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Nature of Sin

Dylan C. Halter

Theology Survey II

May 11th, 2017

Statement of Topic

Sin is inescapable. Since the Fall, mankind has been doomed. God continuously provided His people an opportunity for repentance, but the cataclysmic effects of sin continued. Understanding the nature of sin is one of the most important doctrines for apologetics, evangelism, discipleship, and pastoral teachings. Upon firmly applying hermeneutics, historical tradition, theological exegesis, and practical applications, followers of the Way are more equipped to do the Will of the Lord. The serpent succeeded in the garden, but the Savior defeated death on the Cross, bringing about redemption and restoration for all of humanity.

Presuppositions

To comprehensively grasp the nature of sin, it is important to acknowledge a few presuppositions regarding the matter. First, one must have complete reliance on the way God has spoken. Throughout the ages, God has offered his Word as a bridge of communication to this world.¹ The most prominent explanation of such a phenomenon is found in 2 Timothy 3:16, which states, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”² In essence, the foundation and trustworthiness within the Bible derives from God’s promise to speak, divinely, into human authors. Faithfulness in God’s written and authored Word provides a way for both believers and non-believers to acquire a firm doctrine on the nature of sin.

¹ Ashford, Bruce Riley, and Keith Whitfield, "Theological Method: An Introduction to the Task of Theology," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014.).

² All Scripture derive from the New International Version (NIV), unless noted otherwise.

Secondly, Scripture stands as the primary source and supreme authority.³ Though illumination of Scriptural passages can be interpreted through historical church tradition, it is paramount to always rely on the sufficiency of Scripture, or *sola Scriptura*, when exegetically interpreting doctrine. A third way sin can be understood is through identity in self. Pastor Tim Keller recognizes that “Sin is seeking to become oneself, to get an identity, apart from him [God].”⁴ Historically, in a secular sense, the nature of sin is typically refined to breaking rules, specifically the Ten Commandments. However, this is an oversimplification of the matter. When properly understood, the nature of sin provides a great resource for the hope of humanity.

Sin is a tough topic for the post-modern, scientifically-focused, autonomous world. Philosopher G. W. Leibniz argues, from a naturalist point of view, that evil and sin are logically necessary to achieve the best possible results.⁵ For example, compassion for the hurting only exists when there is suffering. Though necessitating evil is an oversimplification of the nature of sin, the historical sequence of God’s redemptive promise for sinners is the best world God could have made.⁶ Taking on a Christian worldview regarding the nature of sin provides a more profound explanation for why suffering, malice, hatred, and death occur in the world. No other worldview can account for all simultaneously. In summary, Scripture presupposes its reliability, is God-breathed, is the supreme authority, and provides explanations for all that is evil.

³ Ashford, Bruce Riley, and Keith Whitfield, "Theological Method: An Introduction to the Task of Theology," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014).

⁴ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York, New York: Penguin Group, 2008).

⁵ John Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification for Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2015), 162.

⁶ *Ibid*, 163

Biblical Evaluation

Sin displeases God and destroys the sinner.⁷ It is important to note that creation was intended to be without sin. The willful rebellion of God's plan began in the Garden of Eden. God instructed both Adam and Eve, the progenitors of humanity, to refrain from eating from the tree of knowledge (Gen 2:17). However, the crafty serpent reframed God's commandment, convincing the two to give in to their desires, pleasures, and prideful hearts (Gen 3:6).⁸ From that moment, God declared their fate due to the willful decision to sin. Though humanity was created in the image of God, the curse is brought upon all future descendants (Gen 3:14-23).

The most befitting term for the overall nature of sin is *chātā'*, or missing the mark.⁹ This is most evident in the Fall narrative. It can also refer to fault, trespass, harm, blame, and offense, occurring around 600 times in the Old Testament.¹⁰ Since mankind originated in the image of God, departing from His righteousness through our sinful nature misses the original intention of His design. Morally, sinners are accountable and responsible for their behavior.¹¹ Throughout the Old Testament, the effects of the Fall brought about guilt, corruption, and punishment.

Essence of Sin

A proper understanding of Scripture reminds us that the guilt of Adam's sin rests on all.¹² Paul clarifies in his letter to the Roman church, stating, "Therefore, just as sin entered the world

⁷ R. Stanton Norman, "Human Sinfulness," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014).

⁸ "When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for *food* and pleasing to the *eye*, and also desirable for gaining *wisdom*, she took some and ate it." The italicized concepts refer to lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, respectively.

