

DOCTRINAL ESSAY
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by

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“The Doctrine Of Sin and Its Significant Relation to Salvation by Grace in Christ”

Introduction

The last evil days, the days which the Apostle Paul foretold as that time when *“they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears, and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables”*

(II Timothy 4:3), have arrived. For example, when people today hear the word “sin,” what do they think? Many see it as an archaic, obsolete, ecclesiastical term carried over from medieval times. Many, upon hearing the word “sin,” raise their eyebrows and wear a thin smile of amusement as if sin were nothing but the notion of naive, silly people who ought to know by now that there is no such thing as “sin.” Others see “sin” as a legalistic, Puritanical term which belongs only in Hawthorn’s *Scarlet Letter*. In short, they will not “endure” [that is, *tolerate*] it. Given this disdain for the fact of “sin,” and given the fact that it is a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith, there is hardly at this time a doctrine more pertinent and warranted for special attention. Thus, we commend our President for assigning for our convention essay this year the **Doctrine of Sin**.

However, as **sin** is a very broad subject, it was the decision of your essayist to narrow the focus of this topic by showing the *significance* of the **Doctrine of Sin** as it pertains to the **Doctrine of Salvation by Grace in Christ**. In other words, the teaching of the doctrine of sin finds its ultimate purpose in the preparing of the hearts of the impenitent to see the need for salvation in Christ alone without any merit or worthiness on the part of the sinner himself. In addition, even for Christians, the doctrine of sin stands as a constant, indelible reminder of why we continue to stand in need of the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

The greater portion of this essay will be devoted to **The Many Facets or Components of the Doctrine of Sin** itself and will constitute **Part I**. In this section we will take up such things as the Scriptural definition of sin, the Biblical distinction between Original Sin and Actual Sin, the role of the Law, the effects and consequences of sin, sin as being both positive and negative, etc. Then in **Part II** we will show how the Doctrine of Sin relates to salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. While the latter section is somewhat shorter, it is not lesser in importance, but redounds to the true glory of the Gospel. Throughout the essay, every effort is made to illustrate and drive home how the doctrine of sin is never a “dead issue” but an ever-present matter requiring our daily, diligent attention.

Part I: The Many Facets or Components of the Doctrine of Sin

A. The *Definition* of Sin

With respect to the doctrine of sin, there is no need to compile and sift through Biblical material to formulate a definition. Scripture, in dictionary-like fashion, provides us with a straightforward definition of sin. I John 3:4, saying: “*Sin is the transgression of the Law.*” Whatever thoughts, words, or deeds transgress or violate the Law of God is sin. This Biblical definition eliminates any other notions as to what sin is or is not. Not current or popular opinion, not the Pope or church councils of Rome, not synods, conferences, or pastoral conferences determine what is sin; only what God’s Law calls sin is sin. Romans 7:7 says: “*I had not known sin, but by the Law; for I had not known lust, except the Law had said, Thou shalt not covet.*”

Right at the very beginning in Eden, Satan tempted Eve to determine what sin is on the basis of sight and reason. Human reason, now polluted and corrupted by sin, asks, “What could be so bad about plucking a fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil? What harm is there in eating something that is desirable for food, especially if it is alleged to hold the prospect of also making one as wise as God!” As Eve and Adam learned to their great regret and shame, their simple act of disobedience, no matter how harmless the act appears now to sin-warped reason, was **sin**. It violated God’s Law: “*Thou shalt not eat of it.*” Thus again, “*Sin is the transgression of the Law.*”

But oh, how fallen man, including carnal “Christians” who only masquerade as true believers, and also true Christians when they in weakness succumb to their Old Adam, love to embrace their opinions and biases in determining what is sin. For example, a favorite justification of people who wish to live together in fornication is that they “love each other.” Hence, this alleged good motive would supposedly justify their fornication. Yet with or without their really being “in love” with each other, fornication is sin because it is against the Sixth Commandment: *“Thou shalt not commit adultery.”* [By the way, is it really “love” if two people mutually consent to commit fornication? Does mutual consent *to sin* make the deed a “loving” act? If being partner with a thief means one hates his own soul (Proverbs 29:24), shall not being a partner in any other sin not also mean that one hates his own soul?]

Consider another scenario. A young boy breaks into a corner grocery store and steals some groceries. He is caught, but seeks to justify the theft by saying, “My Mom lost her job, and we needed food.” Does the need justify the *sin*? The Jesuits notwithstanding, the end does not justify the means. The command, *“Thou shalt not steal,”* has been broken. On the other hand, when the Roman Church requires celibacy of its priests and nuns, it is requiring what God’s Word does not require, but which Scripture freely permits and enjoins: *“Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled. But whoremongers and adulterers God will judge”* (Hebrews 13:4). Rome has chosen to ignore the fact that Scripture condemns the prohibition of marriage as a *“doctrine of devils.”* Hence Rome is continually guilty of sin and causing sin by making something that is honorable and God-pleasing a sin. Rome causes most of its priests who quite apparently are not gifted with continence to burn in their lusts (I Corinthians 7:2).

What is more, in keeping with the definition of sin, we must also beware of another papistic error, namely, that sin is only those evil acts which are done consciously and deliberately. If deliberation and premeditation were necessary, then the unborn babe in the womb would not be guilty of sin. Yet by virtue of original sin, which we shall take up later, we all were guilty of sin even before we drew our first breath, as King David declared: *“Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me”* (Psalm 51:5).

