



CANADIAN CONFERENCE
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

ARTICLE 4 [MB Confession of Faith]

Sin and Evil

PASTORAL APPLICATION

In the church we believe that sin is a concept that must be understood with reference to God and God's plan for creation. It is not simply a moral term to describe what a society considers to be wrong. For example, when a shopkeeper defrauds a customer this is not merely breaking the law but also an instance of faithlessness to the customer and to God. Sin is any act, thought, desire, emotion, word, or deed, or the absence of these, that displeases God.

Sin and its Consequences

God is not arbitrarily offended. God has initiated a covenant with humanity, an agreement which establishes a relationship between God and people. Living rightly within this covenant relationship leads to *shalom*, a concept from the Old Testament prophets webbing together God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and peace. Throughout the Scriptures God outlines the expectations of the covenant relationship which promote His plan of *shalom* for creation.

In the church we regularly remind ourselves of who God is through our worship. Spiritual leaders must also take seriously the task of teaching and reminding the church of what pleases and displeases God. North American society is moving away from concrete definitions of right and wrong and toward a definition of morality in terms of relativism and tolerance. For many in society moral tolerance is now the only good, and moral intolerance the only evil. In this context it is increasingly important for the church to be intentional about teaching the biblical view of sin.

Sometimes pastors are hesitant to provide clear teaching about sin because of abuses of this teaching in the past. In the history of the Mennonite Brethren, some churches have defined sins with a list that goes beyond the Scriptural definition, banning activities such as dancing, playing cards, buying insurance, or choosing a spouse from another denomination. Jesus cautions about legalistic definitions of sin by pointing out that it is not outward activity that defiles a person but what comes from the heart. Keeping this advice in mind, the church must still provide concrete teaching about what constitutes sin.

Throughout the history of God's people the defining of sin has played an important role in forming the character of the followers of God. In the Old Testament the list of Ten Commandments plays a central role by describing in condensed form the conduct that accompanies a covenant relationship with God. In the New Testament the church (Acts 15:28-29) and Paul (Eph. 4:25-5:20; 1 Thess. 4:3-6) instruct new Christians coming from a pagan background with other lists of sins. Around the 13th century the church taught that seven deadly sins were fatal to spiritual progress: pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth.

Personal Dimension of Sin

While being firm in teaching about sin, pastors also need to pay careful attention in their counseling to discerning the situations of individuals. For many spiritual leaders and others in power, for example, pride is a common and dangerous manifestation of sin. Liberation theologians remind us, however, that pride is often a sin of oppressor groups. These oppressor groups can assume that pride is a root cause of sin for everyone, and often warn the oppressed against the pitfalls of pride as well. In reality the opposite may be true. The root cause of sin for many oppressed people may not be pride but attitudes of



passivity and self-depreciation. To overcome sin, the oppressed need to develop a healthy sense of pride, not be taught to confess it as sin.

While some come to the church with a shallow view of sin, others come carrying burdens of guilt. Any church with a high view of discipleship and ethics will have among its members those who are burdened by feelings of guilt that they do not measure up to the standards. In dealing pastorally with these individuals it is important to realize that not all guilt is bad. Guilt may be a means of grace, the work of the Holy Spirit convicting an individual of sin and leading to genuine repentance.

False guilt comes when a person has truly repented but has not been able to accept forgiveness or to forgive themselves. The injury of wounded psyches and broken relationships is often very deep, with lifelong effects. The journey toward forgiveness is neither automatic nor immediate. The church must walk patiently beside those struggling to forgive and to be forgiven, challenging them with the hope that complete forgiveness is God's way and a true possibility. Increasingly pastors are referring individuals seeking God's forgiveness and freedom to Christian counselors, who can provide more in-depth, long-term support.

The church should model and encourage the discipline of daily personal repentance and acceptance of forgiveness. In the worship service many congregations incorporate into the pastoral prayer a time for silent, personal confession followed by thanksgiving and acceptance of forgiveness from God.

Social Dimension of Sin

In the church we believe that one member's sin affects the spiritual health of the entire congregation. To be part of the body of Christ means we run counter to the individuality of our culture and take responsibility to lovingly bring to one another's attention the sins we discern. Pastoral counseling, Bible studies, and care groups can provide ongoing support for persons struggling to live a life of Christian freedom.

