

## Human Nature and the Nature of Sin

I have come this morning to preach heresy. The title of this sermon is *Human Nature and the Nature of Sin*. Most Christians think human nature is inherently sinful due to the so-called “original sin” doctrine. But I reject original sin as inconsistent with the Bible, with personal experience and with reason. And because this doctrine is accepted by most Christians I am, by definition, a heretic. Even John Wesley preached original sin. Yet I believe he would’ve changed his mind given our hindsight. I therefore preface this entire sermon with the understanding that these are my personal views and not necessarily the official views of the United Methodist Church. But maybe they should be.

The important thing to understand about Wesley was his opposition to Calvinism. Wesley rejected Calvinist predestination because it makes for poor discipleship. For example, Mahatma Gandhi reported that a Calvinist group of missionaries called the “Plymouth Brethren” once tried to convert him to Christianity. They explained to him that he would continue to sin, since it was in his sinful nature, but he would now have a marvelous savior to relieve him of the responsibility of sin. Gandhi replied that if such is the meaning of Christianity he did not wish to count himself among us. He said, “I wish to be relieved of sin itself, not just its responsibility.”

It is very much in the spirit of Wesley to praise Christians who “walk the walk, not just talk the talk.” Wesley preached the idea of *sanctification* in which he believed the Holy Spirit could remove the stain of original sin. But perhaps—just perhaps—the best way of removing the stain of original sin is realizing that the doctrine was in error all along.

Though Jews and Christians share the same Old Testament, Jews have never believed in original sin. Likewise, Jews have never cared much about the evolution debate. I believe the reason some evangelicals throw such a wall-eyed fit about evolution is that it negates original sin. Their belief system requires them to accept a literal Adam without a bellybutton who fathered the whole human race. Never mind Neanderthals, Peking man, and all that business. Never mind the fact that geologists tell us the earth is millions of years older than the Bible tells us Adam should've lived. As William Jennings Bryant said in the famous Scopes monkey trial, some are more interested in the "rock of ages" than the "age of rocks." In fact, forget about science altogether. My problem with a literal reading of Genesis is that it begets really bad theology.

The great Jewish scholar Martin Buber believed unless we read the Fall as an instructive myth we fail to grasp its deeper meaning. Don't be scared of this word "myth." To say the Fall is a myth is not to say it didn't really happen. I believe Genesis records the story of real people, but I also believe their story is timeless. An important detail often overlooked in the Fall myth is that the serpent is already present in the Garden of Eden. The author of Genesis nowhere attempts to explain the first cause of evil. Rather, the sole concern is how evil arises with respect to each person. As Buber worded it,

Man always begins again and again as God's creature, although henceforth under the burden of a humanity cast out from Paradise into the world and history. . . . That he sins belongs to his condition, that he turns back belongs to his holding his own in it. *He sins as Adam sinned and not*

*because Adam sinned.*<sup>1</sup>

Similar views were advanced in the third century by the granddaddy of all free-will Christian theologians, a Scottish monk named Pelagius. Pelagius also argued that the “ought” presupposes the “can.” That is, justice requires that God may only command of us what we are freely able to do. Otherwise, verses like Matthew 5:48, where Jesus commanded us, “Therefore, be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect” make God into a sadist. Unfortunately, the Roman Church settled upon Augustine’s view of original sin, which is why mainstream Christians still follow it today. Sin supposedly is passed on materially and genetically from the fallen Adam. The Roman Church rejected Pelagius and in so doing spawned a religion of co-dependency. Whoever is convinced they need an outside authority to teach them right and wrong will always be anxious for someone to lead them.

Let me head off a possible misunderstanding. Pelagius was probably wrongly accused of denying the need for Christ’s redemptive grace. It’s difficult to know for sure what he taught, because the history of this debate was written by the prevailing power structure. Regardless of what Pelagius actually taught, *what I teach* is that children are born as innocent as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, but they inevitably fall into sin because temptation is so deeply embedded into human history. When we sin, only Jesus saves. The question of human nature and the need for Christ’s redemptive grace are two entirely separate issues.

The view that sin is primarily due to human history and not human nature is firmly supported by the Bible. Jesus said, “the Kingdom of heaven is *within you*” (Lk 17:21). Paul prayed that God “may grant you to be strengthened with power through

his Spirit *in your inner being*" (Eph 3:16). Now, I know some will say you can make the Bible support any position you want by pulling various verses out of context. But let's back up and look at the big picture, and while we're at it, throw in a little experience and common sense.

