

righteousness was not adequate *coram Deo*; the whole person must be righteous before God. At this point he affirmed Christ's alien righteousness that is extrinsic to Christians and justifies them. Simultaneously, therefore, believers are extrinsically righteous through Christ's alien righteousness, and intrinsically they are (and will remain) sinners.

Concerning sanctification, *simul iustus et peccator* describes the tension involved in the coexistence of the righteous and the sinner in an individual. This is not to be confused with Luther's understanding of Romans 7, however, which he saw as a conflict of the Spirit with the flesh. In the first instance *simul iustus et peccator* characterizes theological and empirical togetherness of the divine verdict and a person's actual condition. Romans 7 can be distinguished as describing the anthropological conflict within the Christian.

See also [Justification](#)

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Sin. Biblical Understanding. In biblical perspective, sin is not only an act of wrongdoing but also a state of alienation from God. For Israel's great prophets, sin is much more than violation of a taboo or transgression of an external ordinance; it signifies the rupture of personal relationship with God. We become most aware of our sinfulness in the holy God's presence (Ps. 51:1–9; Isa. 6:5; Luke 5:8). Sinful acts have their origin in corrupt hearts (Gen. 6:5; Isa. 29:13; Jer. 17:9). For Paul, sin (*hamartia*) is not just conscious transgression of the law but also a debilitating ongoing state of enmity with God. Sin almost becomes personalized. It can be thought of as a malignant, personal power that holds humanity in its grasp.

The biblical witness also affirms that sin is universal. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23; cf. Prov. 20:9; Eccles. 7:20). "All have turned away," the psalmist laments, "all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, / not even one" (Ps. 14:3).

In Reformed theology, sin's core is unbelief. This has firm biblical support: in Genesis 3, where Adam and Eve trust the serpent over God's word; in the Gospels, where Jesus Christ is rejected by Jewish leaders; in Acts 7, where Stephen is martyred at the hands of an unruly crowd; and in John 20:24–25, where Thomas arrogantly dismisses Jesus's resurrection.

Hardness of heart, which is closely related to unbelief (Mark 16:14; Rom. 2:5), likewise belongs to sin's essence. It means refusing to repent and believe in God's promises (Ps. 95:8; Heb. 3:8, 15; 4:7). It connotes both stubborn unwillingness to open ourselves to God's love (2 Chron. 36:13; Eph. 4:18) and its corollary—insensitivity to our neighbors' needs (Deut. 15:7; Eph. 4:19).

Whereas sin's essence is unbelief or hardness of heart, its chief manifestations are pride, sensuality, and fear. Other significant aspects are self-pity, selfishness, jealousy, and greed.

Sin is both personal and social, individual and collective. According to the prophets, not just a few individuals are infected by sin but the whole nation (Isa. 1:4). Among sin's collective forms that cast a blight over the world today are racism, nationalism, imperialism, ageism, and sexism.

Sin's effects are moral and spiritual bondage, guilt, death, and hell. The Epistle of James explains, "Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death" (1:14–15). In Paul's view, "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23; cf. 1 Cor. 15:56).

According to Pauline theology, the law is not simply a check on sin but an actual instigator of sin. So perverse is the human heart that the very prohibitions intended to deter sin instead arouse sinful desire (Rom. 7:7–8).

Biblical faith also confesses that sin is now inherent in the human condition. We are not simply born into a sinful world; we are born with a propensity toward sin. As the psalmist says, "Even from birth the wicked go astray; / from the womb they are wayward, spreading lies" (Ps. 58:3; cf. 51:5). Church tradition speaks of original sin, conveying not a biological taint or physical deformity but a spiritual infection that mysteriously is transmitted through reproduction. Sin does not originate from human nature, but it corrupts this nature.

Sin's origin is indeed a mystery, tied in with the problem of evil. The story of Adam and Eve does not really give a rationally satisfactory explanation of either sin or evil (this was not its intention), but it throws light on the universal human predicament. It tells us that prior to human sin there was demonic sin, which provided the occasion for human transgression. Orthodox theology, both Catholic and Protestant, speaks of an angelic fall prior to humanity's fall, attributed to the misuse or abuse of the divine gift of freedom. The general consensus among orthodox theologians is that moral evil (sin) sets the stage for physical evil (natural disaster), but exactly how the one causes the other will probably always remain a subject of human speculation.