It should also be pointed out that sin is not only an act against one of the *specific* commandments of the *Decalogue*, but any violation of God’s Word. For example, none of the Ten Commandments specifically addresses God’s exclusion of women from the pastoral office, yet there **is** a specific command of God: *“I suffer not a woman to teach nor to usurp authority over the man”* (I Timothy 2:12); and again: *“Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law”* (I Corinthians 14:34). Thus, churches **sin** by calling women into the pastoral office. Of course, in the final analysis, *any* violation of an expressed will of God ultimately falls under one or more of the Ten Commandments. Having a woman as a pastor most certainly breaks the Second Commandment, *“Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain,”* in that she would be teaching God’s Word (His Name) contrary to His will. Moreover, *any* sin is finally against the First Commandment, *“Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.”*

Now since *“sin is the transgression of the Law,”* it is necessary to explain that this definition does not now any longer apply to the Old Testament *ceremonial* laws, all of which were abolished by God Himself, since they found their fulfillment in Christ, as Paul writes: *“Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days, which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ”* (Colossians 2:16-17). Likewise, the civil or “political” laws given to Moses, which, for example, demanded the stoning of an adulterer, no longer apply since the Mosaic civil laws pertained only to the theocratic nation

of Israel. Many religions such as Judaism and also some Protestant bodies like the Seventh-day Adventists overlook this important distinction between the *moral* Law which is for *all times*, and those laws which pertained only to Old Testament Israel. Also, there was no transferal of any of the *ceremonial* laws into the New Testament. Not only is the Sabbath or day-of-rest on Saturday no longer binding, but in addition there is no New Testament “Sabbath.” Sunday is not the Sabbath, as this is typically taught by the Reformed. You may mow the lawn and wash your car not only Monday through Saturday, but also on Sunday!

Furthermore, because of the fact that there is such a thing as an erring conscience, a person can be guilty of sin even when he is not explicitly transgressing a specific law of God. In Romans 14 the Apostle Paul addresses the matter of a *weaker brother*, a brother not yet sufficiently instructed. He cites the example of one who has a conscience against eating meat which had been offered to idols, even though such meat is not in itself evil. The more fully instructed Christian could eat it with a *good* conscience, but he must not force the man with the *erring* conscience to eat against his conscience. Paul says, “*For meat destroy not the work of God. All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offence. It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak. Hast thou faith? Have it to thyself toward God. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth. And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith; for whatsoever is not of faith is sin*” (Romans 14:20-23). To act against one’s conscience, even though the conscience be mis-informed, is sin because the person believes that he truly is sinning. [Of course, a weaker brother who has been properly instructed on the matter should not continue to have an accusing conscience, nor should he be permitted to continue to condemn those who properly exercise their liberty.]

B. The *Origin* and *Cause* of Sin

As we all once learned from Scripture and in our catechetical studies, the origin of sin is Satan and also man who permitted himself to be deceived by Satan. From Scripture we know that Satan rebelled against God and is therefore the first creature to sin. Thus sin *originated* with Satan. Christ says in John 8:44, “*He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.*” Yet Scripture also attributes the origin of sin to man himself in that the sin of **Adam** was imputed to **ALL men**. In Adam, we all sinned. “*Wherefore as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin, and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned*” (Romans 5:12). How Satan, being a good angel, could fall is not the issue; rather the issue is that he did rebel against God. Likewise, Adam and Eve, although created perfect and righteous and being in the very image of God, nevertheless fell. As our old Lutheran theologians have said, man, in the *state of integrity*, was able to sin and able not to sin. At the behest of Satan, man, of his own free will, sinned.

Now some let the devil becloud their thinking by reasoning this way: “God knows everything; God has all power to stop anything; and no creature can subsist or move or do anything without God. Therefore perhaps God Himself must take some of the blame for sin!” God forbid! The fact that God upholds all creatures and concurs in the actions of all creatures does not make God *culpable* or *guilty* of **sin**. First of all, God is holy, sinless and hating sin. “*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts*” (Isaiah 6:3). Also, James says: “*Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God; for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth He any man; but every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lust and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin; and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.*” (1:13-15).

Indeed, man is held responsible for his sins. In the end, it is not sin that is sentenced to damnation; but man, the culpable, guilty, accountable sinner, is punished in hell. Also, even though Satan was the first to rebel, and even though the fire of hell was originally prepared for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41), impenitent sinners, those who die in their sins and, in unbelief, are “*without Christ*” (Ephesians 2:12) go to hell. (Matthew 25:41). To the goats on His left hand, Christ shall say: “*Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels*” (Matthew 25:41). Let this lead us to the next subsection.

