are often paired up as emblems of each other.) So idolatry isn’t just an act of craving fame, for example, instead of God. Idolatry is also the act of putting fame *alongside* God and trying to serve them both. Your god, said Luther, is “whatever your heart clings to,” and that often means we’ve got more than one god. We are like an adulterous husband who, right through his affair, “still loves his wife.” He loves two women—or so he thinks. Similarly, a Christian who wants to be God’s child but also wants to be famous and admired in the world is a person with two loves: God and fame, fame and God. He loves them both. He “wants it all.”

In Scripture, God warns against double-mindedness of this kind not only because it is disloyal, not only because it is staggeringly ungrateful to our maker and Savior, but also because it is so foolish. Idols can’t take the weight we put on them; they’re *false* gods. Worldly fame can occasionally be used to gain a hearing for the gospel, but it cannot forgive us. It can’t cure us.

Despite rumors, it can't secure us. And the untamed desire for it can split a person. Divided worship splits worshipers. Divided love splits lovers. The truth is we have to choose. Like a sailor with one foot on a dock and another on a departing catamaran, we have to choose.

The Bible's account of the human predicament is that from the start we've been choosing wrong. We've kept on perverting and polluting God's gifts. It's not just that each of us commits individual sins—telling lies, for example, or plagiarizing a paper. The situation is much more serious than this. By sinning we not only grieve God and our neighbor; we also wreck our own integrity. We are like people whose abuse of alcohol ruins not only their liver, but also their judgment and their will, the things that might have kept them from further abuse of alcohol. The same pattern holds for everybody. We now sin because we are sinners, because we have a habit, and because the habit has damaged our judgment and will.

I think we understand how this process works. A woman who has gotten into the habit of lying might eventually find it hard to tell the difference between a lie and the truth. Whatever's convenient seems "true" to her. She now lies because she's a liar. And she has no particular desire to change. Similarly, a man who thinks women are "bitches" or "broads" might feel insulted—and angry—when a woman refuses to be treated like a bitch or a broad. The reason is that he feels entitled to his sexism, and he feels sure that she isn't entitled to object to it. His sexism has corrupted his judgment.

When we sin, we corrupt ourselves, but we may corrupt others, too. A father who beats up his son breaks some of the bones of self-respect that hold his son's character together. As the novelist Russell Banks shows in *Affliction* (maybe you've seen the masterful film by Paul Schrader that's based on it), an abusive father might break down his son's dignity to such an extent as to wreck his son's chances of making and keeping solid relationships. In fact, abuse fosters abuse, or as social scientists say, abuse predicts abuse. Victims victimize others and even themselves. In this way sin gains momentum. Worse, all sinful lives intersect with other sinful lives—in families, businesses, educational and political institutions, churches, social clubs, and so forth—in such a way that the progress of both good and evil looks like wave after wave of intertwined spirals.

Where the waves meet, cultures form. In a racist culture, racism will look normal. In a secular culture, indifference toward God will look normal, as it does in much secular education. Human character forms culture, but culture also forms human character. And the formation runs not only across regions and peoples, but also along generations. A boy can "inherit" his father's sexist idea that men ought to dominate women. A daughter can "inherit" her mother's sexist idea that women ought to let men do it.

The result of all this spiraling and inheriting is devastating. Whole matrices of evil appear in which various forms of wrongdoing cross-pollinate and breed. The "gaming" culture, for example, includes a lot more than slot machines and roulette tables: it also partners with the sex, liquor, and pawn shop industries to foster multiple addictions. The culture of war includes not only killing, its main business, but also such side-businesses as espionage, counter-espionage, treachery, dis-information, profiteering, prostitution, and drug abuse. "War is hell" not only

because of its violence and destruction, but also because of the physically and morally nauseating atmosphere it generates. (Part of being a “war hero” is to come back from war with decency and bravery still intact.) Popular entertainment culture includes not only songs and dances, but also films that glorify greed or mindless sex and that routinely portray the parents of teenagers as naïve or stupid.

When we are born into the world, we are born into these matrices and atmospheres. Our slate has been scribbled on by others. We are born into a world in which, for centuries, sin has damaged the great interactive network of shalom—snapping or twisting the thousands of bonds that give particular beings integrity and that tie them to others.