Hubris. The biblical understanding of sin has certain parallels with the Greek tragic concept of *hybris*, yet there are also profound differences. *Hybris*, sometimes (not wholly accurately) translated as "pride," should not be equated with the idolatrous pride that proceeds from a corrupted heart. Rather, it is the unwise self-elevation that proceeds from nature's vitalities. Whereas hubris signifies the attempt to transcend limitations appointed by fate, sin refers to unwillingness to break out of our narrow limitations in obedience to faith's vision. While hubris connotes immoderation, sin consists in misplaced allegiance. Hubris is trying to be superhuman; sin is becoming inhuman. Hubris means rising to the gods' level; sin means trying to displace God or living as if there were no God.

In Greek tragedy, the hero has a quite different standing from the sinner portrayed in the Bible. The tragic hero is punished for authentic greatness, not unwarranted exaltation. While the tragic hero is to be admired, the sinner, insofar as he or she persists in sin, is justly condemned. Both should be pitied, but for different reasons. Tragic heroes are fate's victims, not really responsible for their predicament. Sinners, alternatively, know the good but do not do it. Tragic heroes are tormented by the sorrow of being blind to the forces that brought about their undoing. Sinners are troubled by the guilt of knowing that they have no one to blame but themselves. The tragic hero's fault is inevitable; the sinner's is inexcusable. The tragic hero is a pawn in fate's hands; the sinner a willing accomplice in evil. In Greek tragedy, the essential flaw is ignorance; in the biblical perspective, the tragic flaw is hardness of heart.

Historical Controversy. In the fifth century, Augustine challenged the views of the British monk Pelagius, who saw sin basically as an outward act of transgressing the law and regarded the human person as free to sin or desist from sin. Appealing to Scripture, Augustine maintained that sin incapacitates humans from doing the good, and we are born as sinners. Yet because we willfully choose the bad over the good, we must be held accountable. Augustine gave the illustration of a man who, by abstaining from food necessary for health, so weakened himself that he could no longer eat. Though still human, created to maintain health by eating, he was no longer able to do so. Similarly, by the historical event of the fall, all humanity has become incapable of that movement toward God—the very life for which it was created.

Pelagius held that one could raise oneself by one's own efforts toward God, and therefore grace is the reward for human virtue. Augustine countered that humans are helpless to do the good until grace falls on them, and when grace is thus given, they are irresistibly moved toward God and the good.

At the time of the Reformation, Luther powerfully reaffirmed the Pauline and Augustinian doctrine of the bondage of the will against Erasmus, who maintained that humans still have the capacity to do the right, though they need grace's aid to come to salvation. Luther saw humanity as totally bound to the powers of darkness—sin, death, and the devil. What we most need is to be delivered from spiritual slavery rather than inspired to heroic action.

The debate between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner on human freedom is another example of division on this question. Though firmly convinced that we are sinners who can be saved only by God's unmerited grace as revealed in Jesus Christ, Brunner nonetheless referred to "addressability" in humanity, a "capacity for revelation," that enables us to apprehend the gospel. For Barth, not even a capacity for God remains within our fallen nature; therefore, we must be given not only faith but also the condition to receive faith. In this view, there is no point of contact between the gospel and sinful humanity. Brunner vehemently disagreed, contending that there would then be no use in preaching. Barth argued that the Spirit must create this point of contact before we can believe and obey. In contrast to Brunner, he affirmed humanity's total depravity; yet he did not believe that human nature is so defaced that it no longer reflects God's glory. In later writings, Barth contended that sin is alien rather than belonging to human nature. Nonetheless, he continued to affirm that every part of our nature is infected by sin's contagion, rendering us totally unable to come to God on our own.

Modern Reappraisals. In the nineteenth century, theologians under the spell of the new world consciousness associated with the Enlightenment and romanticism began to reinterpret sin. For Friedrich Schleiermacher, sin is not so much revolt against God as the lower nature's dominance within us. It is resistance to the universal God-consciousness, which needs to be cultivated in every human soul. Sin is basically a minus sign, nature's inertia that arrests the growth of God-consciousness. Schleiermacher even saw sin in a positive light, maintaining that evil has been ordained in corporate human life as a gateway to the good. Sin has occurred as preparation for grace rather than grace occurring to repair sin's damage. Schleiermacher did acknowledge a corporate dimension to sin.

