We believe that our first parents were created in a state of innocence, but by their disobedience they lost their purity and happiness, and that in consequence of their fall all men have become sinners, totally depraved, and as such are justly exposed to the wrath of God.

Sin can be very physical and concrete in the way it appears in an evil world, but the reasons behind sin are often much more theoretical – so we use metaphors, symbols, and images to try to formulate what is spiritual and abstract. We also need to look at the reasons for and consequences of sin from different viewpoints to get a more complete understanding of what it is.

Scripture is full of historical events and stories that give us different perspectives. They paint complementary pictures that we are able to interpret into knowledge, and into theology, which helps us to understand God and ourselves better. They have been interpreted and understood in various ways by men and women in contrasting cultures over the centuries.

This is also true when we try to understand man’s broken relationship with God. The British evangelical, John Stott, shared some helpful wording in his book, The Cross of Christ. The essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone; God accepts penalties which belong to man alone.

Based on the creation story, the apostle John and, later, other apologists like Irenaeus and Origen, proclaimed that all humans were created completely good and in the image of God: God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them (Genesis 1:27-28).

However, the first generations of Christians also communicated with others and sometimes argued with philosophers, sceptics and members of other religions about their faith – just like us.

Thinkers like Plato, and religions like the different branches of Gnosticism, had dualistic views of human existence. They argued that the human body was evil, but contained a divine spark or an image of God embodied in the soul of man. We find similar dualistic arguments today, when people say that we are basically good and do not need salvation, or that we are ‘just human’, with the conclusion that no one can blame or change our human nature.

It is important that, in studying the Scripture, we communicate with others from different contexts and cultures …

FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

- What are the attitudes regarding human nature in your culture?
- How do these compare with the biblical picture?
- How can we help people understand the nature and significance of sin?
- What word pictures are helpful in the 21st century when describing our separation from God and the need for reconciliation?

When the doctrine says we are all ‘totally depraved’ it means that sin affects all dimensions of our existence …