C. The *Consequences* of Sin

Because God is a holy, just, and righteous God who cannot stand sin, yea, even hates sin, He must therefore punish sin. “*I the Lord your God am holy*” (Leviticus 19:2). “*I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me*” (Exodus 20:5). Therefore the consequence of sin is the temporal and eternal wrath and punishment of our just, holy, and righteous God. Chiefly, the consequence of sin is death. Romans 6:23 says: “*For the wages of sin is death.*” As we have been taught from Scripture, this wage of sin is not just temporal death. The death which results from sin is also spiritual death and eternal death. Hence, when Adam fell, he immediately died *spiritually*, that is, his soul was darkened with sin and unbelief and was left without true fear, love and trust in God. He was left “*dead in trespasses and sins*” (Ephesians 2:1). Yet at that moment he also became subject not only to temporal death, but also to eternal death, which is damnation in hell. The Bible calls this eternal death the “*second death*” (Revelation 20:6). He who suffers *temporal* death while in the state of *spiritual* death (unbelief) will then suffer *eternal* death in hell. This eternal death is not annihilation or extinction, but an eternity of continuous living and existing in hell where one is totally cut off from God and without any relief from the tortures of hell, “*where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched*” (Mark 9:44). In hell there shall be uninterrupted “*weeping and gnashing of teeth*” (Matthew 8:12).

Yet even before man is called out of this life, he must also suffer the temporal consequences of sin. We are all familiar with what God told Eve and Adam respectively. Yet let us hear God again. To Eve God said: “*I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee*” (Genesis 3:16). To Adam God said: “*Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it, cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken; for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return*” (Gen. 3:17-19). Thus, even though we as Christians are forgiven our sins, and our guilt has been removed in Christ, we are not altogether exempt from the temporal consequences of sin. By His grace in Christ, God tempers these consequences for us, and may, as He sees fit, spare us this or that consequence. Otherwise, we, too, must work by the sweat of our face. Bearing and having children, although a great blessing, has its hardships and sorrows. However, when we as believers suffer the temporal consequences of sin, they are not to be regarded as a real punishment for sins, but the loving chastening of the Lord upon His beloved in Christ, “*for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?*” (Hebrews 12:6-7). King David was forgiven his transgressions yet suffered their temporal consequences, such as the death of the child born of Bathsheba; and these consequences were most troublesome, yet they were transformed from punishments in the strict sense of the term to that of the loving chastisement of the Lord.

D. The Doctrine of *Original Sin*.

Just as it is important to define what sin **is**, so it is important to define and properly understand what is meant by **Original Sin**. While saying that the very first transgression of man was the “original” or first sin, the term “**Original Sin**” refers to the total depravity and corruption of man’s nature stemming from Adam’s fall. Our theologians in accord with Scripture speak of **Original Sin** as **a)** hereditary *guilt*; and **b)** hereditary *corruption*. Take first the inherited guilt. “*By the offence of one, judgment came upon all men to condemnation*” (Romans 5:19). Though none of us were physical participants in the first sin, as were Adam and Eve, nevertheless Adam’s guilt was imputed by God to all mankind. This is why all men die. “*Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all mankind, for that all have sinned*” (Romans 5:12). The same text continues, “*For until the Law sin was in the world; but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam’s transgression*” (Romans 5:13-14). Here we are clearly told that even before there was the written Law, sin was still in the world in that death, sin’s wage, was in the world. Death, sin’s wage, was in the world because Adam’s transgression was imputed to all men. Though sin was not formally imputed by Law until the *written* Law arrived, the sin and guilt of Adam were nevertheless imputed even from Adam to Moses.

Yet not only the guilt of Adam was imputed to all, but also the total depravity and corruption of Adam was inherited by all. King David rightly confessed: “*Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me*” (Psalm 51:5). “*But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags*” (Isaiah 64:6). “*That which is born of the flesh is flesh*” (John 3:6). “*That ye put off concerning the former conversation, old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts*” (Ephesians 4:22). “*For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies*” (Matthew 15:19). “*Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one*” (Job 14:4). “*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?*” (Jeremiah 17:9). “*Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the Law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God*” (Romans 8:7-8).

Here three additional citations are in order, one from Hollaz, one from the *Formula of Concord*, and another from Quenstedt. Hollaz said: “Original sin is the thorough corruption of human nature, which by the fall of our first parents is deprived of original righteousness and is prone to every evil.” The *Formula of Concord*: “Original sin is not a slight, but so deep a corruption of human nature that nothing healthy or uncorrupt has remained in man’s body or soul, in his inner or outward powers.” Quenstedt: “Original sin is a want of original righteousness, derived from the sin of Adam and transmitted to all men who are begotten in the ordinary mode of generation, including the dreadful corruption and depravity of human nature and all its powers, excluding all from the grace of God and eternal life and subjecting them to temporal and eternal punishments, unless they be born again of water and the Spirit or obtain the remission of sins through Christ.”

At this juncture, it is important to note the error of an otherwise great champion of the truth during the post-Reformation period, the error of Matthias Flacius (1520-1575). In his debate with Strigel, Flacius, in his earnest efforts to uphold the truth of the sinful corruption of man’s nature, went too far. When Strigel said that original sin was an *accidens* (Latin), that is, not the substance of man’s nature but merely something that happened *to it*, Flacius countered that original sin is *substantia*, the very substance of man’s nature; that is, human nature as an entity,

in and of itself as an essence, is evil. Thus, merely *to be* a human being would be equal to sin. Yet we are not sinners by *being* human, but by the fact that our human nature has been *totally corrupted* by sin, as Mueller states: “Hence we must distinguish between human nature, which also after the fall is the work of God, and the corruption of human nature, or original sin, which is the work of the devil” (Mueller, J. T., *Christian Dogmatics*, page 221). The seriousness of the error of Flacius would also transmit to the doctrine of Christ, who, upon becoming **true man**, would have to be a sinner **if being** human, in and of itself, equals sin.

