

The Trouble with Sin: Original Sin Revisited¹

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Sin has fallen on hard times. Whereas once it was a word to strike terror into the heart of the believer, its most pervasive use on the current scene is to describe sumptuous, chocolate-filled eclairs and their like. Its history has been reduced to a fairy tale concerning a woman, an apple, and a snake, inspiring advertising agencies with all manner of ways to market and sell their wares. Or, if such popular uses of sin seem an incomplete way to describe the phenomenon in contemporary society, the alternative, churchly application is all too often a list of things that folks in general and church members in particular should most certainly avoid. And, of course, there is always that other use of sin that simply varies its spelling from *s-i-n* to *s-e-x*. Indeed, sin has fallen onto hard times, such that we have almost lost the word completely from any meaningful lexicon or from any integral tie to our daily lives.

But I suggest that this trivialization of sin may itself be sinful, contributing to a trivialization of life itself. The trouble with sin is that it may not be troublesome enough. In this lecture I shall develop the following theses:

1. Sin, particularly in its ancient description as “original sin,” is a depth reality woven into the fabric of our lives without our conscious consent.

2. Original sin today presupposes interconnected structures of existence whereby each one affects all others, and all others affect each one.

3. Original sin also refers to structures of consciousness, mediated through the culture in which we are born, that presume or assume the ill-being of any aspect of creation.

4. The word “sin” is itself a positive rather than a negative naming insofar as it calls upon a standard of justice, derived from the gospel, for the sake of transformation.

The Ancient Naming

There is something quite archaic about the very notion of “original sin”—we hardly know how to deal with it in an evolutionary age. If we regard it at all, we

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see it either as an innocuous old tale, or—if we are women who have suffered the peculiar association of women with sin resulting from Eve’s tryst with the serpent—then a not-so-innocuous old tale that is best buried in some convenient trash heap of forgotten history. We are no longer aware that the notion of original sin was originally a way of dealing with horrors of human existence that refused to give way either to reason or to love. These horrors were tiny little children born with harsh handicaps—a baby born today into the agony of drug withdrawal might be one example, or my little granddaughter born dead with an irreparably malformed heart might be another. How is it that this world, this beautiful world, contains so much human tragedy and the suffering of the innocent? In the case of the child born with crack addiction, we might join those who questioned Jesus, and ask smugly, “Who sinned, this one or its parents, that it was born thus?” (cf. John 9:2). But we are a bit stymied when it comes to the sufferings of the innocent through the Russian roulette of birth defects. How is it that such things occur in a creation pronounced good? This was the question asked by the early church. Convinced that “all evil is the result of sin and its punishment,” they strove to find the sin that explained the suffering of the innocent.

Complicating the question was the very pervasiveness of the human tendency to act contrary to the good of self or others. And surely we should not find such questioning strange. Are we not also pervasively afflicted in similar ways? Against massive evidence that smoking harms us, don’t perfectly fine folk still smoke? Or overeat? Or disdain exercise? Perhaps we regard such matters as trivial. In the nature of the case, we don’t have to watch the grief we cause others by our earlier-than-necessary departure from this life through our self-abuse. Moreover such behaviors do, after all, manifest our freedom to be self-abusive if we so choose (or to be self-righteous about our proper use of our freedom if we don’t so choose). Yet there are deeper forms of self-abuse for us to consider. How hard it is for us to strike a proper balance in our self-esteem, and how easy it is for us to think more highly or more lowly of ourselves than we ought to think. Failure to value our gifts is as bad as overvaluing them. Possibly it is *worse* than overvaluing them, for it involves shrinking from our responsibility to be all that we can be for the good of the whole community. But who among us has not wrestled at some time or other with too high or too low a self-esteem? Our failures relative to ourselves lead to the impoverishment of the community in general.

