

What We Believe, and Why it Matters

Part 3: Sin

COTN Articles of Faith 4

The three spheres of sin:

1. **Original** sin

- Genesis 2:8-9, 15-17; James 1:13; Romans 5:12, 18-19

2. **Personal** sin

- Romans 3:23, 7:9, 15-25

3. **Systemic** sin

- Ephesians 2:1-2; Romans 7:24-25

Solution to the three spheres:

1. Christ's **sacrifice**

- Hebrews 10:4, 5, 8-10, 12-14

2. The Spirit's **filling**

- Ezekiel 36:25-27

3. **You!**

- Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 2:10; Matthew 22:37-40

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What We Believe, and Why it Matters Part Three: Sin¹ *COTN Article of Faith 5*²

I have a small collection of items that I'd like to tell you about. It is not very big yet, but it is growing. The first item I got was twelve years ago in Germany in 2006, which was my last sabbatical before this most recent one. While on that sabbatical, I did a self-guided study of Martin Luther, following in the great reformer's footsteps. I have some books and things to commemorate that study, but I'm especially fond of my first theologian bobble-head, Martin Luther. Yes, my collection is theology bobble-head dolls.



But much of our theology finds its roots in the teachings John Wesley, so I had to get a John Wesley bobble-head.

But it's not all academic; I think it's best to be well rounded in one's theology, so I added to my collection a modern-day theologian, Mr. Bean. I think there are several things that Mr. Bean gets right that academic theologians often miss!



¹ Resources: Frank Moore, *Coffee Shop Theology* (Beacon Hill Press, 1998); Al Truesdale, Ed., *Global Wesleyan Dictionary of Theology* (Beacon Hill Press, 2013); Gay Leonard, *Articles of Faith: What Nazarenes Believe and Why* (Beacon Hill Press, 1995); *Manual: Church of the Nazarene, 2017-2021* (Nazarene Publishing House, Kansas City, MO, 2017)

² 5. We believe that sin came into the world through the disobedience of our first parents, and death by sin. We believe that sin is of two kinds: original sin or depravity, and actual or personal sin.

5.1. We believe that original sin, or depravity, is that corruption of the nature of all the offspring of Adam by reason of which everyone is very far gone from original righteousness or the pure state of our first parents at the time of their creation, is averse to God, is without spiritual life, and inclined to evil, and that continually. We further believe that original sin continues to exist with the new life of the regenerate, until the heart is fully cleansed by the baptism with the Holy Spirit.

5.2. We believe that original sin differs from actual sin in that it constitutes an inherited propensity to actual sin for which no one is accountable until it's divinely provided remedy is neglected or rejected.

5.3. We believe that actual or personal sin is a voluntary violation of a known law of God by a morally responsible person. It is therefore not to be confused with involuntary and inescapable shortcomings, infirmities, faults, mistakes, failures, or other deviations from a standard of perfect conduct that are the residual effects of the Fall. However, such innocent effects do not include attitudes or responses contrary to the spirit of Christ, which may properly be called sins of the spirit. We believe that personal sin is primarily and essentially a violation of the law of love; and that in relation to Christ sin may be defined as unbelief. (Original sin: Genesis 3; 6:5; Job 15:14; Psalm 51:5; Jeremiah 17:9-10; Mark 7:21-23; Romans 1:18-25; 5:12-14; 7:1-8:9; 1 Corinthians 3:1-4; Galatians 5:16-25; 1 John 1:7-8 Personal sin: Matthew 22:36-40 {with 1 John 3:4}; John 8:34-36; 16:8-9; Romans 3:23; 6:15-23; 8:18-24; 14:23; 1 John 1:9-2:4; 3:7-10)

Granted, this is a fledgling collection, and there are more theologian bobble-heads to be had, and I look forward to expanding my collection. But that's a pretty broad expanse of theology, don't you think?



So my sons know that I've got this fledgling collection, and they decided to add to my set and get me another theologian bobblehead for my birthday. So now I have a theologian bobblehead of this guy. Does he look familiar? In a really creepy way? I opened my birthday present, and I admit I was speechless! I think that when it comes to academics on this particular spectrum of theologians, I fall much closer to the Mr. Bean side!

Anyway, that is my collection of theologians, so far. I don't know how I feel about that last bobble-head, but I am proud that my boys have grown into such fine young men who can find such creative ways of making fun of their dad!