However, while we must not adopt Flacius’ error, neither dare we deny how profoundly our nature has been corrupted. The *Smalcald Articles* state: “This hereditary sin is so deep and horrible a corruption of nature that no reason can understand it, but it must be learned and believed from the revelation of Scripture” (Part III, Art. I, 3). Hence the confession of sins in our hymnal is not Flacian, but Scriptural when it says, “Almighty God, our Maker and Redeemer, we poor sinners confess unto Thee that we are by nature sinful and unclean and that we have sinned against Thee by thought, word, and deed.” We are by nature sinful and unclean by reason of the total corruption of our nature by sin. Therefore we must condemn the errors of those religions, particularly of the Reformed bodies, which deny or minimize original sin and its guilt and corruption. Mueller rightly points out that among them are such errors as that of: **a)** denying altogether the inherited corruption, saying that children are corrupted not by propagation, but by the bad example of others; **b)** admitting the corruption of human nature, but denying that it is sin; and **c)** minimizing the original corruption (Semi-Pelagians, synergists). As we shall see later, such a minimizing of original sin perverts and denies the doctrine of salvation by grace alone without any merit or works.

Now you will recall from the quote from Quenstedt that he held, on the basis of Scripture, that **original sin** was “transmitted to all men who are begotten in the normal mode of generation.” Indeed, there was one exception to the transmission of Original Sin to all men. There was one person who was born **apart from** the ordinary mode of generation. Our Lord Jesus Christ, being conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary, was born **without** the corruption and guilt of sin, as Gabriel said to Mary, “*The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.*” (Luke 1:35). This enabled our Lord Jesus, although true man as well as true God, to be our Savior from sin.

Because of Original Sin, the mind and will of all men were left without spiritual light or understanding. For this reason, natural man deems spiritual things as foolishness. In the passage all of us have memorized, the Scripture says: “*But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him, neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned*” (I Corinthians 2:14). This is why man has no ability to bring himself to understand the things of God. The **Holy Ghost** must teach it **through the Word**, and the Holy Ghost must first work conversion from unbelief to faith in Christ. “*No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost*” (I Corinthians 12:3). Thus, conversion and spiritual enlightenment occur simultaneously. Paul says: “*Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away*” (II Corinthians 3:16). Thus, Paul also says: “*But if our Gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost, in whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them*” (II Corinthians 4:3-4). Hence, all Pelagianism (salvation by works), Semi-Pelagianism (salvation by works plus faith), or synergism (conversion by the cooperation of man with God), are ruled out since man is by nature “*dead in trespasses and sins*” (Ephesians 2:1). Natural man can only sin. Let this lead us into what we call *Actual Sin*.

E. Actual Sin

The term **Actual Sin** refers to all those sins which *result from* and *flow out of* Original Sin. The term **Actual Sin** is not to be understood as what sin really IS versus what is really not sin, but *actual* in the sense of **acts** (*act*-ual) or **deeds** of sin, the various individual **ACTS** of sin or transgressions against the Law which are spawned or produced by Original Sin. Original Sin is an *inherited* condition and not something committed, whereas **actual sins** are individual **acts**, sinful thoughts, desires, words, and deeds which result from this condition. To put it another way, **actual sins** are all the individual sinful **acts** which flow out of Original Sin. The Apostle Paul says, “*The good that I would I do not, but the evil which I would not that I do; ...it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me*” (Romans 7:19-20). Such actual sins may be either **sins of commission** or of **omission**. Sins of *commission* occur by doing what the Law of God forbids, and sins of *omission* occur by not doing what the Law of God requires. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, we see both kinds. The thieves were guilty of sins of *commission* by beating and robbing the traveler. The priest and the Levite were guilty of sins of *omission* by failing to do what the Law requires that a person should do for his neighbor, that is, “help and befriend him in every bodily need” (Luther - Fifth Commandment). O how often we sin by not doing what we ought to do, as the Bible says, “*Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin*” (James 4:17).

While your essayist sought to determine where he might best mention sin as being either negative or positive, perhaps this is as good a place as any. Our theologians do speak of sin as being either negative or positive. Here the terms negative and positive are used etymologically, that is, with respect to words in their origin. The Greek word for law is *nomia* [no-MEE-ah]. Therefore, sin in the *negative* sense is *anomia* [AH-no-MEE-ah], that is, a lack of conformity with God’s Law. Compare this with our use of the word “amoral,” meaning not moral. Thus *anomia* is *not* law, *not* in agreement, or *lacking in* agreement with the Law. In contrast to sin as a negative concept is sin as a *positive* concept, that is, it is a concrete, actual opposition to the law.

Furthermore, *actual* sins may be still further classified. Because of the limits of time, we will simply name the classifications and give a very brief explanation of each. —First there are *voluntary* and *involuntary* sins. The former refers to sins knowingly and willfully committed, while the latter refers to sins committed in ignorance or without deliberate purpose. In the latter we also include what are called *sins of weakness*, something which can only be said of the Christian in that unbelievers remain dead in trespasses and sins and captive to Satan’s power.