Corruption is thus a *dynamic* motif in the Christian understanding of sin: it is not so much a particular sin as the multiplying power of all sin to spoil a good creation and to breach its defenses against invaders. We might describe corruption as spiritual AIDS—a systemic and progressive devastation of our spiritual immune system that eventually breaks it down and opens the way for hordes of opportunistic sins. These make life progressively miserable: conceit, for instance, typically generates envy of rivals, a nasty form of resentment that eats away at the one who envies. “Sin,” as Augustine says, “becomes the punishment of sin.”<sup>15</sup>

All this corruption amounts to a pervasive depravity of human nature. This doesn’t mean we are all as nasty as we can be. It doesn’t mean that, in a corrupted state, we always choose the worst alternative. Even in a fallen world, ordinary people practice ordinary kindness every day. They build hospitals, organize relief efforts, and manage twelve-step programs for addicts. A warring world that needs peacemakers also has some, and some of the great ones get prizes. The Holy Spirit preserves much of the original goodness of creation, and also inspires new forms of goodness—and not only in those people the Spirit has regenerated. Besides such regenerating grace, which actually turns a person’s heart back toward God, the Spirit also distributes “common grace,” an array of God’s gifts that preserves and enhances human life even when not regenerating it. As John Calvin observes, God’s Spirit works everywhere in the world to pour out good gifts on the merciful and the unmerciful, on the grateful and the ungrateful, on believers and unbelievers alike. (Rain falls on the fields of unbelievers, too.)

Moreover, God checks the spread of corruption by preserving in humanity a sense of divinity and the voice of conscience. To bridle lawlessness, God uses shame, fear of discovery, fear of the law, even a desire for profit among those who believe that honesty is the best policy. Further, God preserves a basic sense of civic justice—a “seed of political order” to go along with the seed of religion—and, for enrichment of life, invests particular talents in jurists, scientists, artists, and poets.<sup>16</sup> Still further, the world’s great religions contain civilizing tendencies, greater or smaller, that remind us of God’s will for the kingdom. (Christian peacemakers have learned

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<sup>15</sup> Augustine, *On the Merits and Remission of Sins*, 2.36.22: “What is called ‘sin’ dwelling in our members is sin in this way: that it becomes the punishment of sin.” (I owe this reference and translation to Professor Mark F. Williams.)

<sup>16</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:43–45 (1.3.1–2), 1:272–73 (2.2.13–14), 1:292–93 (2.3.3).

much from Gandhi.) The same goes for customs and traditions. As I said, culture forms character, and the result may be very bad. But it may also be quite good, as one can tell in traditional Asian cultures with low crime rates and high regard for the elderly. Popular culture, which sometimes celebrates lust and trivializes faith, can also stir us with a call for humanitarian aid or with a filmed version of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, which powerfully portrays the disruption of shalom and the painful, heroic efforts needed to restore it. Add these things up, and you'll have an impressive number of common graces. The Holy Spirit often blows ahead of the progress of the gospel and to remarkable effect.

And it's a good thing, too. Human beings need common grace just to keep life going in relatively civil ways. This is so because evil contaminates everything—minds as well as bodies, churches as well as states, preachers as well as prize fighters. People sometimes rebel against grace itself. For example, they might feel insulted to be offered forgiveness, resenting the implication that they need it. Evil runs *through* everything, not around some things.

If you put together corruption and common grace, you'll be in a position to explain a remarkable fact: worldly people are often better than church people expect, and church people are often worse. Church people are sometimes *much* worse than we expect. In fact, says Geoffrey Bromiley, to see sin “in its full range and possibility,” we have to look at religious sin, church sin, the kind of sin that people commit ever so piously.<sup>17</sup> You might say that the Devil goes to church a lot. It's also deeply sobering to reflect on the fact that terrorists who run airliners full of screaming passengers into heavily populated buildings do it with joyful hearts: they think they're serving the God who will soon reward them as martyrs for righteousness.