Albrecht Ritschl, in the same century, understood sin as the product of selfishness and ignorance. He did not see the human race in bondage to sin's power but instead believed that

people could be effectively challenged to live ethically, heroically. His focus was on actual sins, not humanity's being *in* sin. He even allowed for the possibility of sinless lives, though he did not deny the necessity of divine grace for attaining the ethical ideal. For Ritschl, religion is fundamentally the experience of moral freedom that enables humans to be victorious over the world. At the same time, he acknowledged radical evil's presence, though, as in Kant's case, this did not significantly alter his vision of a new social order characterized by the mastery of spirit over nature. He also tried to do justice to evil's collective nature, but this effort was never quite convincing.

Twentieth-Century America. Reinhold Niebuhr pioneered in reinterpreting sin. Rejecting the Reformation understanding for its biblical literalism and determinism, he also disputed the liberal view, which confused sin with human weakness and finitude. For Niebuhr, sin is inevitable because of the tension between freedom and finitude, but it is not a necessary implication of human nature. Our anxiety over our finitude provides the occasion for sin; our ability to transcend ourselves is the source of sin's possibility. We are tempted either to deny the contingent character of our existence (in pride) or to escape from the responsibilities of freedom (in sensuality). Niebuhr sought to preserve the paradox of sin's inevitability and human culpability.

Paul Tillich saw human sin as consisting in estrangement from one's true self and the ground of one's selfhood. Virtually making sin an invariable concomitant of human finitude, he spoke of an ontological fall in addition to an immanent fall. Tillich made generous use of psychological and sociological categories (such as "alienation" and "estrangement") to illuminate sin's mystery. Just as sin is a fall from our ontological ground, so salvation lies in reunion with this ground. For Tillich, the universal experience of estrangement from the creative ground of all being is the tie that links Christians and non-Christians.

In liberation theology, sin is redefined in terms of primarily social oppression and acquiescence to injustice. It is also seen as greed for financial gain at the poor's expense. Just as sin is that which dehumanizes people, so salvation is that which humanizes them, liberating them for meaningful and creative lives.

Closely related is feminist theology, which sees sin's essence in passivity to evil, in timidity and cowardice in the face of intimidation. Sin consists not so much in self-affirmation as in self-contempt. The need for women who have been subjugated by a patriarchal ethos is for self-assertion, and their sin lies in resignation to the social system that relegates them to inferior status.

The understanding of sin has also undergone profound transformation in popular culture, where psychology is more significant than theology. Under the influence of "New Thought" and other neotranscendentalist movements, cultural religion reinterprets sin as negative thinking or defeatism. In some other strands of cultural religion, sin is equated with sickness or instability. The cure lies in self- or group therapy rather than a sacrifice for sin. The way to overcome guilt is through catharsis rather than repentance. Atonement is reinterpreted to mean at-one-ment with the self or the world.

Overcoming Sin. Christian faith teaches that sin cannot be overcome through human ingenuity or effort. The solution lies in what God has done in Jesus Christ. The penalty for sin is death, judgment, and hell, but the gospel is that God has chosen to pay this penalty

himself in the sacrificial life and death of his Son, Jesus Christ (John 3:16–17; Acts 20:28; Rom. 3:21–26; 5:6–10; 2 Cor. 5:18, 19; Col. 2:13–15).

Through his atoning sacrifice, Christ has set humankind free by taking sin's retribution on himself. He suffered the agony and shame that we deserve. He thereby satisfied the just requirements of God's law and turned away God's wrath from fallen humankind. His sacrifice was both expiation of our guilt and propitiation of God's wrath. It also signifies the justification of sinners in God's sight because Christ's righteousness is imputed to those who have faith. Likewise, it represents the sanctification of sinners by virtue of their being engrafted into Christ's body through faith. Christ's cross and resurrection also accomplish the redemption of sinners because they have been brought back out of sin's slavery into the new life of freedom.

Humankind is objectively delivered through Christ's victory over the powers of sin, death, and the devil; but this deliverance does not make contact with the sinner until the gift of the Holy Spirit awakens faith. The Spirit's outpouring completes Christ's salvific activity. His atoning work is finished, but the fruits of his redemption need to be applied to God's people by the Spirit if they are to be saved *de facto* as well as *de jure*. Through regeneration by the Spirit, imparting faith and love, the sinner is set free from bondage to sin and enabled to achieve victory over sin in everyday life.