I share that with you sort of tongue in cheek, because truthfully, a significant part of being a pastor, especially when it comes to preaching and teaching, is that the pastor *is* a theologian. It is a pastor's job to preach and teach correct theology in ways that both *inform* and *inspire*. Listen: the sermon is not a pep-talk! It is not just some inspirational, motivational speech. A sermon must be rooted and grounded in accurate theology from the written Word of God as it declares the saving reality of the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ himself and what he has done for us. If you leave church on any Sunday inspired but not rightly informed, I have failed you and my calling. But by the same token, if you leave informed and not inspired to greater change and Christlikeness in your life, I have failed to preach accurately (or else you have failed to listen correctly; or somewhere in between).

So, of course we try to find ways to make the sermon more interesting, sometimes entertaining, and to make it fit within the reality of human attention spans. We try to be creative, using metaphors that help engage all your senses, and we design the worship service entirely to communicate the truth for that day. But theology that is grounded in God's Word as revealed in God's Son can be used by God's Spirit to create in us transformational change into greater Christ-likeness – if you open yourself to God's work in your life as you listen. And we take that preaching responsibility very seriously, with every sermon series.

That is why we are in this series called, "What We Believe, and Why it Matters." There are some important truths about the Christian faith that we all need to be sure that we not only *understand*, but that we *experience* if we are going to live life-to-the-fullest that God has for us in Christ, and if we are going to carry out our purpose in this world. So we will be going through our Articles of Faith as a church.

And I want to remind you that last spring our 5th and 6th graders and their parents went through a class on the Articles of Faith, and for their class they made posters – you can see them on the back wall. Please stop and check them out when you leave today.

We need to be fully aware of what it is we believe. There are some conflicting doctrines and theologies out there on the radio, internet, and bookstores, so it's important for you to know *what* you believe, because it really does matter, and if it's God's truth it can make a difference in your life.

Today we are talking about article number 5, which is about sin. Not the most positive one of the bunch, for sure. Honestly, this one is mostly bad news. Sin is bad stuff and its very bad news for us. But there's no point in Good News if there's no bad news, right? The Good News is good news because it saves us from the bad news! And when you realize how bad the bad news really is, you realize how really, really good the Good News is!

So it's important that we understand...

the **Three Spheres of Sin:**

In order for us to really comprehend how extensive and pervasive sin is – just how bad it is – we'll need to realize the three spheres of sin.

The first is what we call...

1. Original sin

This is a term that we use to describe the sinful condition that every human being has, because we are born into it. It goes back to the beginning of creation, in the story of Adam and Eve. You might remember how the story goes. God created this incredibly beautiful garden for our first parents, Adam and Eve to live in, called Eden.

“Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” (Genesis 2:8-9, niv)

God made it clear that there was just one rule:

“The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.’” (Genesis 2:15-17, niv)

Think about it: there was only ONE rule to have to obey. It's a rule book with just One rule in it: just don't eat from that tree. So what did Adam and Eve do? They ate from it. It is a very short step from creation to the fall into sin. The ink is barely dry on chapter two when, in chapter three, Adam and Eve sin and eat from that tree.

Before they sinned, they experienced happy, unhindered fellowship with God in a perfect environment. So why do you think God made that one rule?

Because love requires a choice. Being made in God's image, we were given free will to choose. Without it, we would be mere automatons; just machines that were programmed to love and obey God. And that's not love; love always involves a choice. But instead of choosing obedience, we listened to the lie of the serpent, our enemy from of old, Satan, or in Hebrew its pronounced, "sautawn." It means adversary, or accuser. Satan convinced Adam and Eve that God wasn't giving them a choice. Satan said that God wanted to control their choices; that they weren't free at all because he told them "no." Of course, by choosing their own selfish ambition rather than the God who selflessly loved them, they plunged the entire human race into sin. Sin entered and altered our DNA, so that every person who is born into the human race has inherited the full measure of original sin. We all have it, and there is no cure that we can create on our own. With that altered DNA came both spiritual and physical death. Spiritual death means that we are unable to be in relationship with God, and physical death because all die. These deaths affect us in many ways besides just at the end of our lives. Work is hard. We face illness, great pain, broken relationships. We are horribly capable of hurting each other and creation. In fact, in the very next chapter of Genesis, chapter four, Adam and Eve have two sons: Cain and Abel. Cain is jealous of Abel and viciously murders his own brother. Sin affects our entire being: spirit, soul, mind, and body. Sin hurts ourselves and others.