So what we see, if we look around town, is that it isn't only secularists who “suppress the truth” about God (Romans 1:18). Believers do it, too. How else can we explain that Christians have used their faith to enforce slavery? How else can we explain that Christians have used their faith to suppress honest inquiry into science or history? Or think of this: why does our picture of God so often look like a picture of us? Pondering such questions, Merold Westphal suggests that before we Christians dismiss Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, the three main architects of “the atheism of suspicion” in the modern age, we ought to learn something from them about the corrupt uses of religion, even of true religion.<sup>18</sup> Honest religious practice builds spiritual momentum: “to those who have, more will be given” (Mark 4:25). But dishonest religious practice can cause shipwreck in the human soul: “from those who have not, even what they have will be taken away” (Mark 4:25). Aware of this terrible possibility, the Jewish thinker Martin Buber once lamented that just as “there is nothing that can so hide the face of our fellow-man as morality can,” so also “religion can hide from us, as nothing else can, the face of God.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “Sin,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 4:522.

<sup>18</sup> Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 13, 16–17.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, quoted in Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, 25.



## 6. *Who's to Blame?*

Why does sin ricochet down the generations, and why does history echo? What accounts for the fact that combatant ethnic groups and feuding clans lock themselves into round after round of hostilities that neither mend nor end? Where do the patterns of dysfunction in family systems come from, and why are they so miserably hard to fix? Why do even grade school students commit sins in sequence, each touching off the others like firecrackers in a string?

Of course, nobody has full answers to such questions, and we should distrust people who pretend to have them. Still, we can learn something about the progress of sin if we inventory the answers we do have and describe the ones we lack.

What answers do we have? We know that where grievances are concerned people have long memories and short fuses. We know that injustice enrages people and makes them vengeful. We know that people who hate their lives often abuse those who incarnate what they hate and that the abused then abuse others. We know that nobody is more dangerous than a victim. We know that sin brings distress and that people often seek to relieve their distress with the same thing that brought it—a dynamic that sin shares with addiction.

At bottom, says Reinhold Niebuhr in renewing a famous old theory of sin, we human beings want security.<sup>20</sup> We feel restless and anxious in the world because we are both finite and free, both limited and unlimited. We are persons of seemingly endless possibilities and of immense power, but we are also creatures utterly dependent on the good offices of our creator. So we live on the edge of our finitude and freedom, anxious lest we miss opportunities and anxious anew when we have exploited them. For suppose we lose our advantage? Suppose somebody usurps our power or defrauds us of our money or defeats us in our reelection bid for office? Persons of eminence fear obscurity just as tyrants fear the approach of justice.

Failing to trust in the infinite God, we live anxiously, restlessly, always trying to secure ourselves with finite goods that can't take the weight we put on them. We climb social ladders, buy securities, try to make a name for ourselves or leave a legacy. We deliberately put others in our debt (name a federal dam after somebody, and he will listen with interest to your next request), or alternatively, we try to escape, calming our restlessness with flights into lust or drunkenness or gluttony. Unbelief, says Niebuhr, yields anxiety that yields alternating pride and sensuality.<sup>21</sup>

But do the answers in our inventory, including Niebuhr's, fully explain the evils we have been discussing? Hardly. To start with, let's take a simple case. A fifth grader is caught in the act of trying to steal a classmate's Nintendo DS and finds it easy to lie about what he's up to ("I just wanted to look at it") and then to lie about the lie ("I'm telling you the truth!"). Suppose we interrogate him about his misdemeanor, seeking to learn from him its cause and motive. Why did

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<sup>20</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (2 vols.; New York: Scribner's, 1964), 1:182.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:183–86.

he try to steal someone else's NDS? A candid answer might be that he wanted the NDS and concluded that theft was the fastest way to get it. But why was he willing to break a law, trouble a schoolmate with an annoying loss, and disappoint his elders? Presumably because he wanted the NDS more than he wanted shalom. But why? Because he is selfish in this respect: he would rather fulfill his personal desire than keep the peace. But if being selfish brings so much trouble to everybody, including oneself, why be that way? Because, as the filmmaker Woody Allen once said in trying to explain his controversial affair with the young daughter of Mia Farrow, Allen's twelve-year companion and mother of some of Allen's children—"the heart wants what it wants."

But why doesn't the heart want God, trust God, look childlike to God for life's joys and securities? Why doesn't the heart seek final good where it may actually be found? Why turn again and again, in small matters and large, to satisfactions that are damaging?

Because the heart wants what it wants. That's as far as we get. That's the conversation-stopper. The imperial self overrules all. Inquiring into the causes of sin takes us back, again and again, to the intractable human will and to the heart's desire that stiffens the will against all competing considerations. Like a neurotic little god, the human heart keeps ending discussions by insisting that it wants what it wants.