Easier yet to illustrate is the pervasive tendency to act against the good of others. The egregious examples are too agonizing for elaboration: One of my students is a young, twenty-four-year-old Franciscan sister who ministers day after day in Bethlehem House to women and children suffering from the horrors of monstrous abuse—she sees raped babies. Day by day every city newspaper will

routinely record the number of drive-by murders and their intentional as well as accidental victims. We shudder at the new rise of hate organizations in our country, whose obsession is always the so-called purification of society through vicious elimination of those they ironically deem a blight to "the American way of life." And regardless of how we feel about the Gulf War, let us be clear that no bomb may be dropped nor weapon discharged, on either side, without a sob for the awful destruction of lives held dear and a prayer for the forgiveness of sin. We are very expert, in an infinite variety of ways, at acting against the good of others. But every action against the good of another is a searing of our sensitivity, a lessening of our own humanity, so that the sin against another is also a sin against the self.

Furthermore, the situation may even be more complex than the fact that self-abuse diminishes the good of the community, and other-abuse diminishes the good of the self. Consider the very real possibility that God is in relation to the world, open to its raw reality, co-experiencing reality with every element of existence, no matter how insignificant (but this, of course, would render all things significant). If God feels the world as it feels itself, then God feels our self-abuse and God feels our abuse of others; God experiences the terror of falling bombs, and the agony of a raped child. Sins against self and others are at the same time sins against God. But since such a possibility is too mind-boggling to develop, consider this a simple aside as we turn again to the plight of our theological forebears in the early church as they too dealt with the perplexing horror of a humanity with a pervasive tendency toward self- or other-abuse in a world presumably created by God as good.

The problem they faced might be called the theory of infinite regress. Even we know that people who abuse children were very likely themselves abused when they were children, by parents who themselves were abused, by parents who. . . . You can see the problem. If you, like they, lived in a world where the common sense of the day told you that all humanity descended from a single pair who were themselves created good by God, and if you, like they, had access to the Genesis story, then you too might have come up with the notion of original sin. The theory, of course, is not found in the Genesis text, but is built upon that text. It simply says that the first pair, though good, chose to act against the good that they had been given (why, given their goodness, they chose to act against their good was never easily explained). In their case, action shaped their nature as well as their character, so that from henceforth they and all their progeny would live and act from a nature distorted from its original good. Since their nature was distorted, it was subject to innumerable vicissitudes, each of which was a down payment on the eventual reality of death. Thus their progeny, even in infancy, suffer the results of this distortion physically, and all act out of this distortion spiritually in ways that are abusive to self and others.

We are some fifteen centuries removed from formulation of this doctrine, and our own penchant is to look at the complex blend of sociological, psychological, economic, and political factors that account for the mystery of moral evil, or sin. But despite our temporal and psychic distance, we must recognize the heuristic power of the doctrine in its ability to render intelligible the staggering irrationality of our perversity. Fundamentally, the doctrine argued that without courtesy of individual consent, we are born into a situation where we participate in and contribute to the distortion of the good.

A Contemporary Naming

When we lost the power of the ancient story—and there are good and salvific reasons why we should have lost that power, for in time its non-biblical theology came to work immeasurable harm—we lost our sensitivity to our shared responsibility for the general ill-being of society. The doctrine of original sin spoke to a common plight and to a corporate responsibility; its loss threw us into a morass of individualism, and a consequent trivialization of sin. That is, sin was reduced to sins, each of which is individually caused and is a matter of individual concern. There is little sense of “we’re in this thing together,” much less any sensitivity to any degree of individual responsibility for evils far from our personal doorstep. In the ancient doctrine—and, indeed, in literature such as *The Brothers Karamazov*—sin involved a pervasive web of a shared nature and interwoven responsibility for the whole. It is essential to recover this corporate sense of participation and, therefore, responsibility if we as communities devoted to the good of society are to make any real difference in a world sorely in need of a real difference. While there are doom-sayers in every age, so that we tend to dismiss cries of concern or despair, I beg you to consider the following real possibilities and realities.

1. Vice-President Quayle has allowed the possibility that we (who, after all, are the only nation in the world ever to use the atomic bomb) may use nuclear weapons in Iraq; Saddam Hussein reserves the “right” to use chemical weapons against massive civilian as well as military populations.

2. Large quantities of burning oil will affect weather conditions insuring famine over much of Asia.

3. Spilled oil devastates wild life.

4. Apart from war, industrialization is bringing about deterioration of ozone layers in the heavens and loss of oxygen-producing forests on earth.

