

Whatever Became of Sin? By Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. L1050213
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 and Romans 5:12-19
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I suppose the biggest problem I have with the word “sin” is that it was used during my childhood years by some churches and some Christians to describe many activities in which I engaged and which were enjoyable—activities that I did right in my own home, some even with my own brother, sisters, parents, and grandparents. I played cards, and some Christians called that a sin. I danced—my parents even sent me to Miss Pettingale’s ballroom dancing school where I took dancing lessons, and some Christians called dancing a sin. My parents drank. They served wine and mixed drinks to house guests, right in our home. We even had a wet bar in the basement, and some Christians called drinking alcohol a sin. My grandfather, the Missouri Synod Lutheran one, used the word frequently, and prayed with me to God that I wouldn’t sin, and that I be forgiven of whatever sins I had committed.

I was quite confused about sin and what sin was. The effect of this was for me to throw the word sin out of my vocabulary. It just did not have clear meaning. This same phenomenon has happened in culture as a whole. What were once termed sins such as murder, mayhem, and robbery became crimes under Henry the VIII.¹ Instead of crimes against God, such activities became crimes against the state and were punishable by the state. For many, this took murder and robbery out of God’s arena and put them into the legal arena. Through psychology and the medical model, many crimes are no longer viewed even as crimes, but as symptoms of illness or abuse. We explain away people’s sins and crimes as being caused by a poor self image. “There are no bad children, only bad parents.”

The church’s and culture’s use of the word “sin” has been very intimately connected with sexuality, and most everyone knows how enjoyable sexuality is! The effect has been that we have trivialized “sin” right out of acceptable usage. Our loss of the proper use of the word “sin” has created a great problem. We have lost our moral compass as individuals and as a society. If no one sins, then there is no need for grace, no need for forgiveness, no need for Jesus or the church.

What is sin, what is its nature, what is it’s proper religious usage, and how can we recover its meaning for our lives so that in fact, our lives can be healthy? The American Heritage Dictionary definition of sin is “A transgression of religious or moral law, especially when deliberate, *Theology*: a. Deliberate disobedience to the known will of God b. a condition of estrangement from God resulting in such disobedience.”²

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for sin is *hamartia*. It has no simple single definition in the Old Testament. Different books and authors use it in different ways. It’s root (*ht*) means “missing the mark, or going astray.” It implies 4 basic meanings in the OT: negligence, rebelling, guilt, and error. It is a legal and theological term for what is against the norm, and for human purposes, the norm is God’s will.

There is a story in the Bible about the first human pair in the Garden of Eden. Before eating the fruit, the pair was in proper relationship with God, with each other, and with the rest of creation: the animals, birds, plants, earth, water, and air. It was an idyllic state of affairs. The man and woman had all they needed. They did not have to work hard and they had no shame or guilt. The relationship between God and the man and woman was one of trust, openness, and closeness.

The pair, however, ate fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. We read that the serpent talked them into this. This is an example of good salesmanship: “Your eyes will be opened, and you will become like God, knowing good and evil.”³

¹Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* © 1973, Hawthorn Books, p. 24

²*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition* © 1992

³Genesis 3:5

The man and woman gave in to the temptation to become like God. They upset the proper relationship between God and humanity. They realized they were naked and they felt shame. The nakedness the couple felt is merely a metaphor of our nakedness before God—no matter how much we try to cover ourselves up there is no escaping divine accountability. “Those who try to be as God finally stand before God like children who have been found out and are full of evasions.”⁴ Now, shame and guilt have been introduced into the human condition. Remember, that is not how God intended things to be. Because of human arrogance, all is out of balance.

We could argue about which is the better state of affairs. Did God really intend for human beings to be so innocent and ignorant? I am sure that we humans are more fun and more challenging for God now that we have free will and consciences, and think.

There is a way to recover the proper relationship with God, to recover some of that idyllic Edenic state. We need to resurrect that old word “sin,” and understand it as missing the mark, as not living in the way God intends us to live. We sin when we separate ourselves from God’s love: not by playing cards, but by ignoring the dealer; not by dancing, but by sitting against the wall feeling sorry for ourselves; not by drinking alcohol, but by doing anything to the extent that we dull our senses fog our consciences and lose sight of reality; not by enjoying our sexuality, but by using others sexually for our enjoyment.

God revealed to humanity the proper relationships between them and God and between them and other human beings. God gave us the Ten Commandments. They make clear what we are to value more than anything else. They make clear issues like killing, committing adultery, coveting, lying, stealing. At any rate, the proper state of affairs is for humans not to feel guilt or shame, but to relate intimately with God: not to run and hide behind the trees whenever we hear God coming close to our lives.

Whatever became of sin? Nothing. It has always been present, since those post Eden days, even if we weren’t willing to name it as such, even if we explained it away by calling it other names.

The journey through Lent to Easter is a journey admitting to our sinfulness and admitting to the fact that the current state of affairs is not the one God intended. Our sinfulness includes trying to be like God, judging others, and meting out punishment. Our sinfulness includes loving things and using people. It includes knowing shame and guilt. It includes estrangement from God and from others. This is not how God intended things to be.

We do not have to be condemned by our sin. God is a God of grace and love. Without being able to admit to this out of kilter state of affairs, we have no chance for grace.

Paul summed it up in Romans by saying, “sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned...”⁵ That should put the lie to rugged individualism. What each person does affects many others around him or her. And grace from God also came into the world through one person, Jesus Christ.

Grace is a wonderful thing. It is freeing and cleansing. It is new life, but we cannot have grace without admitting to sin, just like we cannot have resurrection without death. When we admit to our sin, then our lives can be healthy again. We can then remember that we are created: we are creatures, not the creator. We remember there is only one creator, God. We remember that we are to be in loving relationship with our brothers and sisters and neighbors. This Lenten season, I invite you into a closer and more honest relationship with God and with others.

⁴*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in One Volume* by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley © 1985, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, p. 46.

⁵Romans 5:12