—There are *grievous* and *less grievous* sins. While all sin is rebellion against God and deserving of damnation, Scripture does speak of *grievous* and *less grievous* sins. Jesus speaks of the servant who knew his master’s will and refused to do it as being worthy to be beaten with many stripes, while the servant who did not know his master’s will was to be beaten with but few stripes. [In this regard, there are not only degrees of *gravity*, as when, for example, Jesus told Pilate: “*He that delivered Me unto thee hath the **greater** sin*” (John 19:11), but also degrees of *punishment*, as when He said to the Pharisees: “*Ye shall receive the **greater** damnation*” (Matthew 23:14). It is interesting to note, however, from these and other passages that the terms “grievous” and “less grievous” are not truly Biblical terms, while “grievous” and “MORE grievous” would better fit what Jesus Himself describes and would be the wiser choice of words.]

—Closely aligned to this is the classification of *mortal* and *venial* sins. Mortal sins are all sins

which result in a fall from grace, and sins which destroy faith. Venial sins are the involuntary sins of believers, which although they also are deserving of damnation, they are sins of which the believer, because he is a believer, nevertheless repents and are forgiven to the believer for Christ's sake. The Roman church errs in this by making *specific sins* to be either mortal or venial.

—Crying sins are those sins which by their heinousness and maliciousness invoke a special and specific punishment of God. Examples include the following: The sin of Cain, who slew his brother, Abel, whose blood “*cried*” unto God from the ground (Genesis 4:10); the oppression of the Egyptians upon the Israelites (Exodus 2:23-25; 3:7); the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:20); the oppression of widows and orphans (Exodus 22: 22-23); withholding due wages from a laborer (James 5:4); and the persecution of Christians (Revelation 6:9-10).

—We also speak of *pardonable* and *unpardonable* sins. Simply put, a pardonable sin is one of which a person is able to repent, while an unpardonable sin is that of which a person is unable to repent. In this regard, there is but one sin, the commission of which renders a person unable to repent; and that is *The Sin Against the Holy Ghost*. This occurs when a person has known, believed, tasted and appreciated the grace of God, but then knowingly, intentionally, maliciously, blasphemously, and spitefully turns against and attacks the Gospel of God's grace and sins against the work of the Holy Ghost. This sin is described in Hebrews 6:4-6 this way: “*For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance, seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh and put him to an open shame.*” However, it must also be stated that if a person, such as King Saul in the Old Testament, hardens his heart, God Himself may harden his heart even further as His judicial punishment and render him unable to repent. Likewise, the Pharaoh of Egypt, although never a believer, stubbornly and persistently refused to be humbled before the obvious mighty deeds of God and thereby hardened his heart. Subsequently God Himself sealed this hardening as His just punishment (Ex. 8:15, 19; 11:10). Thus, while *The Sin Against the Holy Ghost* and a judicially hardened heart are not identical, the result may be the same condition whereby one can no longer repent. Regarding *The Sin Against the Holy Ghost*, however, Dr. Walther, in his *Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, has rightly stated that he who is worried that he may have committed *The Sin Against the Holy Ghost* has not committed it since no such concern and fear would exist in the heart of the person who did commit it.

Part II: How the Doctrine of Sin Relates Directly to Salvation by Grace in Christ

When Scripture presents the **Doctrine of Sin**, it does not present it in isolation, or as something unto itself. The doctrine of sin rather lays the foundation for the doctrine of God's grace in Christ. The doctrine of sin has the following direct connections with salvation by grace through faith in Christ: **1)** The doctrine of sin shows man's lost and condemned condition and the absolute necessity of salvation by grace alone; **2)** The doctrine of sin, therefore, shows the necessity for the substitutionary work of Christ for all sinners; **3)** The sin remaining in Christians shows why believers must continue to trust in Christ. **4)** God's grace in Christ is magnified by its ever abounding over sin in our lives.

A. The Doctrine of Sin shows us man's condition of being a lost and condemned creature and therefore the absolute necessity of salvation by grace.

The true doctrine of sin, which was set forth in the first part of this essay, makes it crystal clear

that fallen man was left not only in a corrupt condition, but also therefore guilty under God's Law and under the curse of the Law, both temporal and eternal death. *"The wages of sin is death"* (Romans 6:23). Being in such a corrupt condition, man is absolutely incapable of delivering himself from his corruption and guilt, and from the just temporal and eternal punishment of God upon sin. Any attempt on the part of the sinner to obey the Law with the intent of saving himself by the works of the Law is absolutely futile. Paul says: *"For as many as are of the works of the Law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the Law to do them"* (Galatians 3:10). Again: *"For by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified"* (Galatians 2:16). And yet again: *"But that no man is justified by the Law in the sight of God, it is evident"* (Galatians 3:11). Moreover, not only can no sinner save himself, neither can another sinner save a fellow sinner by some ransom payment or some great sacrifice since even such payment or sacrifice would also be corrupt and wholly insufficient. Psalm 49:7-8 says, *"None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him: (for the redemption of their soul is precious..."* and again: *"Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? Not one."* (Job 14:4).

Tragically, fallen man, driven by his conscience which testifies to the natural knowledge of the Law in the heart, seeks to placate God by works. All the various false religions in the world, in the final analysis, in some way or another seek to satisfy God (whom they know only according to their *natural* knowledge of Him) by means of works. Having their *"understanding darkened"* (Ephesians 4:18) and alienated from the life of God, they know "deep down" that they stand accused; and this moves them to seek to appease God by works which, of course, are of no avail. Even if they feel "excused" by such dead works, they are not in fact "excused." *"For when the Gentiles, which have not the Law, do by nature the things contained in the Law, these, having not the Law, are a law unto themselves; which shew the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another"* (Romans 2:14-15).