Because sin is a breach of a covenant relationship, the consequences of sin spread beyond the individual who is committing the sin. When a relationship has been violated, personal repentance is not always sufficient to restore the relationship. Churches also need to facilitate reconciliation between people.

The practice of the Lord's Supper emphasizes the need for forgiveness to be a regular part of all Christian relationships. The invitation to Communion emphasizes that participation is for people who are in right relationship with God and with each other. It is the responsibility of the church to teach that if church members have sinned against another and have not asked for forgiveness and reconciliation, they should abstain from Communion until they have confessed their sins to individuals wronged and have asked for forgiveness.

Jesus' teaching on church discipline in Matthew 18 places the responsibility for making relationships right not only on the offender, but also on the one who is hurt. The gospel instructs us to show love to all involved. We show love to the victim by actively supporting the one who may feel powerless to confront an offender who will not listen. We show love to the offender by limiting knowledge of the offense to persons or groups involved with helping bring about true repentance. It is in keeping with these principles of forgiveness that churches often call in trained Christian mediators to help resolve complex conflicts.

In the case where the believer has openly done something wrong, the New Testament illustrates that a public confrontation is in order. In Galatians 2 Paul admonishes Peter publicly because he sinned publicly. When a person refuses to repent of a sin after being openly challenged by the entire congregation, that person is to be put out of the church in order to encourage the person to rethink his or her position. Churches need to take this discernment very seriously. God gives the covenant community of the church a large role to play in the actualization of forgiveness. "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 18:18). When the church gathers in the power of the Holy Spirit to discern the forgiveness of sins, God is there among them and will bring to pass what they discern together.



Life in the World

In the world where people do not live by the covenant relationship that God has established, Christians are frequently confronted by people who sin. Many of the psalms are cries to God by people who feel that they have been grievously wronged. The Scriptures counsel God's people to trust God to protect them and not to take revenge themselves.

In response to sin in the world, the church also proclaims the message of liberation from the enslaving powers of sin. In a society which understands genetic disposition, addiction, victimization, and multinational corporate structures as powers which are greater than individual human will, the good news of the gospel comes in the form of liberation. Christians have the responsibility to take liberation from sin beyond the walls of the church. For example, some congregations have made public demonstrations in response to war; others attempt to shape political bills to promote justice; still others do long-term one-on-one work with people who need help overcoming addictions. By the work of Christ through the church God addresses situations of hopelessness and despair.

The message of Jesus' liberation of people from the power of sin goes hand in hand with the message of Jesus' liberation of people from the power of evil spirits that controlled them. Jesus cast demons out of people and gave his disciples the power to do the same. When the demons did not listen to Jesus' disciples, he instructed them to pray and fast. There is still a place in the church for casting demons out of people—however, much care must be taken.

Today it is easy to take one of two extreme positions on the subject of demons. The first is a complete denial of the existence of personal forces of evil. The danger of this position is that if we regard evil as impersonal, we may underestimate the depth of that dominion which behavior patterns, ideologies, and institutions exert over lives. People may regard these forces merely as a pressure which may be resisted or rejected. They may discover too late that they are borne along by an intentionality which they are powerless to break (Finger, vol. 2, 163).

The second extreme is a view that demons are everywhere or that all problems are caused by these personal forces of evil, and that exorcism in the name of Christ is the only solution for these sins. The problem with this position is that it can cause much damage when put into practice. Many of our sins are caused when a God-given characteristic becomes unbalanced. For example, a healthy view of oneself made in the image of God can become pride; a healthy appreciation for God's gift of sex can become lust. Attempts to identify and exorcise demons without true spiritual discernment can damage the healthy, God-given characteristics of one's personality. Often, rather than the instant solution suggested by exorcism, God's way of liberation comes through accepting forgiveness and following biblical guidelines for long-term discipleship, thus allowing the Holy Spirit to shape our lives to God's glory.

In response to the reality of sin, the good news is that Jesus offers hope through forgiveness and liberation. The challenge for the church is to continually accept and actualize this forgiveness and liberation in ways that represent God's kingdom here on earth.

Bibliography

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