Reformation theology insists that Christ saves us not only from sin's power but also from its dire consequence—eternal death. We are given both immortality and remission of sins. Christians do not suffer further penalties for sins committed after baptism and conversion, since punishment for sin has already been borne by Christ. Christians have been delivered from sin's guilt, but they still suffer the interior pain of guilt insofar as they continue to sin while in the state of grace. The remedy lies not in acts of penance prescribed by the church but in the act of repentance by which we claim again the assurance of forgiveness promised in the gospel. The suffering that accompanies the Christian's sin is not a penalty but a sting that reminds us of our deliverance and also spurs us to persevere and overcome.

Evangelical and Legalistic Religion. Sin's meaning is quite different in a religion based on the gospel than in one based on law. Sin, in evangelical perspective, is not so much infringement of a moral code as breaking a covenantal relationship. Sin is an offense not so much against law as against love. In legalistic religion, sin is violation of a moral taboo. In evangelical religion, sin is wounding God's very heart. For evangelicals, the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith.

Biblical faith acknowledges sin's legal dimension, recognizing that the law's just requirements must be satisfied. Yet it also perceives that sin is basically the sundering of a personal relation between God and humanity; the greatest need is not the payment of debt but reconciliation.

The cross's deepest meaning is that God out of his incomparable love chose to identify himself with our plight. Christ's was suffering of vicarious love, not simply penal suffering canceling human debt. Salvation means that Christ's merits are transferred to the deficient sinner, that God's forgiveness is extended to the undeserving. Christ not only pays sin's penalty but also does more than the law requires: he accepts the sinner unto himself, adopting

that person as a brother or sister. He gives sinners a writ of pardon and embraces them as a loving shepherd who has found the lost sheep.

Just as sin is deeper than the law's infringement, so love goes beyond the law's requirements. The answer to sin is forgiveness that was not merely conditional on Christ's sacrifice but indeed responsible for this sacrifice. God did not forgive because his law was satisfied; yet because he chose to forgive, he saw to it that his law's demands were fulfilled.

See also [Atonement](#); [Augustine of Hippo](#); [Guilt](#); [Idolatry](#); [Justification](#); [Omission](#); [Sins of](#); [Original Sin](#); [Pelagius](#), [Pelagianism](#); [Sanctification](#)

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Sin, Conviction of. Biblical teaching revolving chiefly around *elenchein peri hamartias* and equivalents. “Conviction” does not cover all shades of meaning of *elenchein*. The word sometimes entails “exposing” and “correcting” in addition to “proving wrong” or “showing the guilt of.”

A sinless person cannot be the object of this conviction (John 8:46; 1 Pet. 2:22). The world can, however, notably for disbelief in Christ (John 16:8–9). A sinning member of the Christian community can be an object of conviction too (Matt. 18:15; Eph. 5:11). Similarly, an entire congregation may be reproved (1 Tim. 5:20; 2 Tim. 3:16; Titus 1:9, 13; 2:15; James 2:9; Rev. 3:19).

Conviction originates with God: the Father (Heb. 12:5), the Son (Jude 15; Rev. 3:19), and the Holy Spirit (John 16:7–11). It is mediated through Christian witnesses, especially preachers, as they spread God's Word (Matt. 18:15; John 16:7, 8; Eph. 5:11, 13; 1 Tim. 5:20; 2 Tim. 4:2; Titus 1:9, 13; 2:15), as an outworking of brotherly love (Lev. 19:17–18 LXX). Their witness intensifies the convicting work already present through the Mosaic law (James 2:9) and self-revelation to the conscience resulting from illumination by Christ's first advent (John 3:20).

The outcome of this convicting work varies. In one sense, it is always effective because the object invariably receives divine illumination to see issues clearly (John 16:7–8). In another sense, it is only relatively effective because the object may respond with repentance (Matt. 18:15; 1 Cor. 14:24) or rejection (Luke 3:19–20). What conviction does is to make clear the dire results if the guilty party persists in wrongdoing, remaining a victim of satanic blindness (2 Cor. 4:4; cf. Heb. 10:26).