Since man cannot save himself from his sin and guilt and from the due judgment of God upon his sins, he must *be* saved by someone else. He who is helpless to help himself must be rescued by someone who has not only the authority but also the power to do so. **Only God** can save the sinner. Yet in order for God to save the sinner, God must remain true to His own **holiness** and **justice**. God cannot simply excuse sin or "write it off" as a divinely-magnanimous gesture. By excusing sin or "letting it go," God would be denying Himself, denying His very essence, denying His holiness, denying His divine justice. Instead, God saved us in such a way that His Law would be fulfilled, and the penalty of His Law would be exacted. This leads us to the next relation of sin to salvation by grace, namely, that

B. The sin of man made absolutely necessary the substitutionary work of Christ.

In order for God to have saved us lost and condemned sinners justly and righteously, He *"sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the Law, to redeem them that were under the Law"* (Galatians 4:4-5). Yes, Christ became one of us, flesh of our flesh, but without sin, in order to take our place under the Law, to be our Substitute under the Law. The fact that man had violated and transgressed God's Law did not mean the Law had lost its validity and force. It still had to be fulfilled. Thus, only our Lord Jesus Christ, true God and true man, could both be under the Law and also keep it perfectly. This was our Savior, the Scripture says, *"who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth"* (I Peter 2:22). This was He *"who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners..."* (Hebrews 7:26). Thus, neither in thoughts, words, deeds, attitudes, or feelings, did Christ, *"the Holy One of Israel"* (Isaiah 43:3), sin, as He once asked rhetorically:

“Which of you convinceth [convicteth] me of sin” (John 8:46).

This will ever amaze us, even us Christians, since we as sinner-saints, who still have the Old Adam of sin within us, are prone to sin and commit sin every day. Even though we are forgiven sinners and ever want, according to our New Man, only to do good and to keep God’s commandments, we fail in our best attempts to be perfect; indeed, we are still very much imperfect because of our flesh. Paul says, *“I count not myself to have apprehended”* (Philippians 3:13a). Thus, the very thought of our Savior, as true man, never once sinning boggles our minds! We know no such thing of ourselves! Yet, in Christ, man did keep the Law perfectly. From His conception, birth and infancy onward, our Savior never sinned. Yet, try as we may, though we strive according to our New Man not to sin, *“we daily sin much and indeed deserve nothing but punishment”* (Luther - 5th Petition). *“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us”* (I John 1:8). *“For I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing; for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good, I find not. For the good that I would I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do”* (Romans 7:18-19). Yet Christ, our Substitute under the Law, kept the whole Law entirely and perfectly; and amazingly, by His grace, God imputes Christ’s righteousness to us. *“Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to every one that believeth”* (Romans 10:4). Here the word *“end”* means *“fulfillment”* — perfect, complete fulfillment. Hence our synodical Catechism, in answer to the question, *“Why was it necessary for our Savior to be true God?”* answers: *“That His fulfilling of the Law might be sufficient for all men.”* Then the following passage is cited: *“By the obedience of one shall many be made righteous”* (Romans 5:19). Thus, an integral and essential part of Christ’s *vicarious atonement*, His perfect, all-sufficient *substitutionary satisfaction* of the legislative requirement of Divine Justice [*“Ye shall be holy!”*] in the place of sinners, was His **active obedience**, the fact that **He kept the Law perfectly for ALL mankind**.

Yet the Law of God also requires that sin and the guilty sinner be **punished**. Thus, Christ, as our Substitute, also took upon Himself our sin and guilt. God literally, not figuratively, but literally, imputed and charged our sin and guilt to His Son. *“And the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all”* (Isaiah 53:6). *“For he hath made **Him who knew no sin*** to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him”* (II Corinthians 5:21). [*NOTE the better juxtaposition of this relative clause according to the Greek text.] Since our sin and guilt were charged or imputed to Christ, also the punishment due us was meted out to Christ. Where the sin and guilt are, there the punishment must be according to Divine Justice (Ezekiel 18:4b). Our sin and guilt were laid on Christ; hence, the punishment came upon Christ as well. The punishment was **death**, *“for the wages of sin is death”* (Romans 6:23). Christ suffered not only the *temporal* death of crucifixion, but also while on he cross He suffered *eternal* death, the very tortures of the damned in hell, crying, *“My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me”* (Matthew 27:46). Thus again, if we were to be redeemed from the **curse** of the Law, Christ also had to take our place and suffer **that curse** in our stead. Out of love for His Father (John 14:31) and for us (John 13:1), Christ bore the curse for us on the accursed tree of the cross. St. Paul writes: *“Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the Law, being made a curse for us; for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree”* (Galatians 3:13); and the Apostle Peter states that Christ *“His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness, by whose stripes ye were healed”* (I Peter 2:24).