5. One tiny little Bethlehem House, a shelter for abused women and children in a small city, works with thousands of persons each year. For every one who receives help, we do not know how many remain helpless, and in how many hamlets, towns, and cities.

6. Our inner cities, most certainly including our nation's capital, are devastated by drugs, crime, unemployment, illiteracy, and forms of brutality, all of which contribute to the brutalization of the human spirit.

7. Our rural mountainsides are pocketed with communities suffering from ingrained poverty, illiteracy, and forms of brutality, all of which contribute to the brutalization of the human spirit.

I have no wish to join the ranks of the doom-sayers, but the depressing habit of reading the daily newspaper convinces me that we corporately are in trouble. It is time to recover the doctrine of original sin not just for explanatory purposes, but to reinforce a realistic sense of corporate responsibility that might energize us for corporate action.

How can we reinterpret original sin in such a way that it makes sense of our interrelated responsibility for the plights I have just named, and for the many plights that I have not named?

Consider that we live in a world of interconnection, interdependence, interrelationality, in ever-increasing circles of influence. Who we are depends in large measure upon where we are, when we are, and with whom we are. We are continuously responding to continuous influences, each of which demands its due in shaping our lives—in fact, we are literally responding to so many influences simultaneously that we mercifully have a very efficient screening system that allows most of that information and influencing to operate at pre-conscious levels of our being. But inexorably, we are affected by all that is, whether greatly or negligibly, and we are responsible for our responding integration of those influences into who we are. Likewise, in such an interconnected universe, we ourselves have an affect on all that is—other realities must deal with the difference that we make, whether they do so consciously or at preconscious levels of existence. We receive from all and we give to all, so that the whole of things—whether of a special community like a seminary or a university, or the larger community of a town, or a county, or a state, or a government, or a world, or a universe—is what it is partly because we are in it. We participate in the whole, both by giving and by receiving.

In such an interrelated system, corporate responsibility begins to take on greater plausibility. We live in systems within systems, each affecting the others in imponderable ways, and each affected by all others in ways we experience either as joy or, all too frequently, as great grief. Need I cite the recent experiences of so many of us in chapel or church, praying in intercession for those from our communities who were in the Persian Gulf? Were our spirits not affected by their danger? Was there not anguish deep within us by our knowledge of those who had been killed or were missing in action? Events thousands of miles away deeply affected our way of being. In the complexity of this world all actions,

not simply some actions, have an effect on how we are. In such a world, original sin takes on awesome meaning. Insofar as there is evil done to another anywhere, we are all affected by it. Insofar as one of us does evil to self or another, all are affected by it. We participate in one another for good and for ill, and thus participate in one another's joys and sorrows, in one another's kindnesses, and in one another's sins. An interconnected world involves us in systems and circles of corporate welfare. Dostoevsky portrayed this interconnection profoundly in *The Brothers Karamazov*, probing to levels we shrink from embracing. Each is responsible for all; all are responsible for each. One aspect of original sin in today's world is created through our implication in one another's deeds and in our responsibility for one another's welfare.

One would reject such responsibility, for surely it is too extreme. But to bring it home more forcefully, let me leave this "cross-section of interconnected existence" approach in favor of one that speaks of inherited guilt in a way reminiscent of the old doctrine.

Inherited Sin

Original sin is not only the reciprocal relationships that constitute our world in ever larger systems of being; original sin is also the formation of our conscience and consciousness in such a way that we see as "normal" and "ordinary" the ill-being of any facet of creation.

This is simply illustrated. I grew up in Massachusetts in the forties, when romantic movies involving cross-country train trips were all in vogue, and I confess to seeing my share as a girl. In these movies, there were both white folks and black folks, and the white folks were always in the dining cars and Pullmans, and so were the black folks—but I do not have to tell you who was doing what. Never once did it occur to me to question my mother and father as to how come the black folks were always serving the white folks. To the extent that I did not question it, I assumed it to be a normal part of reality, and so unwittingly perpetuated my expectations upon the few black folk I was privileged to meet. Such attitudes, reinforced hundreds of times in a variety of ways, were formed in me without anyone bothering to ask my consent to this formation—the influence was subtler than that. The end result is that without ever consciously consenting to such an ugly thing, I became a racist, inheriting the whirlwind. And while one might object that this form of racism is relatively harmless, I suggest to you that this acceptance of the inferiority of another, multiplied a millionfold, creates the kind of a climate that allows the brutal ugliness of humiliations and lynchings that still hold a people in bondage. We cringe at such excesses, but they are excesses of our own sensitivities, carried to their illogical, irrational conclusions—for there is nothing rational or logical about such evils.