We live in the heart of apple country, so you'll understand this analogy: How does a worm get inside an apple? It doesn't burrow in from the outside; it comes from inside. An insect lays an egg in the apple blossom. Sometime later, the worm hatches in the heart of the apple, then eats his way out. Sin, like the worm, begins in the heart and works out through a person's thoughts, words, and actions.

Our hearts are inclined toward self.³ We don't have the ability, the will, or the desire to get back into right relationship with God. We are separated from God and spiritually corrupted.⁴

You might be thinking, "Well, that's not fair, then. Why am I judged for something I didn't do; something I inherited?" While you face the consequences, you are not judged for that. What Christ did on the cross pays the penalty for original sin.

"When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned... Yes, Adam's one sin brings condemnation for everyone, but Christ's one act of righteousness brings a right relationship with God and new life for everyone. Because one person

³ Moore, *Coffee Shop Theology*

⁴ *ibid*

disobeyed God, many became sinners. But because one other person obeyed God, many will be made righteous.” (Romans 5:12, 18-19, nlt)

So the question is, “Will God condemn us for original sin?” No.

Our Article of Faith says, “We believe that original sin ... constitutes an inherited propensity to actual sin for which no one is accountable until its divinely provided remedy is neglected or rejected.” In other words, until you are old enough to accept or reject Christ’s work on the cross, you aren’t held accountable for original sin until you can choose.

When young children die before they have reached the age that they are responsible for their decisions, God automatically gives them grace and they gain heaven. What Christ did on the cross covers their sin. The same is true for a mentally handicapped or mentally ill person who cannot be responsible for their actions, no matter how old they are. But as soon as you and I reached the age that we know the difference between right and wrong, the age that we were responsible for our choices, *then* we are guilty. When is that age? Some cultures of the past have said it is 10, or 12. We don’t let people vote until they are 18 or drink until they are 21. So what age is that age of accountability? It’s different for everyone. I’ve known some very mature and responsible 7 year olds. And I’ve known some very immature 45 year olds. But God knows when it is for each person, and you know it for yourself!

You see, once we reach that age, then we must be held to account for the second sphere of sin, and that is...

2. ***Personal*** sin

In other words, once you know right from wrong, you are responsible for your sin, and the full weight of sin and its guilt is on you. Just like Adam and Eve when they broke that one rule, you too are now held accountable and face the consequences until you choose Christ. And again, you bear the guilt of it. You can’t pay enough or sacrifice enough to make up for it. You can’t change your ways or modify your behavior to stop yourself from sinning. It is in your DNA, remember?

So what exactly is sin? Generally speaking, sin is falling short of God’s standards. It’s missing the mark, like we are shooting an arrow at a target, and we don’t hit it. Actually, it’s more like the target is north and we are aiming south. God has an ideal for us, for our lives. God created us in his image, and intended for us to achieve a great ideal. But we sinned, and we keep falling short.

Here’s a definition that we use in our Articles of Faith:

“Sin is a voluntary violation of a known law of God by a morally responsible person.”

(Repeat)

In other words, you know something is wrong, but you do it anyway. Or, you know something is right, but you don't do it. And the problem is, all of us who have reached the age of being responsible are guilty:

“Yes, all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious ideal...” (Romans 3:23, tlb)

So even though God won't judge us for original sin before we can be held responsible for it, as soon as we know better, we choose wrong. We choose sin.

The Apostle Paul wrote about sin from his own experience. Listen carefully, because It's a long passage so I'm not going to put it on the screens:

“That is why I felt fine so long as I did not understand what the law really demanded. But when I learned the truth, I realized that I had broken the law and was a sinner, doomed to die ... I don't understand myself at all, for I really want to do what is right, but I can't. I do what I don't want to—what I hate. I know perfectly well that what I am doing is wrong, and my bad conscience proves that I agree with these laws I am breaking. But I can't help myself because I'm no longer doing it. It is sin inside me that is stronger than I am that makes me do these evil things. I know I am rotten through and through so far as my old sinful nature is concerned. No matter which way I turn I can't make myself do right. I want to but I can't. When I want to do good, I don't; and when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway. Now if I am doing what I don't want to, it is plain where the trouble is: sin still has me in its evil grasp.

