

SIN

Mark Menacher

What do you think of when you hear the word “sins?” How about the word “sin?” How are they the same? How are they different?

For Lutherans, as for many other Christians, there are two main ways to think of sin. Most commonly, when people think of sin they think of a bad deed, such as breaking the rules in some way. In this sense, the bad deed might be an action or an omission. The bad deed might be something said or something left unsaid. Finally, the bad deed might be something thought or something not thought at all. Although such deeds may not be intentional, one is still responsible for having done or not having done them. Such actions are generally called “sins.”

Underlying the idea of sins as misdeeds is the understanding of Sin as a state or condition of being human. Lutherans teach that the condition of Sin gives rise to individual bad deeds called “sins.” Given this relationship between Sin and sins, what exactly is Sin? Why is there Sin? Finally, who has Sin?

The biblical account of Adam and Eve gives the Judeo-Christian tradition answers to some of these questions. Importantly, however, interpretations of the Bible vary between Judaism and Christianity and also between the numerous Christian denominations. As a result, from one common biblical story the answers to the nature of Sin differ theologically.

What do you remember about the story of the Fall? What details have stuck with you?

According to Genesis chapters 1-3, Adam and Eve were created by God and placed in a Garden called Eden. These first human beings were given everything by God to name and to nurture. God also gave Adam and Eve one command. They were not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

In the course of time, a Serpent (the most subtle of all creatures) persuaded Eve to take some of the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If Adam and Eve ate of the fruit, the Serpent said, then she and Adam would be like God! So, Eve ate of the fruit and also gave some to Adam to eat. At that point, according to the Bible, Adam and Eve knew that they had done evil and not good. Adam and Eve were not content to be God’s creatures. They wanted to be like God. This desire to be like God goes to the root of human Sin. Theologians often call this episode “the Fall.” In their attempt to be like God, Adam and Eve, and thus all human beings, have “fallen” from God’s grace or from their original sinlessness.

How did the snake convince the people to take the fruit? What did the people find most appealing? What does that tell us about sin?

People often think that the act of taking the fruit was the first sin. In other words, the first bad deed created a state of Sin for all humanity. Lutherans, however, interpret the biblical account a little differently and a little less superficially.

Before Adam and Eve took the fruit, something else had already happened. Adam and Eve had stopped listening to and trusting God alone. This breach of trust (the desire to be like God) damaged the

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

- Genesis 3:6-7

relationship between God and all humanity. For Lutherans, then, Sin is a condition of unbelief. All human beings are born in Sin. All human beings share this Sin. Finally, all human beings live in bondage to Sin. Sin is now the nature of being human. Viewed this way, the act of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was, so to speak, merely a fruit of the condition of Sin.

What do you think it means to say we are in bondage to sin?

One's understanding of Sin also affects one's understanding of God's solution to Sin (salvation). Different understandings of salvation determine how the various Christian denominations view their mission. In order to explain this more fully, it is important to recall that according to the Bible human beings were created firstly in the "image and likeness" of God (Genesis 1:26). The advent of Sin not only affected the divine-human relationship but it also severely damaged the "image and likeness" of God in human beings. So, how does God mend both aspects of Sin?

Some Christian denominations (Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and Anglicans) maintain that after Sin entered human reality the image of God was not completely lost. These denominations also teach that after baptism human Sin is eradicated, although one is still exposed to the forces of sin and thus one might still commit bad deeds as described above. In other words, after the Fall the image of God is still present and is restored in baptism. The mission of these churches, then, is first to baptize and then to provide baptized people with ever more grace in order to restore the "likeness" of God. This grace comes through a system of sacraments which are administered by specially ordained clergy. These sacraments must be received often in order that church members, mainly lay persons, can become more and more like God.

For Lutherans, however, becoming more and more like God is little different from wanting "to be like God," which is the reason for Sin in the first place. To address the nature and results of Sin in their deepest aspects,

Lutherans teach that in the Fall both the image and likeness of God in human beings were destroyed. Before God, human beings have nothing divine left to call their own.

Lutherans teach that in the Fall both the image and likeness of God in human beings were destroyed. Before God, human beings have nothing divine left to call their own. Luther would say that human beings in Sin now have the image of the devil. Even after baptism, Sin is not eradicated. Unbelief still

determines and thus still leaves broken the relationship between God and all human beings.

Have you ever thought you were in the image of the devil? What does that statement mean? If Baptism doesn't eradicate sin, what does it do?

For Lutherans, the church's mission is not to make one "like God" but instead to turn unbelievers or partial believers to faith in God through Jesus Christ. Through the proclamation God's word as law, human beings are confronted with their sinfulness (Sin and sins). Then, through the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ (gospel) in word and sacrament, sinners also hear and receive the promise of the forgiveness of their Sin and sins. When this combination of law and gospel evokes faith in human beings, their relationship with God is healed. Therefore, faith makes one right in God's sight. In faith, one receives a new image, the image of Jesus Christ, because one has been taken into Christ.

How does this understanding of sin and mission affect the actions of our church? What might this mean for how we reach out to others?

As a result of God's actions in Christ - through word and sacrament - Christ presents himself to sinners. He thereby speaks directly to the hearers and, out of his grace, promises to forgive them of the sinfulness of their unbelief. Those who trust solely in Christ's word alone become right before God and thus are saved.