⁹ R. Stanton Norman, "Human Sinfulness," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014).

¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² John Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief*. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing Company, 2007), 858.

through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, *because all sinned*" (5:12, emphasis added). Paul is not implying that we bear guilt of someone else's sin, rather we incur the penalty because, if placed in Adam's position, the same temptation would cause the same result.¹³ Therefore, through one man's disobedience we are found guilty (Rom 5:19). Punishment through disobedience is another Biblical concept taught, due to sinful nature. The cosmic disruption was pronounced by God to the serpent, Adam, and Eve, bringing about death (Gen 3:19; Rom 6:23). As a casualty of punishment, the entire creation experiences the consequences of the Fall. Not only has death spread to man, but Adam's sin extends to all things: "cursed is the ground because of you" (Gen 3:17).

Finally, the corruptibility of the moral character impacts all of Adam's descendants. There is nothing sinful man can do to become righteous in God's sight (Rom 3:20). Furthermore, all righteous deeds are like filthy rags (Isa 64:6), and nothing good dwells within us; our flesh will override it (Rom 7:18). Humanity is completely dead in sin. The essence of the corruptible nature of mankind through sin is defined as total depravity.¹⁴ There is no possible way to delight God, because "Those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom 8:8). Depravity signifies an anthropological shift in the general nature of mankind. The Psalmist exclaims, "Indeed, I was guilty when I was born; I was sinful when my mother conceived me" (51:5, HCSB). In writing to the church at Ephesus, Paul exhorts them, "We too all previously lived among them in our fleshly desires . . . and we were *by nature* children under wrath as the others were also (Eph 2:3 HSCB, emphasis added). In sum, the moral corruptibility of mankind is inherited through a depraved state, originating thousands of years prior in the Garden of Eden.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid, 863

Historical Development

Patristic Era

Augustine provides many continuities with traditional and Biblical interpretations of the nature of sin in Romans 5:12. He first states that all were present in Adam during the Fall, thereby becoming guilty.¹⁵ Augustine also interprets the passage from Psalm 51:5 as being born in to sin through the seminal union in Adam, again sharing in the state of guilt in Eden.¹⁶ Essentially, mankind's presence at the Fall through the genetic purity of Adam is the cause of their depravity. Though depraved, Augustine assumed that the *imago Dei*, or image of God, was not destroyed but was seriously scarred.¹⁷

Medieval

Thomas Aquinas presented original sin as the destitution of original righteousness.¹⁸ For him, righteousness was lost because of the Adamic curse. He also attributed sin to a genetic origin, and the transmission of our sin nature comes from reproduction.¹⁹ Aquinas added the necessity of infant baptism to his exegesis, explaining that, for the remission of sin to be completed at birth, one must be baptized.

Reformation

John Calvin's theology on the nature of sin, though seemingly harsh, builds upon the Augustinian view of depravity and inherited sin. For Calvin, mindfulness of sin is of extreme importance for salvation because "without a sense of our predicament there will be no desire in

¹⁵ R. Stanton Norman, "Human Sinfulness," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014).

¹⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁹ *Ibid*

us to seek God's mercy and grace.”²⁰ The main proponent to his theological interpretation was glorifying God, first and foremost. Calvin was so in tune to the overwhelming sense of grace for the elect that his idea of sinful man was “a hereditary corruption and depravity of our nature, extending to all parts of the soul, which first makes us obnoxious to the wrath of God, and produces in us works which in Scripture are termed works of the flesh.”²¹ Again, the utter detestability of sin greatly destroys the image that God intended, yet Jesus single-handedly restores the once-lost glory.

Modern

John L. Dagg also follows suit regarding depravity due to sin. Adam failed as an ambassador of righteousness in the garden, determining the fate for humanity. In Dagg’s eyes, “depravity has infected human conscience, action, and rational capacities.”²² It is more disease-oriented than genetic. For him, the flesh overrides the desires to do good, propagating the depraved nature of man and causing one to sin.

Karl Barth refuted both disease and genetic causality of sin and understood it as a willful departure from God’s laws.²³ He also took a Christocentric approach. In his understanding of Romans 5:12, rather than drawing from the sins of Adam, Barth focuses on the soteriological aspect of the passage, focusing his attention not on the depravity of man but on the salvation

²⁰ Victor Nico, “Assessing the consistency of John Calvin's doctrine on human sinfulness,” in *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, (2015): 1-8, <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/docview/1738751580?pq-origsite=summon&accountid=12085>

²¹ R. Stanton Norman, "Human Sinfulness," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014).

