

The Sin behind “Sin”

PAUL WELLS

A Dutch friend recently told me about his scary experience of going through the ice into the canal while skating. Once under, you should aim at surfacing not directly toward the light but to one side, allowing for the fact that light refracts through water. I will take his word for it—happily, I have never faced the predicament and never will.

However, it is an apt illustration of sin in the human condition. Sin has refracted and distorted reality, skewing everything. Nothing is normal, although it might seem so. Looking at our broken human experience, nature, and history—what we call reality—does not give direct access to light or release from anguish. We are misled, or blinded, and hit the ice ceiling trying to surface. When we seek to lead others, we can become “blind leaders of the blind,” as Jesus said in Matthew 15:14—a sobering thought indeed.

The reality of sin means that in pastoral counseling, efficiency will ultimately be proportional to its recognition, both in those suffering and those ministering to them. Scientific theories and analysis may have a part to play, but they are not the last word on human nature and its redemption. Jay Adams made a point of this years ago when he set out his stall in *Competent to Counsel* by affirming that psychological problems were sin problems—a claim that sparked a lot of lively debate.¹

Where Adams was right is that sin cannot be sidelined, as though mental health problems were the result of badly jumbled neurons waiting for chemical correction. Nor are human individuality and the soul reducible to a collection of atoms to control.²

¹ Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970).

² Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things* (London: Virago, 2015), 3–16.

Adams was, of course, working in a culture in which the idea of sin still had a Christian aroma. Generally, people knew what was being referred to, although the word was often focused on sexual transgression. This has changed with the postmodern turn. The Duke of Sussex can speak of his adolescent frolics in a soggy field behind an English pub without batting an eyelid. In our churches, Reformed or evangelical, sin also figures more and more superficially in preaching, and one would suppose in counseling as well. The major sin people recognize today is hurting someone's feelings.

All of this requires a review of our doctrine of sin in the context of the gospel message, whether in counseling, preaching, or missional witness.

I. *Contrasting Views of Sin*

This new attitude spreads its tentacles to all areas of life in society, including questions of law and crimes that are prosecuted, as well as mental health issues. However, there is a big difference between a biblical worldview and the posttruth woke mentality, which pointedly calls into question what we think sin is.

The “sins” people around us have no problem pointing the finger at are racism, sexism, patriarchalism, and intolerance or refusal of diversity—discriminatory attitudes against others, who feel degraded by them. What is viewed as “sinful,” if the word is used at all, is what is perceived as aggressive and shame inducing for those who feel belittled as victims. Reconciliation is not demanded, but reparation is.

I imagine this changes many of the issues raised in counseling by comparison with biblical and traditional notions of guilt.

II. *Biblical Sin Is God Related*

Sin in the Bible is an *objective* reality, the condition of being a sinner. It primarily concerns *God*, his law, and the way he judges sinfulness, even when it is against our neighbor. It is relational and measured by God's holiness. It involves stepping outside a right relation with God and others and missing the mark. It is rebellion, rejection of God's order, and transgression (cf. 1 John 3:4).

Sinfulness is not something we recognize naturally. We do not easily think we are sinners. It is no joyride to accept that we are “miserable sinners,” and it is even harder to confront others with their sin. We try to dodge accusations when we can, including those of our conscience, and to back off confronting sin in others, most of all in our nearest and dearest.

Sin is revealed by God’s word, and it is known by the inner voice of conscience echoing God’s law, both natural and revealed. G. C. Berkouwer argued in his work on the subject that it is inexplicable and irrational—an enigma that leads to death.³

Long before being enacted outwardly, sin is an illness of the heart. Therefore, the intention behind a crime is important. This is why seeking the motive for a crime was part of traditional criminal investigations. Acts, thoughts, and feelings are all objectively right or wrong, righteous or sinful, because of what is outside us—a personal God, who is the moral standard, and his law. Even if hurt looms large in today’s mentality, sin cannot be reduced to those feelings, because lurking behind the hurt, inflicted or received, there are invariably sinful dispositions—pride, anger, self-pity, jealousy, lust, narcissism, and the whole gamut of ego-related pleasures.⁴ Counseling cannot simply deal with feelings to make people feel good about themselves. Like preaching, it must focus on a serious view of sin and on the lasting dispositional problems of a sinful nature.

III. *The Subjective Turn*

Many people today seem to like the idea of being home alone in the universe, where they rule the roost because “the world is their oyster.” This posture brushes out a hard truth—that sin is an objective reality in the eyes of a divine judge who sets the standards. It is not a horizontal passing feeling, defined in terms of personal devaluation or abuse. Wrong is lastingly detrimental to the individual.

In the present mentality, wrong is antisocial behavior to which victims are unjustly subjected. Even though no criminal offense may have been intended or done, they feel ill done by. Hence, two new categories, unknown a generation ago, figure largely. Hate crimes are defined as criminal offenses done to others, while hate incidents are prejudices felt by victims without the law having been broken. All this may explain why police forces seem to spend hours on perceived hate offenses while burglaries go unsolved.

Standards are no longer seen as straightforward violations of external laws but are defined in the murky depths of abuse to which someone claims to have been subjected. For instance, the term *black market* originated during the Great Depression of 1931 and was used during World War II to

³ G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971).

⁴ The Traveling Wilburys, “Seven Deadly Sins, That’s How the World Begins,” *Album 3*, 1990.

describe shady dealings. However, we do not use it now. Black people find it racist, seeing it as a reference to the slave market. They may take deep offense at it, whether or not the speaker even makes the connection.

It is also the way many Christian people today will probably see sin, particularly the younger generation. Older people with more biblical grounding may well try, with some difficulty, to tack it onto a biblical understanding.

Perhaps this is also why there is not much preaching on sin, or we are uneasy with it, or with the idea of hell. Pastoral counseling provides an opportunity to deal with some of the modern myths about sin and to focus on reconciliation with God.

IV. *The Sinfulness of Sin*

Preaching, teaching, and counseling have to bring people to see that what the Bible calls sin is not primarily something felt, although bad feelings may be a consequence of sin, both in the perpetrator and the victim. What is wrong or bad is a transgression against a living and a holy God (cf. Ps 51:4). He is the one to whom we have to give an account before we deal with any wrong we may have caused others to feel or claim to have felt ourselves. This way of thinking may be a challenge for those who are immersed in the world around them by their exposure to the media. We have to think of upgrading our talk about sin.

The modern mindset on sin, and much counseling in evangelical circles, tends to deal with it in a therapeutic way. It fails to face the deep problem of sin in relation to God, which is totally different from having bad feelings about oneself because one is subjected to abuse by others or because one has abused others.

To face the real problem of sin, we have to allow our Christian mentality to have the last word over our feelings, whether good or bad. To do that, feelings have to bow the knee to the authority of Scripture, because in it God alone sets the standard of right and wrong. This is madness for our contemporaries. No matter. “Let God be true and every man a liar” (Rom 3:4).