

Digital Resources

Theology

The Scriptural Idea of Sin

Dr. Louis Berkhof

To give a Scriptural idea of sin, several particulars must be kept in mind.

First, sin is a specific kind of evil.

It must not be confused with physical evil, with that which is injurious, painful, or calamitous. Sickness may be called an evil, but in a different sense. Sin belongs to the ethical sphere, where the contrast is between moral good and moral evil. It is not merely a misfortune that has overtaken man, nor a defect arising from the limitations of his creaturely state. Scripture represents it as a deliberate departure from the right way, a revolt against rightful authority, a breaking of the covenant, and a guilty transgression of the law. It is therefore not something passive, such as a weakness, fault, or imperfection for which man cannot be held responsible. Fundamentally, sin is active opposition to God and a positive transgression of His law. Sin is the result of a free but evil choice by man.

Second, sin has an absolute character.

In the ethical sphere, there is no neutral territory between good and evil. There may exist varying degrees of goodness and wickedness; however, there are no gradations through which an individual progressively transitions from moral good to moral evil. The transition is qualitative, not merely quantitative. A moral being does not become evil simply by possessing less goodness, but by turning away from that which is good to sin. There is no position of neutrality. Man is either on the side of God or against Him; he is either walking in the way of righteousness or has turned into the way of evil.

Third, sin always has relation to God and His will.

The older theologians were right to define it formally as "lack of conformity to the law of God." Yet the law is not an arbitrary rule imposed from without. Its central demand is love of God. Moral goodness consists in love of God, and moral evil therefore

consists in its opposite. Sin is separation from God, opposition to God, and hatred of God. It reveals itself in transgression of the divine law in thought, word, deed, disposition, and state. A correct doctrine of sin must always consider it in relation to the holy will of God, whether that will is written on the heart of man or revealed in the law of God.

Fourth, sin includes both guilt and pollution.

- **Guilt** is the state of deserving condemnation and being liable to punishment for violating the law. It expresses the relationship between sin and divine justice.
 - **The guilt of fault.** In one sense, guilt is the ill-desert or demerit inseparable from sin itself. It is a simple fact that we've done something wrong.
 - **The guilt of penalty.** In another sense, guilt is the obligation to satisfy the law's just demands. We've not only done something wrong, and that will never change, but there is a debt that needs to be settled. This guilt is only removed by satisfaction, whether rendered personally or vicariously.
- **Pollution** is the inherent corruption to which every sinner is subject. It is not merely an outward stain, nor a substance infused into the soul, but a real corruption of human nature. Guilt and pollution must be distinguished, yet they cannot ultimately be separated in the sinful life of man. The sinner is both guilty before God and inwardly defiled by sin.

Fifth, the seat of sin is the heart.

In Scriptural phraseology, the heart is the central organ of the soul, from which the issues of life flow. Sin does not reside in a single faculty alone, as if the intellect, the will, or the affections could be isolated from the rest of man. From the corrupt heart, its influence extends to the entire person: intellect, will, affections, body, and conduct. The whole man therefore stands under the displeasure of God.

Sixth, sin is not limited to visible actions.

Sin comprises sinful deeds, sinful habits, and a sinful state or condition. The sinful state is the root from which sinful habits arise, and these, in turn, manifest in sinful acts. At the same time, repeated sinful deeds establish and strengthen sinful habits. Thus, the acts and dispositions of man find their explanation in his

corrupt nature. Sin may therefore be defined as a lack of conformity to the moral law of God, either in act, disposition, or state.

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Louis Berkhof was born in the Netherlands in 1873, where his family was part of the Christian Reformed Church. In 1881, his family immigrated to Grand Rapids, in the United States. Berkhof studied at Calvin College, Calvin Seminary, and then at Princeton Seminary. From 1906 to 1944, Berkhof was professor of theology at Calvin Theological Seminary. He wrote extensively on Reformed theology. Louis Berkhof died in 1957.

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