

## Week 8: The doctrine of sin

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, in *Works*, vol. 3, trans. Douglas Stephan Bax, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004).
- Derek R. Nelson, *What's Wrong with Sin: Sin in Individual and Social Perspective from Schleiermacher to Theologies of Liberation* (London: T&T Clark, 2009).
- Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1941–3).
- Ted Peters, *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

# 1. Introduction

- Doctrine of sin is deeply ambiguous.
- On the one hand: close to the heart of Christian theology.
- On the other hand, gives rise to reserve and criticism.
- Stands for denial of human goodness.
- Legitimised draconian discipline.
- Both sides of the doctrine need explaining.

## 2. Biblical perspectives

- Doctrine of sin largely NT teaching although reliant on OT texts.
- E.g. Ps. 32, 1–2: Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin.
- Quoted in Romans 4, 7-8.
- Important: for NT sin comes into view in the context of forgiveness, redemption.

# Biblical Perspectives II

- (a) Forgiveness of sins.
- Predominant theme in synoptic gospels.
- John the Baptist preaches 'baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (Mk 1, 4; Lk 3, 3).
- 'Healing of a paralytic' in Mk 2:
- 5. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'
- Sin always used in the plural – refers to individual acts.
- Forgiveness *before* death and resurrection of Jesus.

## Biblical perspectives III

- (b) Sin in the Gospel of John
- Important theme, but word almost always used in singular:
- 1, 29: 'The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!' (John the Baptist about Jesus)
- Sin here is a cosmic force.
- Connection with Jesus' sacrificial death ('lamb of God').

## Biblical perspectives III

- (c) Sin as universal
- Most influential on sin is St Paul.
- Rm 3, 9: 'All are under the power of sin'.
- Emphasis on sin's universal sway (note singular again).
- Affects everyone – Jews and Greeks.
- Is *only* and *fully* annulled in Christ's death.

# Biblical perspectives IV

- (d) Adam and Christ
- Rm 5, 12: 'Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin ...'
- Interpretation of the fall story of Gen. 3 as 'original sin'.
- Connection of sin and death.
- Universal sin – universal redemption?

# Biblical perspectives V

1. The Bible speaks of sin a lot!
2. Sin is spoken of in diverse ways, even just in the NT.
3. Synoptics emphasise individual transgressions, *sins* (plural), whereas John and Paul think of sin (singular) as a universal, cosmic force.
4. All correlate it with Jesus' redemptive activity: his ministry (synoptics) and his death/resurrection.
5. Important: sin is merely the foil for the gospel of salvation.

### 3. Sin as personal and universal

- Sin is naturally aligned with misdeeds.
- We tend to think of a sinner as a criminal or an amoral person.
- Forgiveness of sins amount to a willingness to 'move on' after someone has done us a wrong.
- Evidently, this usage isn't compatible with the biblical witness.
- Sin cannot simply be identical with moral/criminal fault even though it is clearly related.

## Sin as personal and universal II

- Is sin then an external force that *makes* us bad or turns good intentions into bad outcomes?
- Undoubtedly, human beings experience this kind of predicament (cf. Greek tragedy).
- ‘The sin of the world’ (Jn 1, 29) seems to be related to this experience.
- Yet: sin must *also* be personal, or forgiveness would make little sense.
- In some sense they are ‘our’ sins.

## 4. Sin and interiority

- Sin is most plausibly connected with innermost core of our humanity.
- In NT already emphasis is more on *motivations* than actual actions (cf. the 'hypocritical' Pharisees, Paul's use of 'coveting' in Rm. 7, 7 ff.).
- Augustine: 'Sin is nowhere but in the will' (*De duabus animabus* 10)
- Sin is a disposition to action, not the action itself.
- Hence, it can be universal while our actions are not determined.

# Sin and interiority

- Augustine: Sin is concupiscence.
- The structure of our desire is problematic.
- Gen. 3, 5: 'You will be like God'.
- But: Augustine identified concupiscence with *sexual* desire in particular.
- We inherit Adam's sin insofar as we are conceived in lust.
- Dark side of doctrine of sin coming to the fore.

## 5. Universal and original sin

- Pelagian controversy: perhaps most influential for Western theology.
- Pelagius (390–418) taught *moral* and ascetic Christianity.
- Christians are told in the Bible to do good; therefore they are able to do so.
- They have free will and will be held responsible by God for their moral and spiritual perfection.
- Against Pelagius, Augustine emphasized the universality of grace and sin.

## Universal and original sin II

- To advance his case, Augustine developed theory of original sin.
- Adam's sin is passed on to all human beings in two ways.
- (1) All inherit his propensity to sin.
- (2) All share in his guilt because 'in him' all sinned (on basis of flawed reading of Rm 5, 12).
- All humanity is a *massa perditionis* (mass of perdition).
- Deserving of punishment and thus saved only by grace.

# Universal and original sin III

- The notion that human being 'inherit' Adam's guilt is powerful.
- It can solve the problem of theodicy: The existence of moral *and* natural evil can be traced back to Adam's sin.
- It explains the *universality* of sin and the need for salvation.
- Justifies infant baptism (not even an infant is free from sin).
- Yet it is also terrifying and seemingly far removed from the gospel of love.

## 6. Sin and law

- Jewish teaching on Torah insists it is God's good gift to his chosen people.
- Yet St Paul understands it (in Greek) as 'law' and contrasts it with the gospel.
- No salvation is possible 'through works of the law' (e.g. Rm 3, 20).
- Why then was it given by God?
- Paul's response: because of sin (Gal. 3, 19).

## Sin and law II

- The law therefore was a 'disciplinarian' before the salvation through Christ.
- The correlation of sin and law in Paul facilitates a punitive conception of law.
- Luther, *Commentary on Galatians* (1531): 'God has ordained civic laws, indeed all laws, to restrain transgressions. [...] Restraint from sins is not righteousness but rather an indication of unrighteousness. Therefore just as a rope holds a furious and untamed beast and keeps it from attacking whatever it meets, so the Law constrains an insane and furious man lest he commit further sins.' *Luther Works* 26, 308.

# Sin and law III

- There are at least two 'uses' of the law:
  1. The 'political' or 'civic' use.
  2. The 'elenctic' use, cf. Rm 3, 20: 'through the law comes the knowledge of sin'.
- Melancthon and Calvin teach also a 'third use' of the law which is pedagogical for Christians.
- The alignment of sin and law increases the dark aspect of the doctrine of sin.

## 7. Sin and existence

- Most influential in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century theology has been an existential interpretation of sin.
- S. Kierkegaard: *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844).
- Kierkegaard identifies sin with the existential shock of human beings faced with their infinite possibilities.
- We get our lives wrong, so to speak, because we can't accept our finitude.
- Although formulated as a critique of Augustine's teaching, Kierkegaard's theory preserves its core elements.

## Sin and existence II

- Sin is a determination of human existence that prevents us from fulfilling our potential *as* finite beings.
- As such, it is the root of particular sins but not identical with them.
- It is also, plausibly, inescapable apart from redemption.
- This idea was picked up by major 20<sup>th</sup> century theologians, e.g. Barth, Tillich, and Bonhoeffer.

## 8. Open questions

- Individual sin – structural sin:
- Liberation theology has rightly insisted that sin cannot be applied to individual existence but applies to social/political structures as well.
- Gendered sin:
- Feminism insists that traditional hamartology emphasizes ‘male’ sins which for women may be virtues.
- Both critiques remind us that discourse on sin occurs in specific cultural context by which it is tinged.