I recall my first grade teacher telling us, "Tomorrow some colored children will start going to school with you, and you'd better get along with them otherwise they'll put you in jail!" The year was 1969, and mine was the last segregated class in Mississippi public school history. Much to the amazement of our teachers and parents, we got along just fine. The upper classes were a real powder keg, but the younger classes had no problems with integration at all *because we were too young to know what racism was*. Years later at our class reunion, I saw our children playing together just like we did. I then realized that children aren't born racists; that's something we teach them with each passing generation. *I believe it's the same with all sin*.

Recall when God denied Moses and his entire generation the right to enter the Promised Land. God then said to Moses, "Your children, who this day have no knowledge of good and evil, shall go in there, and to them I will give it, and they shall possess it" (Dt 1:39). If original sin doctrine is right, then each generation is born as evil as the last. If original sin doctrine is right, then God's actions here made no sense whatsoever.

Likewise, look at the story of Noah's flood. Genesis records, "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (6:5). So, God sent the flood and wiped out all of humankind except Noah and his family. Yet Noah was descended from the

fallen Adam just like everyone else God destroyed. If sin is genetic, due strictly to a historical Adam's Fall, why didn't God truly wipe the slate clean and start over with a new Adam? For that matter, why didn't Jesus have children like *The Da Vinci Code* suggests, so that we could selectively breed sin out of our bloodline like the Unification Church believes? *Perhaps because sin is in the world, not human nature.*

The Cross has finally broken sin's hold upon the world. And since that day, we have been but a single generation away from the Promised Land. That is why Jesus said, "Whoever does not enter the Kingdom like a little child shall not enter it" (Mk 10:15).

There you have it, my opposition to original sin doctrine in a nutshell. You're perfectly free to accept or reject my heretical ideas. But if you do accept them, chances are it will entirely change your Christian worldview. It may even change your life.

Here's how:

1. If we accept the idea that people are basically good then sin is the result of confusion and ignorance, and it is therefore much easier to forgive our wrongdoers. Jesus said from the Cross, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). Even a dog can forgive someone who trips over him; it's much harder for him to forgive someone who kicks him.

Why is it important that we be able to forgive our wrongdoers? Listen carefully to the Lord's Prayer: "And forgive us our trespasses, *as we forgive those who trespass against us*" (Mt 6:12). Jesus also said, "Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into

your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (Lk 6:37–38). And one more proof text because I really want to drive this lesson home: Jesus said, “And when you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your trespasses” (Mk 11:25–26; cf. Mt 18:23–35).

We Christians often think that as long as we ask Jesus for forgiveness we’re home free. We think we can begrudge our trespassers and seek all the retribution we want, yet rely upon the blood Jesus shed on the Cross to cleanse us. This is a mockery of the Cross. Jesus will indeed forgive us of each and every sin we have ever committed, but only if we do likewise of everyone who has ever sinned against us. Jesus asks nothing more, nothing less. Contrary to popular opinion, universal love and forgiveness are not empty, feel-good “works,” they are the very means of accepting and perfecting Jesus as one’s personal savior. Accept the idea that sin is ignorance and we’ll be better able to love and forgive.

2. Original sin is a bad faith flight from responsibility. It teaches we are humanly incapable of following the teachings of Jesus that really matter.

I speak now mainly of pacifism. I doubt most of you are aware that the Catholic Church at one time actually forbade soldiers to take communion. For the first three hundred years, Christians abstained from military service or any other form of violence. They took seriously Jesus’s statement to Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world then my servants would fight” (Jn 18:36). The reasons mainstream Christians no longer believe in pacifism are too complicated for me to fully

address this morning. But a big reason—and the point for this sermon—is there's a direct correlation between belief in the doctrines of "just war" and "original sin," which should come as no surprise since Augustine mainly formulated both.

In an essay called "Human Nature Is Not Inherently Violent," author Alfie Kohn notes that 60 percent of adults surveyed agree with the statement, "Human nature being what it is, there will always be war."<sup>2</sup> I submit world peace will come only when we change our expectations of human nature, not our God-given human nature itself, for that's just fine.

The historical peace churches—like the Amish, Brethren, Mennonites and Quakers—generally reject original sin. Wrap your head around *that* for a moment. Just imagine what a different world this would be if every church were a peace church! WWII would never have been fought for there never would've been a WWI. Neither would there have been a U.S. civil war, for all these wars were fought between so-called Christian nations. Even our current problems with the Muslims go back to the crusades, which never should've been fought in the first place. We'll never attain world peace until we realize original sin is error grown cold.