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

offered through Jesus Christ.²⁴ The triumph of Christ trumps the depravity of sin, bringing about new life and a restored righteousness with God.

Theological Formulation

The most prominent exegesis of the nature of sin is the concept of *total depravity*, which is found through both historical and biblical accounts. Total depravity encompasses a plethora of biblical verses relating to righteousness through deeds, moral goodness, and origin of fleshly desires. From the patriarchs of the early church to the modern interpretation of sin, the progenitor of sinful nature was Adam. Whether the nature of sin exists through genetic reproduction, as with Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin, or a state of being, as with Dagg and Barth, it is quite evident that the Adamic curse infiltrated the intention of God's invention. Both Augustine and Aquinas provided a proper biblical foundation to their theology. They understood the implications of Psalm 51:5 and Eph. 2:3, both implying humanity being born into sin. This is the truest understanding of the nature of sin. Similarly to how parents pass along dominant genes to their offspring, the seed of Adam has provided a genetic dominance over righteousness, through sin. All are born in to it and subject to it effects, which leads to death.²⁵

Conceptually, this idea of total depravity follows a theory known as natural headship. Both spiritual and physical material are passed through the genetic line biologically and originated from Adam.²⁶ John Calvin's view on depravity originating from "our nature" and "parts of the soul" makes sense then. The key passage for the nature of sin is found in Romans 5:12-19. Verse 12 is the key, identifying that sin has been spread to all because all have sinned.

²⁴ Orrey McFarland, "'The One Jesus Christ': Romans 5:12-21 and the development of Karl Barth's Christology," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Edinburg, August 2014

²⁵ Romans 6:23

²⁶ R. Stanton Norman, "Human Sinfulness," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014).

This matches with natural headship as sin was *spread* throughout humanity. Augustine and Aquinas also were right in their interpretation that if sin was spreading throughout humanity, then it must have one origin that was passed down through the ages. Tracing lineage back to Adam, it is clear that our depraved state began in the Garden. This directly altered the image God intended.

John Calvin's focus on depravity and the separation from God is another key to understanding the nature of sin. Corruption and the moral infringement on the goodness of mankind is undoubtedly altered. The Westminster Confession of Faith supplements Calvin and early patriarchs' concept of sin while maintaining continuity with the Bible:

From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions.²⁷

Inability to do that which is good is grounded in depravity. Paul summarizes this in Romans 8:7-8: "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." The hostility of the flesh against the goodness of God is where the separation begins. It is quite evident through Biblical and historical accounts of the nature of sin that it originated from the progenitor, was passed genetically, and causes a displeasing encounter with God.

Practical Application

How could the filthy rag of sin, which covers us all, be used practically in the autonomous, naturalistically driven, postmodern world? First, it gives Christians a realistic understanding of their audience. Knowing that all of humanity began in the image of God and

²⁷ WCF, 6.4

turned from their ways is an opportunity to demonstrate empathy while evangelizing. Second, it takes away from the blame game when tragedy strikes. Often, many blame God for suffering. But we seldom take personal responsibility for affecting our lives. Practically, the acknowledgment of sin and the results that follow help us to live a life set apart for God. Third, we are free from bondage when we recognize the oppressive nature of sin. Jesus said, “everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). Those who believe break off the oppressive bonds of sin and live a life of freedom. The nature of sin, though intended to destroy, is in fact a strong tool for evangelism. Unlike heretical sects of Christianity, which are righteousness through works oriented, evangelical Christians understand that sin is a depraved nature of the unrepentant heart. Knowing that the only cure is the cross, we can effectively provide justification through grace by faith alone doctrine when evangelizing. Finally, understanding that humanity is geared against giving glory to God (Rom 1:24-25) provides a positive framework against unbelievers. Instead of them being the enemy, the serpent in the garden—the cause of sin—is revealed.

In preaching the Gospel, the nature of sin shifts the pastor’s focus from condemnation to repentance. Prior to Christ’s ascension, he commanded all who believed to go into the world and preach the Gospel, specifically “teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19-20). Jesus taught the Law through the lens of love. Though absent of sin, he never condemned others of sin. If we are to teach everything the way Jesus taught, then we are to take a Christocentric approach to human nature of sin, always bringing the unrepentant to the cross through love. It is obvious that the supernatural, Christ, supersedes our natural, sinful nature, and transforms us to a new creation.²⁸

²⁸ 2 Cor 5:17

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