



CANADIAN CONFERENCE
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

ARTICLE 4 [MB Confession of Faith]

Sin and Evil

COMMENTARY

The reality of sin and evil can be traced throughout the biblical story and is clearly seen in our own experience. Our understanding of sin and evil grows out of both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Sin and its Consequences (Old Testament)

The Genesis account of creation and the fall lays the foundation for the biblical view of sin and evil (Gen. 1–3). God created the world and pronounced it good. Sin and evil subsequently intruded on and corrupted this good creation when Adam and Eve yielded to the Tempter and chose to disobey God’s command. From the beginning of the Bible, therefore, sin and evil are problems that require a solution. This contrasts with other views of evil, such as the perspective portrayed in the Babylonian creation myth which reflects the prevailing world view during the time of Genesis. In that explanation, where the world was created from the murdered body of a god, evil was understood to be intrinsic in the fabric of creation. Evil and sin were considered facts of life to be endured, not problems to be solved.

The account of the fall also illustrates that sin violates God’s purposes for human relationships. Not only does sin result in alienation between God and people, it also produces alienation between individuals, between the genders, and between people and creation. The ultimate consequence of sin is death (Gen. 2:17; Rom. 6:23). Sin’s consequence of alienation requires a solution of reconciliation (Gen. 3).

Furthermore, the account of the fall illustrates that it is the nature of sin to disguise itself as desirable (Gen. 3:6; 2 Cor. 11:13-15). The result, however, is that sin mars the image of God within humans. Every aspect of human nature is affected by sin. No single aspect—such as reason, sexuality, or the physical body—should be identified as the primary carrier of sinfulness (Gen. 3:14-19; Rom. 1:21-32). Since every aspect is affected, no human faculty—such as reason or conscience—provides an undistorted point of contact with God. Sin’s consequence of depravity requires a solution in which God takes the initiative.

The stories of the people of Israel wandering through the wilderness describe the many times they were guilty of rebellion against God; they were called a rebellious and stiff-necked people. The issue was one of denying authority to Yahweh. Either they chose to oppose God’s authority directly by disobedience, or they chose to undermine God’s authority indirectly by grumbling and complaining (Deut. 1:26-27; Ps. 78:8, 17-20, 40-42, 56-57). This rebellion provoked the Lord to anger and resulted in condemnation and punishment of individuals and of the people as a whole. The problem of rebellion was addressed by Moses’ repeated intercession to God for gracious forgiveness and by the people’s renewed commitment to submit to the authority of Yahweh (Deut. 9:6–10:13).

Humanity continues to face the temptation to rebel against God by denying God’s ultimate authority. The so-called modern world view, for example, is apt to place the authority of autonomous human reason above the authority of God. The postmodern world view tends to undermine any form of ultimate authority, including the authority of God to rule our lives. Under the guise of liberation from all submission, the postmodern view tempts people to the sin of rebellion against God.

In the Old Testament God initiated a covenant with the people of Israel to establish a relationship with them. This covenant outlined a vision of justice and righteousness for the coming kingdom of God. Allegiance to God meant following the law which included religious, social, and moral prescriptions. At one level sin or transgression meant missing the mark or failing to live up to the objective standard of the law.



Both deliberate rebellion and accidental transgression of the law resulted in condemnation from God. Sin's consequence of condemnation required a solution of forgiveness that God provided in the Old Testament through the sacrificial system.

Sin, however, was not confined to individual disobedience to Yahweh or to a particular law. Throughout the historical books and the prophets we see that Israel's sin as an established nation consisted chiefly of idolatry. Idolatry meant that Israel broke the covenant relationship with Yahweh by turning away from God and by adopting the gods of other nations as well as the religious, social, and moral patterns they represented. Sin therefore involved collective rejection of Yahweh's covenant, which led to participation in systems of injustice. In response to their corporate choice, Yahweh handed Israel over to the power of these nations, who conquered and abused them.

Sin's consequence of enslavement requires a solution of liberation. In the Old Testament God saved the people from the powers that enslaved them by raising up judges or saviors to liberate the people and by offering them a renewed relationship with God (Judges 2:11-19; Dan. 9).

The Old Testament covenant theology taught that God would deal with evil within history. In other words, God would resolve the problem of evil by raising up a righteous nation and a righteous king. By the time of the New Testament, some within Israel considered this present world to be so corrupted by Satan, death, and the forces of evil that only the direct, radical intervention of God from outside history would be able to deal adequately with sin and evil.

Powers and Principalities (New Testament)

Sin is a power. Paul differentiates between sins and sin. He depicts sin as ruling over this present age, enslaving all creation and all people except Jesus and putting them under the power of death (Rom. 3:9-12; 6:6, 12-23; Eph. 2:1-3; 6:11-12). Sin is like a magnetic field that pulls all creation into its force and no human attempt, not even following the gift of God's revealed law, can break that force and free those within its grasp (Rom. 3:20; 7:5-25; Gal. 2:16).

Adam's sinful action allowed the power of sin to gain entrance into the world and consequently to pull all people except Jesus into its rule (Rom. 5:12-21). This understanding of original sin must be balanced by an emphasis on human responsibility. All people except Jesus choose to submit to the power of sin by behaving sinfully; all have sinned (Rom. 3:23). Often it is through the human pursuit of prestige, power, and security that people choose to turn away from God and allow the power of sin to gain a hold in their lives.

The synoptic gospels depict the power of evil as embodied in unclean spirits which exert great physical and moral influence over people. The chief of these demons is called Satan, the devil, or Beelzebub (Matt. 12:24-29). In the wilderness Jesus resisted Satan by challenging him with the truth of Scripture. In his ministry Jesus confronted and cast out unclean spirits and gave his disciples power to do likewise.

Paul uses the language of powers and principalities. Though not all necessarily evil, powers and principalities can be enemies of God and thus they can corrupt and enslave humanity (1 Cor. 15:24-25; Eph. 6:12). Groups, nations, and structures are susceptible to demonic forces. Structures such as governments, military forces, economic systems, educational or religious institutions, family systems, and structures determined by class, race, gender, or nationality can incite people to do evil they would not have chosen on their own. Such systems exercise a collective, enduring power far more destructive than the sum of the individuals who support or comply with them.

Sin and its consequences are described and developed from the beginning of the Scripture to the end. Sin is an enormous problem that produces results of alienation, depravity, condemnation, and enslavement.

Although God provided ways of dealing with sin throughout the Old Testament, God's final solution to the problem of sin was to send Christ into human history. In his obedient life, death, and resurrection Jesus broke the power of sin and death. In Christ God raised up a Savior with power that is stronger than sin and who can liberate God's people from submission to the lordship of sin. God took the initiative and provided forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration through Christ.

Even though the power of sin is broken, humanity continues to experience the effects of sin and evil.



We look to God's radical intervention in this world through Christ's final triumph to bring the problem of sin to its absolute solution.

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