It seems to be a fact of life that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. I love to do God's will so far as my new nature is concerned; but there is something else deep within me, in my lower nature, that is at war with my mind and wins the fight and makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. In my mind I want to be God's willing servant, but instead I find myself still enslaved to sin.

So you see how it is: my new life tells me to do right, but the old nature that is still inside me loves to sin. Oh, what a terrible predicament I'm in! Who will free me from my slavery to this deadly lower nature?” (Romans 7:9, 15-25, tlb)

I want to leave that question hanging in the air for a minute. You and I are powerless to stop ourselves from sinning, no more than you can stop the sun from rising or setting. Even when we know we should not sin, we do it anyway. And because God's ideal is perfect, even one little sin is less than perfect, and therefore we are just as guilty as if we broke all of them.

But let me clarify something: just because we do something less than the way God would do it, that doesn't mean we've sinned. Involuntary and inescapable shortcomings, infirmities, faults, mistakes, failures, or things that we do that are not “voluntary violations” – those are just the residual effects of the Fall. Sin is *not* anything falling short of God's perfection. We will always be human. Before Adam and Eve sinned, they were still less than God's perfection, because they were not God. Neither are we, and neither will we ever be. We were created to be God-like,

but not to be God's ourselves. When we have failures or shortcomings, those are not sins. I may accidentally do something to hurt you. That is not a sin. But if the Holy Spirit or you tell me that I've hurt you, and I don't come apologize and try to make it right with you, *then* I am sinning against God and you. Sin is a voluntary or chosen violation of a known law of God. Does that make sense? We become responsible the moment we are made aware, and none of us have an excuse.

So I think we understand how sin works, and how we are responsible for it. But let me point out that sin is more than just doing something wrong. We deserve death because of sin. Sin is horrible. There is no worse punishment for it; death is as bad as it gets. Sin rips apart our relationship with God, separating us from him forever. Sin puts the shadow of death into everything. We suffer pain, loss, and grief. Sin is the source of all of our personal dysfunction and our relational fractures, divisions, hatred, jealousy, and hurt. Deadly cancer in your body is a small metaphor for what sin does in this world.

Sin is not isolated to the confines of your life and mine; sin spreads not only into our relationships but our world. Because the third sphere of sin is...

3. ***Systemic* sin**

Because sin is our normal mode of operating in this world, sin soaks everything we do. Not only that, we live in a world that is presently ruled by the master of sin and the father of all lies, Satan himself. The Bible points out:

“Once you were under God's curse, doomed forever for your sins. You went along with the crowd and were just like all the others, full of sin, obeying Satan, the mighty prince of the power of the air, who is at work right now in the hearts of those who are against the Lord.” (Ephesians 2:1-2, tlb)

He rules the air around this planet; everything we breath is satiated in the noxious gas of sin. Every system in this world is sourced by sin.

You'd have to live under a rock to miss the systemic evil on display in the news this last week. I'm talking about the hearing for the Supreme Court justice. It is evil that we have a culture in which men have such unspeakable power over women, can abuse them, and keep them silent. It is systemically evil that we have news media that exploits this horrible situation. It is systemically evil that a man can be accused of something he may have done as a stupid teenager and never be able to redeem himself. It is systemically evil that there are two people who lives are being used by Democrats and Republicans in such a way that their lives are destroyed in order to further their party's political agendas. It is systemic evil that is causing such poisonous division in our country. And by the way, social media is a breeding ground for systemic evil and divisiveness.

If you are angry with me right now because I didn't defend your side of these hearings, check yourself; you may be under the influence of systemic sin. I am your brother; you are my sister or brother in Christ. Are you hating me because you think that I'm not choosing your side (go back and read this – I have not chosen a

side!)? Do you think I'm not agreeing with the right side's narrative? We are people of only *one* narrative; the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Systemic evil oppresses, it steals, it is greedy, seeks power, it uses people. Systemic sin warms the globe and destroys creation because of greed. Systemic sin makes sex slaves out of children and funds human trafficking around the globe. Systemic sin shakes its fist, if not its middle finger, at the God who created and loves this world and its people.

Folks, sin is horrible. We are born into it, we are personally responsible for it because we are guilty ourselves, and we buy into and even feed the systemic sin of this world. We are guilty of it all – one of us and all of us.