The trouble is that this only re-describes human sin; it does not explain it, let alone defend it. Our core problem, says St. Augustine, is that the human heart, ignoring God, turns in on itself, tries to lift itself, wants to please itself, and ends up debasing itself. The person who reaches toward God and wants to please God gets, so to speak, stretched by this move, and ennobled by the transcendence of its object. But the person who curves in on himself, who wants God's gifts without God, who wants to satisfy the desires of a divided heart, ends up sagging and contracting into a little wad. His desires are provincial. "There is something in humility which, strangely enough, exalts the heart, and something in pride which debases it."<sup>22</sup>

Returning to our NDS thief, suppose we think of other possibilities in the attempt to find his motive. Maybe he isn't merely covetous and willful; maybe, like characters in Russell Banks' novels, his motives are mixed with blue collar resentments—resentment of his low-budget lifestyle, for example, and of the more prosperous NDS owner. Maybe, to imagine a very different motive, our thief thinks he is clever and wants to see if he is clever enough to get away with an NDS. Or maybe he and the NDS owner will compete in next week's Middle Elementary Track and Field Day events, and the thief wants to upset the owner's concentration. Maybe lots of things. The point is that motives may be elusive. The truth is that we cannot easily sift them.

Moreover, even when we have sorted and classified the motives of a sin, we still haven't fully explained it. Why not? The reason is that to identify a motive is to discern only what pushes a person in the direction of some act, not why he actually commits it. We still do not know why a person *succumbs* to the motive. After all, lots of people feel motivated to steal other people's

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<sup>22</sup> Augustine, *The City of God* 14.13. Like Scripture writers, Augustine thinks of the human heart not just as the seat of emotion but also as the governing center of a human being.

possessions but do not give in to these motives. They “resist temptation.” Why doesn’t a thief resist it, too? Lots of people feel aggrieved by real injustice but do not act on their grievance in some way that creates new rounds of grievances. So why do terrorists act that way?

Everybody understands that we need great, patient statespersons who will inquire into the causes of grievances, ponder them, and seek to allay them. Still, to know the cause of a grievance is not yet to know the cause of all violence done by the aggrieved. Moreover, to know the cause of a grievance is not yet to know the cause of, let alone to justify, every specific means the aggrieved may employ to redress it. Indeed, we may dispute in some cases whether a violent person even has a grievance at all; maybe all he has is anger. At minimum, what we need here is a distinction between the context of an act and its cause. Writing at a time when violent crime in the United States had spiked, Jack Beatty said this:

Even poor youths, even poor, ill-educated youths, even poor, ill-educated youths who live in a society suffused by racism, must be responsible for their acts. To believe otherwise is to espouse an environmental determinism nearly as offensive to reason and morality as racism itself. Crime, arson, running amok in the streets, have social contexts, not social causes. The [media blare about] the contexts is an insidious distraction that rests on the presumption that society is responsible for the crimes against it. That is legal and moral nonsense.<sup>23</sup>

Is it? Doesn’t society at least share in the responsibility for certain crimes against it? When society, via its legislatures, funds some of its schools twice as generously as others; when it provides poor schools for poor people; when its public schools clarify moral values instead of teaching them; when it invents gambling schemes and tries to entice its own citizens to wager money on them; when it constitutionally and judicially protects song lyrics that glamorize the killing of police officers and the terrorizing of women—when society does these things, can it completely wash its hands of crimes motivated by the very resentment, despair, and greed it has engendered?

To be fair-minded about sin—perhaps to be merely observant about it—is to concede that the forces within social and cultural contexts push and pull human beings in countless ways. Contexts strain and constrain people. In fact, social and cultural dynamics exert their pressure regularly and powerfully enough so as to make certain subsequent behaviors expectable. That is why, with a fair degree of confidence, social scientists call certain behaviors or experiences “predictors.” Abuse, for example, predicts abuse: the fact that a person has suffered abuse is one predictor that he will engage in it.

Nonetheless, these forces do not fully explain or justify human evil. That is why, even if he has sharpened it excessively, Beatty has a point. Contexts, and even predictors, of bad behavior are much easier to identify than causes, and we should not confuse them. Nor should we judge personal responsibility on the basis of this confusion.