This is but one illustration. It is a peculiarity of existence that we exist each “after our own kind,” and that our own “kind-ness” weaves itself into our identities from our infancy, defining normative reality. We may limit our “own kind” to a family, to a clan, to a town, to a country, to a gender, to a race, to a religion, but whatever the limitations we draw, they suffice to make quite clear who “we” are and who “they” are. This in itself might be innocuous were it not that we tend to take the further step of making our definitions normative for authentic humanity. There seems to be something more natural, something more innately fine, about our own kind, so that others who are measured and found wanting by our standards are clearly not quite so civilized, or so spiritual, or so refined, or so warm, or so intelligent, or so *right* as we. Therefore *we* are the true subjects in the world, while those different from us may be objectified as “other.” *They* are the enemy, or strangers, or the ignorant, but most definitely, the other.

Certainly we see such attitudes in action in any community when jobs suddenly become scarce and the economy is threatened. Almost always it is the fault of the Japanese, or the latest wave of immigrants, whoever they may be, or the white folk, or the black folk, or the rednecks, or the Jews, or the Arabs, or the Armenians, or the Cambodians, or the whoevers, depending of course upon the defining group. In times of scarcity, falling back upon one’s own kind and taking care of one’s own ensures the survival of one’s kind; perhaps such attitudes are at some level functional.

It may be that such attitudes served survival well in a hostile environment where the goods that ensured survival were scarce. We might speculate that in the evolutionary history of our species, we instinctively developed the tendency to protect our own group and ensure its survival; the problem, of course, is now that unless we expand the understanding of “our” group so that it is constituted by creatures in general, rather than a peculiar subgroup of one kind of creature, we are in danger of destroying all.

But whatever the reason for such attitudes, the fact is that we absorb them with our mother’s milk, breathe them with our native air, and learn them with our language. We do not ask for such attitudes, but they form the defining edges of that which we call normal, structuring our patterns of thought before we have the power to ask. Insofar as these structures of consciousness assume the ill-being of any facet of creation, they are the structures of original sin, predisposing us toward accepting and perpetuating the ill-being they assume. Adam and Eve are as old as our parents, and we are or will become Adam and Eve to the generations that follow us.

Fundamentally, of course, these structures of consciousness deny the interconnectedness and interdependence of all being and presume that the ill-

being of some is insignificant to the whole. Thus, there is a convergence between original sin as the denial of our interconnectedness with all creation and original sin as an inherited structure of consciousness disposing us toward accepting the ill-being of any facet of creation as normal and therefore acceptable. This convergence is the stuff from which we are willing in the name of our norms to wreak humiliation or destruction on others. Original sin leads inexorably to sins—those acts that, knowingly or unknowingly, work ill-being for one, some, or many. Clearly, such an understanding of sin has little or nothing to do with chocolate eclairs—but so long as we can consign sin to such trivialities, we may keep it from hounding us with the deeper responsibility of our participation in causing countless griefs in the world.

The Power of Naming

Back in the more optimistic beginning of this lecture, I suggested that naming sin was itself a step toward moving beyond its powerful grip. So long as we are blind to the dynamic structures of ill-being, restricting our named influence to small and controllable circles of our own kind where well-being is clearly flourishing, then we remain slaves to sin. With hardly a thought at all we shall continue the unintentional but nonetheless damning participation in ill-being. Just as sin does not ask our consent, neither does responsibility. We are responsible for the ill-being we perpetuate, whether passively through neglect or actively through our deeds; we are weighed and found wanting.