That Christ’s **Active** and **Passive Obedience** did in fact fulfill God’s Law in our stead and satisfied divine justice was expressed well beforehand by Isaiah, saying, *“He shall see the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied”* (Isaiah 53:11). And, since the Father was satisfied, He raised His Son from the dead. Paul says that it was Christ *“who was delivered for our*

*offences, and was raised again for our justification” (Romans 4:25). Thus, Christ’s **active and passive obedience together** won God’s **OBJECTIVE justification** of the world, “to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them” (II Corinthians 5:19). And again: “Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of One the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life” (Romans 5:18).*

Yet all this blessed **work** of Christ in bearing the sin and guilt of all mankind and in suffering the punishment deserved by every transgressor, and its blessed **result** in the justification of the world by God for Christ’s sake, becomes our own possession only by faith. This is personal or **SUBJECTIVE justification**. The Lord’s prophet writes: “*The just shall live by his faith*” (Habakkuk 2:4). God’s blessed gift of salvation from sin is given us as a pure gift. It can therefore only be received by faith, and not by works. “*For by grace are ye saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast*” (Ephesians 2:8-9). And St. Paul makes it abundantly clear that one does not lay hold on God’s justification (and ultimately of salvation) by a combination of faith and works, saying: “*And if by grace, then it is no more of works: otherwise, grace is no more grace*” (Romans 11:6). Moreover, the blessed fruit of God’s reconciliation, which is ours by faith in His unilateral forensic act, is that we are now at peace with Him; for Paul writes: “*Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Romans 5:1). Indeed, we continue to treasure and value this grace of God in Christ and the peace it brings to troubled hearts as we consider the next section, namely, that

C. The sin remaining in us as sinner-saints is why we must continue to trust only in the grace of God for our salvation.

As we continue in the grace of God from our Baptism to our last dying breath in this life, we are to “*grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*” (II Peter 3:18). St. Paul says: “*I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.*” (Philippians 3:14). Also, Peter says: “*And beside all this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge...,*” etc. And how does such progress in sanctification come about? It cannot come about apart from the faithful use of the *Means of Grace*, the Gospel and the Sacrament; for Peter exhorts us: “*As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of **the Word**, that ye may **grow** thereby*” (I Peter 2:2).

However, no matter how earnestly we strive to live a sanctified life, we fall *far short* of perfection. Daily we sin much. Would any one doubt that the Apostle Paul was sanctified? Yet, what did he say of himself? Because of the sinful flesh within him, he freely confesses: “*The good that I would, I do not; and the evil which I would not, that I do*” (Romans 7:19). Then Paul declares: “*O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?*” (v. 24). Thus, our assurance of salvation is not based on how well we may have, or think we may have, performed in good works of sanctification, but in the merits of Christ alone. Throughout our lives, we must daily place our trust in Christ’s merits for the forgiveness of sins. Each time we confess our sins, to what do we then turn for comfort and absolution? Do we comfort our souls with our “track record” of good works performed in sanctification? No!! Our only comfort and assurance that we are forgiven is the knowledge we have in the Word of Reconciliation that God for Jesus’ sake has already forgiven us our sins.

In fact, only **that** assurance, which we lay hold on and have for our very own **by confidence in Christ**, can fuel and empower us to strive rightly, that is, to strive with the proper motivation,

to lead a Godly life. Jesus says: “*Without Me ye can do nothing*” (John 15:5). And St. Paul writes: “*Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God*” (II Corinthians 3:4). Why? “*For it God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure*” (Philippians 2:13). Thus, that we remain sinners even as Christians means we never reach a plateau where we can say, “I no longer need the grace of God in Jesus Christ. I can carry on from here.” Indeed, this is why we need frequently to partake of the Lord’s Supper as a *strengthening* Means of Grace. Recall Luther’s answer to Question #16 of his *Christian Questions and Their Answers*. It asks, “Why ought we to remember and proclaim His death?” Answer: “That we may learn to believe that no creature could make satisfaction for our sins but Christ, true God and man; and that we may learn to look with terror at our sins, and to regard them as great indeed, and to find joy and comfort in Him alone, and thus be saved through such faith” [*Luther’s Small Catechism*, p. 34]. And this takes us to the last section of this second part of our essay, namely, that

D. God’s grace in Christ is magnified by how it ever abounds over sin in our lives.

Remember that blessed passage of Scripture in which St. Paul says: “*Moreover the Law entered, that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound*” (Romans 5: 20)? Yes, God’s grace in Christ is far greater than our sin. The same passage continues: “*That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord*” (Romans 5:21). As great as this passage is, and because of how great it is, we should apply it to our own lives as sinner-saints. Thus, in this closing section of our essay, let us spell out how the grace of Christ abounds over sin in our lives.

Obviously grace first came to abound in our own lives the moment we were regenerated or brought to faith in Christ, which, for many of us, was when we, as infants already, were baptized into the name of our gracious Triune God. In Baptism our sins were washed away, and we renounced the devil and all his works and all his ways. In Baptism we “*put on Christ*” (Galatians 3:27). We put on His white robe of righteousness, the “*wedding garment*” which covers all our sin and guilt. This is when grace conquered sin for us personally. We entered into the *state of grace*. Then and there we became heirs of everlasting life.