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<sup>23</sup> Jack Beatty, “A Call to Order: Reflections on the Rhetoric of Evasion,” *Atlantic Monthly* (August 1993): 18.

Consider gang rape, a global horror. It is one thing to observe that a member of a wolf pack was himself sexually abused as a child or is poor and poorly educated or came from a messed up home. These are contextual factors for which other persons and society are at least partly answerable, and at least one is also a predictor. Together they weigh a lot. But it is another thing to assume that these significant burdens *cause* a wolf pack member to join in the rape of young girls and then boast about his role. And it is still another thing to offer the rapist “lite” absolution for his horrific act on the ground that he has pre-atoned for it (“You are not guilty, for you have suffered much”).

Environmental determinism and the no-fault morality that usually accompanies it are pretentious. Environmental determinists pretend to know what is almost always hidden from us, namely, the real causes of wrongdoing. The fact is that we know more contexts than motives of human evil, and we know more motives than causes, but we almost never know all three. A main reason is that although contexts, motives, and causes of evil certainly look as if they are linked, the linkage is hard to specify. In particular, even when we know the psychological or social context of someone’s evil deed, and even its motive, we still might not know exactly what caused her to do it. In general, we do not know to what extent evildoers are themselves, as agents, the main cause of their evil and to what extent they have fallen into a trap set by others. Only God knows the percentages in these matters. Only God knows the human heart. Only God knows how much of our evil is chargeable to us as sin. Only God knows when, for example, a psychological or social account of a particular evil stretches past context and motive to describe its cause.

Given our ignorance along these lines, what should we call malicious envy and gossip? What should we call date rape? How about the theft of your laptop?

I think we ought to call these things sins. We know they are moral evils. As a working hypothesis, we ought to assume that anybody who has committed them has sinned. Why? The reason is that with this assumption we treat people as grownups. We start them off with a full line of moral credit. We deal with them as people who can accept their debts.

Of course, the assumption that someone’s evil counts as sin may in particular cases have to be suspended or even abandoned—in the case of somebody innocently hooked on an addictive substance, for instance. In all cases the assumption must be held provisionally. But in the meantime, and in general, I think we ought to pay evildoers, including ourselves, the “intolerable compliment” of taking them seriously as moral agents, of holding them accountable for their wrongdoing. This is a mark of our respect for their dignity and weight as human beings. After all, what could be more arrogant than treating other persons as if they were no more responsible than tiny children or the mentally maimed? What could be more offensive than regarding others not as players, but only as spectators, in human affairs, including their own? What could be more condescending? What could be more patronizing than refusing to blame people for their wrongdoing and to praise them for their right-doing, and to ground this refusal in our assumption that these people have not caused their own acts or had a hand in forming their own character?

In his Lyman Beecher lectures, William Muehl recalls the humanist passions of Arthur Koestler, a one-time defender of communism who later became its critic. What began to distress Koestler was that in the Soviet communist system the concept of blame disappeared. Nobody blamed reluctant communists. Nobody blamed peasants who resented the loss of their freedoms or who resisted conversion to communism, for surely they had been corrupted by faulty social and economic conditions. Nobody blamed critics of the party line, for surely they had been brainwashed by capitalist propaganda. Instead of blame, party officials offered their opponents pity and reeducation. Of course, the cradle of such pity often turned out to be a mental hospital, and the school for such reeducation a concentration camp—places at least as confining and dehumanizing as any conventional prison. But at least none of the inmates was to blame for being there. Koestler found all this blamelessness progressively disturbing. “Before long it began to come clear that those whom we do not blame we do not regard as responsible. Those whom we do not regard as responsible we do not see as fully human. And those whom we do not see as fully human we are willing to twist and manipulate to suit our own convenience.”<sup>24</sup>

Human rights and prerogatives depend on human responsibility, on citizenship in a community of responsibility. People in this community properly hold each other accountable. People who respect each other’s full humanity refuse to explain wrongdoing with reference to a psychological or social “root cause” or with appeal to the authority of some party official or Professor of Victimology. In other words, until they are moved by evidence to the contrary, respectful people assume that evildoers are responsible citizens like themselves and that they are answerable for their evil.