I mentioned Gandhi earlier in the sermon. We largely have Gandhi to thank that the U.S. civil rights movement was not a bloodbath. Martin Luther King, Jr. learned nonviolence from Gandhi, who in turn learned it from Tolstoy, who was Christian. Gandhi "took up the Cross and followed," so I've never worried much about the Plymouth Brethren's failed attempt to convert him. I'll go out on a limb and say that I fully expect to meet Gandhi in heaven. Gandhi often said, tongue-in-cheek, "When Christians begin following the Sermon on the Mount, I'll be Christian."

Once, at an honors forum at the University of Southern Mississippi, I asked Mahatma Gandhi's grandson, Arun Gandhi, if his grandfather believed human nature was basically good. He replied, "Yes, he did believe human nature was basically good, and so do I. The entire philosophy of nonviolence rests on that principle."

Indeed it does. Lao-Tzu, Socrates, Jesus, Menno Simons, Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, the Dalai Lama: what all these teachers of nonviolence have in common is a deep and abiding faith in the basic goodness of human nature. Nonviolence is an utterly nonsensical approach without that faith. It depends solely upon the transforming power of love and prayer to restore a wrongdoer to humanity. In contrast, original sin is a self-fulfilling prophecy. It expects the worst in human nature and thereby causes it and excuses it, at the same time it judges it.

3. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, original sin "jumps on a man when he's down." It attempts to prove the need for God by saying we are absolutely no good. This for Bonhoeffer is the very opposite of the gospel. The gospel should be about showing people how they are valued in and of themselves, about the love and mercy of God for its own sake, not about trying to convince people of their own misery or guiltiness and make them feel even worse. I'm reminded of a visit to my grandmother's church. The church is located next to an alcohol and drug rehab and, at that time, about half of the congregation were patients there. One Sunday a new preacher arrived and cut loose on a hellfire and brimstone sermon about original sin in general and the total depravity of alcoholics in particular. Needless to say, he was preaching to a lot of empty pews the next Sunday. Anyone who knows anything about alcoholism knows that condemnation

is the *last* thing an alcoholic needs to hear. An alcoholic hates himself; alcoholism is a slow form of suicide. I know for I once buried a friend of mine who drank himself to death. He was also gay. Religion was a big part of his problem, whereas it should've been the solution.

4. And finally, original sin doctrine encourages false guilt and self-loathing over life's instinctive joys, making it unnecessarily hard to be a Christian. Those who believe strongly in original sin tend to elevate "otherworldliness" at the expense of all things physical. The normal biological functions of life, especially the libido—the desire for eating, drinking and sex—they view as inherently sinful. My view is there is nothing wrong with the desires of the flesh *if we fulfill them in a godly way*.

There is a story in the autobiography of Peter Cartwright, the frontier Methodist circuit rider. To illustrate the dangers of alcohol to a prairie farmer, Cartwright dropped a worm into a glass of wine, and the worm writhed in agony. He then dropped the worm in a glass of whiskey, and the worm died on the spot. "What does this teach you about alcohol?" he asked the farmer. The farmer answered, "That if you drink alcohol you won't have any worms!"

I very much like the spirit of the farmer's reply. It reminds me of how Jesus condemned the scribes and Pharisees, "They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders" (Mt 23:4). The scribes and Pharisees abstained from rich foods and hard wine, whereas Jesus and his disciples had a much more relaxed attitude about this sort of thing. This is why they called Jesus "a glutton and a drunkard" (Mt 11:19). Jesus responded to them, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me. . . . For my yoke is easy and my burden light" (Mt 11:29–30).

Why is the yoke of Jesus easy and his burden light? Because, unlike the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus did not issue unnatural demands. Because, Jesus knew that God has not given us desires that are beyond our power to govern. Because, Jesus knew that sin—true sin, and not the scribes and Pharisees’ false interpretation of it—is the very farthest thing from human nature.

In closing, I leave you with a quote from the poet Kahlil Gibran.

And one of the elders of the city said, speak to us of Good and Evil.

And he answered:

Of the good in you I can speak, but not of the evil. For what is evil but good tortured by its own hunger and thirst? Verily when good is hungry it seeks food even in dark caves, and when it thirsts it drinks even of dead waters. You are good when you are at one with yourself. Yet when you are not one with yourself you are not evil. For a divided house is not a den of thieves, it is only a divided house.<sup>3</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith* (New York: Collier, 1951), 158.

<sup>2</sup> *Detroit Free Press*, August 21, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 64.