Yet, after our Baptism, we were not immediately taken to heaven but were left behind to be the servants of Christ and soldiers of His cross. This means we must still continue to battle against the devil, the world, and our flesh, resisting those enemies of our souls “*steadfast in the faith*” (I Peter 5:9) but never for a minute assuming that they will never, even temporarily, gain the upper hand and jeopardize our salvation! The Apostle Paul warns us: “*Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall*” (I Corinthians 10:12). It could happen, not that we would ever want it to, but it could happen that we fall into grievous sin, as did King David, yea, as Peter did, who denied his Savior and fell from faith itself. When such a fall occurs, it is indeed a sad day. Yet by the grace of God, a fallen sinner may be restored by means of the precious Word of God — by the **Law** of God, which apprises him of his sins and brings him to his knees in humble contrition, and by the **Gospel**, which comforts the brokenhearted, binds up the wounded, creates saving faith again in his heart, and restores joy to the believer. King David repented, and was forgiven and restored to faith again (II Samuel 12:13). Peter, too, “*wept bitterly*” (Matthew 26:75) over his sins, was “*converted*” (Luke 22:32) again to confidence in His Savior, and became a willing cross-bearer after his Lord Jesus (John 21:18-19). These are clearly cases in which, where sin abounded, grace did much more abound (Romans 5:20). Indeed, if **we also** should fall, which may God graciously forbid, by God’s grace we too can repent and be forgiven

and restored. This is not to make us relax against sin with the idea that, “O well, I can always repent.” No, this is speaking to the fact that if one does fall, he is not automatically, irreversibly, forever shut off from God’s grace, unable to repent, and prevented by the Lord Himself from being restored to the saving faith. How do we know this? The Bible says so. *“Come now, and let us reason together saith the Lord, Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool”* (Isaiah 1:18). Consider again Simon Peter! He gave that great confession of Christ, *“Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God,”* but not long afterward he actually denied this very Savior whom he had mightily confessed. He denied Him not once, not twice, but three times! Nevertheless, by the chiding look of Christ, Peter was brought to true contrition for his sin, and he wept bitterly. Moreover, by the grace of Christ who prayed for him that his faith fail not, Peter was converted and, shortly before Jesus’ ascension into heaven, was restored to his apostleship. Christ had brought abounding grace to Peter where Peter’s sin had before abounded. Thus, no matter what sin it may be into which we have fallen, it is not so great and so egregious that Christ’s precious blood could not possibly have atoned for it. The following verse is not only to be memorized, but also to be personally applied to our own trembling hearts, namely, *“The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth us from all sin”* (I John 1:7). For this reason, the Bible also says, *“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (I John 1:9).

But let us suppose there is someone among us here today who never before heard the Gospel of salvation, has never believed in Jesus as his Savior, or has even been highly critical of the Christian faith. Or let us suppose you know someone in that lost and condemned state of affairs. Is such a person forever destined to be lost?? As we know, God never predestinated anyone to damnation. He graciously *“will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth”* (I Timothy 2:4). And again, He *“is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance”* (II Peter 3:9). Is there a Biblical example of this? What was the great Apostle Paul before he became an Apostle? He was that zealous, proud, self-righteous Pharisee named Saul of Tarsus. He literally persecuted the Lord Jesus Himself (Acts 9:4), was an enabling accomplice in the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr (Acts 7:58), and made general *“havoc”* of the Church by pursuing, terrorizing and arresting faithful Christians after the Pentecost *“harvest”* in Jerusalem (Acts 8:3). Yet our ascended Lord Jesus, also according to His human nature, appeared to Saul, *“as of one born out of due time”* (I Corinthians 15:8) to bring him to repentance and faith. Yes, Christ first preached the Law to Saul to show him and convict him of his sins. He humbled Saul, who then asked, *“Who art Thou, Lord?”* The Lord answered, *“I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest”* (Acts 9:5). Thus, Jesus presented Himself to Saul as his risen and ascended Savior; and when Saul asked Jesus, *“Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?”* (v. 6). Jesus had Saul taken into Damascus to meet a disciple named Ananias to be baptized. And what did Ananias say? *“Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.”* (Acts 22:16). As has often been said, if Saul, the plotting terrorist, was able to be converted, anyone can! *“For where sin abounded, grace did much more abound”* (Romans 5:20). O, how this magnifies and glorifies the grace of Christ.

It is this abounding grace, manifested in the Gospel, which will preserve us unto the end, *“being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in [us] will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ”* (Philippians 1:6). *“Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it,”* Paul writes in I Thessalonians 5:24. Therefore, even as we diligently strive against sin and seek to please God with a God-pleasing life of good works, we know that underlying all of this is abounding grace, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Even in those moments and occasions when our faith is weak, God’s grace remains active on our behalf; for Scripture assures us that

He does not cast us off or abandon us. *“A bruised reed shall He not break, and the smoking flax shall He not quench”* (Isaiah 42:3).

Conclusion

We opened this essay by stating that the **Doctrine of Sin** is most definitely included in the prophecy of Scripture that *“the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables”* (II Timothy 4:3-4). May we who, by God’s grace, know the truth hold fast the faithful Word which we have been taught, so that we are not deceived and seduced by the devil, the world, or our own flesh into accepting anything but the **Scriptural doctrine of sin**, and so that we may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers (Titus 1:9). Let us ever humbly and diligently examine our hearts on the basis of both the Law and the Gospel — on the basis of the **Law** so as to know, acknowledge and confess our sins and sincerely to repent of them; on the basis of the **Gospel** to know, to accept, and confide in the blessed assurance that in Christ there is the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Thus we close with the prayer of the Psalmist: *“Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting”* (Psalm 139:23-24). Amen.