### *7. The Bottom Line*

Despite certain modern assumptions, life with God isn’t mainly a matter of knuckling under to our superior—the image modernity so much detests. In the Christian view, we human beings do have to trust and obey God and express our devotion to God, but not merely because God is stronger than we are and surely not because God wants to bully us into submission. We must trust and obey because these responses are fitting: after all, we know something of God’s goodness and greatness; we know that God made and rescued us. Some of us know that God *graced* us so that we are forgiven, accepted, renewed as slowly and arduously as an addict. Indeed, only inside the cradle of grace can we even see the true depth and stubbornness of our sin.

This knowledge of God and ourselves opens us up to a whole range of opportunities and duties—to worship God, to try to please him, to beg his pardon when we fail, to receive God’s renewing grace, and out of gratitude to use our lives to weave a whole pattern of friendship, service, and moral beauty.

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<sup>24</sup> William Muehl, *Why Preach? Why Listen?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 65.

Christians describe our human situation like this: we must trust and obey in order to rise to the full stature of sons and daughters, to mature into the image of God, to grow into adult roles in the drama of redeeming the world. God has in mind not just what we should be, but also what, one day, we *could* be. God wants not slaves, but intelligent children; not numb obedience, but devoted freedom, creativity, and energy. That's what the grace of God is for—not simply to balance a ledger, but to stimulate the spurts of growth in zeal, in enthusiasm for shalom, in good hard work, in sheer, delicious gratitude for the gift of life in all its pain and all its wonder.

In short, we are to become *responsible* beings: ones to whom God may entrust deep and worthy assignments, expecting us to make something significant of them—expecting us to make something significant of our lives themselves. No one of our lives is an accident. None of us simply finds herself here in the world. We have been expected, awaited, equipped, and assigned. We have been called to undertake the stewardship of a good creation, to live within sturdy and buoyant families that pulse with the glad give-and-take of the generations. We are expected to show hospitality to strangers and to express gratitude to friends and teachers. We have been assigned to seek justice for our neighbors and, wherever we can, to relieve them from the tyranny of their suffering. Some Christians have been called, in imitation of Christ, to bear unusual suffering of their own.

But we have also been called and graced to delight in our lives, to feel their irony and angularity, to make something sturdy and even lovely of them. For such undertakings, we have to find emotional and spiritual funding from the very God who assigns them, turning our faces toward God's light so that we may be drawn to it, warmed by it, bathed in it, revitalized by it. Then we have to find our role within God's big project, the one that stretches across the border from this life into the next. To be a responsible person is to find one's role in the building of shalom, the re-webbing of God, humanity, and all creation in justice, harmony, fulfillment, and delight. To be a responsible person is to find one's own role and then, funded by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, to fill this role and to delight in it.

### **Annotated Bibliography:**

Jacobs, Alan. *Original Sin: A Cultural History*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008. Jacobs traces the human understanding of original sin (the moral and spiritual taint within the human race) from Augustine to "Hellboy." The writing and thinking are absolutely first quality—vigorous, penetrating, adept. While alarmingly learned, Jacobs' book is also accessible and witty.

Konyndyk DeYoung, Rebecca. *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and their Remedies*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009. A college professor writes intelligently and clearly about envy, vainglory, sloth, avarice, anger, gluttony, and lust—and their

offspring. Remedies are wise and time-tested. The author illustrates lavishly from contemporary culture as well as from classical sources.

Lewis, C. S. *The Great Divorce*. Repr., San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001. A Christian classic, this short work demonstrates Lewis' mastery on such topics as human desire, corruption, and joy. Lewis was convinced that people are in hell because they want to be there; "the doors are locked on the *inside*." His depiction of dying with Jesus Christ (throwing off our besetting sins) comes from a depth of centuries.

———. *The Screwtape Letters*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco: 2001. Another Lewis classic, this short volume of reverse theology consists of a senior devil's counsel to a junior devil on how to tempt a new Christian away from God. Hell is a bureaucracy where everybody is scared and humorless. But the advice (Let him notice his humility and be proud of it) is often witty.

Plantinga, Cornelius, Jr. *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995. A study of the nature of sin, including corruption, deceit, folly, addiction, attacks on God, and flight from God. An Epilogue states that while human sin is horrible, the Christian faith centers not on sin but on our Savior from sin.

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