Like the Apostle Paul, we find ourselves asking:

“My new life tells me to do right, but the old nature that is still inside me loves to sin. Oh, what a terrible predicament I'm in! Who will free me from my slavery to this deadly lower nature?” (Romans 7:24-25, tlb)

There is a...

Solution to the Three Spheres:

The solution is total, complete, and transformational. The solution restores us to the position we were in before the fall, and prepares us for the perfection of the new heaven and earth when Christ returns.

First, the solution to original sin is...

1. Christ's *sacrifice*

When Jesus Christ died on the cross, he paid the penalty for the guilt of our sin once and for all. We're told this clearly in Hebrews, if you remember from this summer:

“For it is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats really to take away sins. That is why Christ said as he came into the world, ‘O God, the blood of bulls and goats cannot satisfy you, so you have made ready this body of mine for me to lay as a sacrifice upon your altar...He cancels the first system in favor of a far better one. Under this new plan we have been forgiven and made clean by Christ's dying for us once and for all...Christ gave himself to God for our sins as one sacrifice for all time and then sat down in the place of highest honor at God's right hand, waiting for his enemies to be laid under his feet. For by that one offering he made forever perfect in the sight of God all those whom he is making holy.” (Hebrews 10:4, 5, 8-10, 12-14, tlb)

If you have not accepted Christ's sacrifice for original sin in your life, you can not claim ignorance. You are well past the age of responsibility. I have absolutely no idea why you would not accept his sacrifice, unless of course you like sin more than

you want freedom. I'd encourage you to pray about it, because in a moment you'll have the opportunity to respond.

Secondly, the solution to personal sin requires more than God's forgiveness; you are still prone to sin. You need a change of heart. You need a heart transplant. You need a heart transformation. The solution is...

2. The Spirit's *filling*

If you have accepted Christ's sacrifice for your sins, confessed them and accepted God's forgiveness that comes as a result, then your life is now clean and ready for the Spirit of God to move in and change your heart and life. This has always been God's desire for you, knowing that you can't change your own habit and desire to sin. He said long ago through the prophet Ezekiel:

“Then it will be as though I had sprinkled clean water on you, for you will be clean—your filthiness will be washed away, your idol worship gone. And I will give you a new heart—I will give you new and right desires—and put a new spirit within you. I will take out your stony hearts of sin and give you new hearts of love. And I will put my Spirit within you so that you will obey my laws and do whatever I command.” (Ezekiel 36:25-27, tlb)

This requires an act of consecration on your part; you must offer your entire self to the Holy Spirit, inviting him to fill you and change you, to direct your life from here on in.

If you have not done that, or you feel you need a fresh filling of the Spirit, you will have an opportunity to respond in a moment.

Finally, if you've accepted Christ's sacrifice for your sin, and you've invited the Holy Spirit to fill you, then there is now a solution to systemic sin in this world, and it is...

3. *You!*

You have the very Spirit of Christ within you. Everything God has done in you, he now wants to work through you. The Apostle Paul, in answer to that question he raised earlier, said in Galatians:

“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20, esv)

God wants you to make a difference in this world, fighting the systemic sin that victimizes and oppresses people. That's why the Bible says:

“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”
(Ephesians 2:10, esv)

What are those good works?

Well, here's the thing: Remember that God created us because he loves us, and he gave us free will because he wanted us to choose to love him in return. But we sinned. We broke the law of love.

If you look at the ten commandments, the first four are about our relationship with God, and the next six are about our relationship with people.

Think about this: Jesus said:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:37-40, niv)

If sin is a violation of the law of love, then the opposite of sin is to love – to love God and to love others. The solution to systemic sin is not violence; it is love. We love people enough to respect them, listen to them, rescue them, meet their needs, and protect them. While they are still sinners – just like Christ did for us.

The solution to systemic sin is you, living a life of love in this world. If we are cleansed by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, if we are filled with the Spirit, shouldn't you and I commit to being change agents in this world, bringing the love of God into the lives of people with our words and our actions?

Shouldn't you and I commit to being change agents in this world?

We need to pray. We are going to open this altar, and spend a few moments in prayer together. The way I see it, we are praying about one of three things: accepting Christ's sacrifice if we haven't yet, asking for the Spirit of God to fill us – or to fill us afresh, and committing to God that we will fight systemic sin by being change agents of love. Every one of us in this room ought to be praying at least one of those prayers. I'd encourage you to mean business. I'd encourage you to come pray here at the altar.