But the gospel calls us to a different reality. The gospel holds up before us a vision where “the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof” (Psalm 24:1), where God’s reign of justice and well-being knows no boundary of kinship or nationhood or gender or kind. East, west, north, south, all are embraced by God’s compassion, and none is outside the divine care. So we have preached! The gospel calls us, moreover, to a spiritual form of existence, called love, that reverses our ethnocentric concerns and points us toward theocentric, geocentric, and anthropocentric concerns. The gospel, of course, says it more simply by stating that we should love God and neighbor as well as ourselves (Mark 12:28-34); to the question, “Who then is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29), the answer is that anyone in need, regardless of their so-called classification, is indeed my neighbor, calling forth my care (cf. Luke 10:30-37).

We exist in the peculiarity that while we easily call relatively trivial things sin, we shrink from naming our unconscious participation in structures of ill-being as sin—it is too great a responsibility for us to bear. What? Me, responsible for the conditions of unbearable poverty in the hollows of Appalachia? Why, I live far away. What is it to me that there are these poor? What? Persons sleeping on the grates of our cities, people whose meager salaries no longer cover the

increasing costs of rent? What is that to me? Why don't they work harder? What? People forbidden access to means of personal and communal fulfillment, such as education, health care, and work opportunities? I personally never denied a soul. What responsibility could I possibly bear? With our ignorant denials we retreat to our normality and to our norms, refusing to name the condition as sin, and therefore refusing to name our own powers as God's own means for transformation.

Notice the power that comes with shedding our myth of presumed innocence, and naming our participation in the problems of society. "Sin" is actually a redemptive word, for it says about that which it names, "this should not be." To say "this should not be" is to call upon a norm other than that which seems so comfortable and obvious to us; it is to participate in the norm of God's own justice, to align oneself with God's own will for the care of all creation in general, and this particular aspect of creation in particular. To say, "this should not be," is to recognize that the ill-being we name is not isolated, but rather is a part of an interconnected universe where the blight of one negatively affects all. The naming of sin is the act of seeing spiritually, which is far more important than the fact of seeing physically. Such spiritual seeing is the promise of transformation in the world. To name sin is to name one's own culpability and responsibility and therefore to be open for personal and corporate action toward redress.

Alas, how is such redress to take place? Whether we name it sin or no, aren't the poor always with us? Here again, the importance of naming is paramount. To name a situation as sin is to be concrete, not abstract; it is to care about *these* persons in *this* situation. While we cannot deal with all poor everywhere, we can deal with these poor here, asking questions such as "What constitutes empowerment for these people?" and "What structures ensure their continued poverty?" and "What resources—spiritual or physical—do they bring that, together with ours, might begin to make a difference for their children, if not themselves?" In an interconnected world, changes here make a difference elsewhere as well.

But if original sin is a structure of consciousness absorbed through our social location, can we look forward to a time when we shall have broken its shackles, living free in a utopian world without wars, or poverty, or abuse, or humiliation, or destruction? My conviction is that we shall never see a time when the corporate prayers of confession in the church will no longer be appropriate. We are called to live in the awareness and the naming of our participation in powers of ill-being, of our own-kind centeredness at the expense of all others. Naming this as our identity, we must then dare to live out of the forgiveness of sins, which is to find ourselves open to a new norm, a new identity formation, and a new hope that by God's grace we can participate in addressing redemptively the sins of this world.

An analogy may be helpful. When I first began going back to school in my early thirties, I was overwhelmed by the number of books there were to read. How was it that I had advanced to the ancient age of thirty and had read so little? I managed fairly well, until in one philosophy class the professor off-handedly shared with us that a friend of his had just returned from Germany, and through a confluence of circumstances had managed to buy a whole boxcar of books. Now in those days I still thought professors had read every book on their shelves, and to hear of a person who had read a whole boxcar full was more than I could endure. I cried all the way home, knowing I could never catch up. But just before I turned into my street, I suddenly realized with a jolt how foolish it was of me to cry. "Marjorie!" I said to myself, "Why should you cry? The time to cry over this is the time when you can no longer read the next book!" While it was true that I could not read a boxcar full, I could indeed read one more. And I did . . . and I do.

No, we cannot deal with a whole boxcar of problems. But we can own the reality of our participation in *this* problem and be faithful in our communities by addressing it. There is power for this. There is power to name the enormity of sin, to move away from its trivialization. In an interconnected universe, there is a power to make a difference. So may we do.

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