

# Dangers of Replacing “Sin” with “Broken”

**Thesis 1: Scripture uses “broken” not to refer to sin *but to either judgment rendered by God (God does the breaking) or as a term for contrition (a state of repentance).* To transpose the two radically transposes Scriptural categories. It also confuses a word used biblically for “contrition” and changing its use for one to refer to sin itself. Therefore there is confusion between feeling “brokenness” (sin and its damage) vs. being in a state of contrition (which is wrought by God).**

Examples: (see also: Jeremiah 23:8-10; Ezekiel 6:9; Nahum 1:6; Matt. 21:44; Revelation 2:27; Romans 11:20)

Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have **broken** rejoice.

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;

a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. Psalm 51:8, 17

The adversaries of the Lord shall be **broken** to pieces;

against them he will thunder in heaven.

The Lord will judge the ends of the earth;

he will give strength to his king

and exalt the power<sup>[a]</sup> of his anointed.” 1 Samuel 2:10

Asa and the people who were with him pursued them as far as Gerar, and the Ethiopians fell until none remained alive, for they were **broken** before the Lord and his army. The men of Judah carried away very much spoil.

2 Chronicles 14:13

I have been forgotten like one who is dead;

I have become like a broken vessel. Psalm 31:12

Reproaches have **broken** my heart, so that I am in despair. I looked for pity, but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none. Psalm 69:20

But rebels and sinners shall be **broken** together, and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed. Isaiah 1:28

“The Spirit of the Lord *is* upon Me,

Because He has anointed Me

To preach the gospel to *the* poor;

He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,<sup>[i]</sup>

To proclaim liberty to *the* captives

And recovery of sight to *the* blind,

To set at liberty those who are oppressed; Luke 4:18

O God, You have cast us off; You have **broken** us down; You have been displeased;  
Oh, restore us again! Psalm 60:1

**Thesis 2: Using “broken” in place of “sin” or other Scriptural language ultimately weakens a proper understanding of the devastation of both original and actual sins, and moves away from seeing concupiscence (sinful desires) as sin. Our problem is not that we are merely “broken” but spiritually blind, dead, and enemies of God. “Broken” may lead to seeing oneself as merely a victim of common but varied human circumstances or injury rather than accountable to divine judgment personally for transgression and unbelief.**

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,  
And in sin my mother conceived me. Psalm 51:5

And you *He made alive*, who were dead in trespasses and sins,<sup>2</sup> in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience,<sup>3</sup> among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.<sup>4</sup> But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us,<sup>5</sup> even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), Ephesians 2:1-5

although the imagination of man’s heart *is* evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done. Genesis 8:21b

Then the Lord<sup>[b]</sup> saw that the wickedness of man *was* great in the earth, and *that* every intent of the thoughts of his heart *was* only evil continually. Genesis 6:5

The Lord looks down from heaven upon the children of men,  
To see if there are any who understand, who seek God.

<sup>3</sup> They have all turned aside,  
They have together become corrupt;  
*There is* none who does good,  
No, not one. Psalm 14:2-3

“The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, And desperately wicked;  
Who can know it? Jeremiah 17:9

This *is* an evil in all that is done under the sun: that one thing *happens* to all. Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness *is* in their hearts while they live, and after that *they go* to the dead. Ecclesiastes 9:3

<sup>12</sup> Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned— Romans 5:12

<sup>8</sup> But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all *manner of evil* desire. For apart from the law sin *was* dead. Romans 7:8

see also Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article II, Of Original Sin – regarding sin’s effects and concupiscence

**Thesis 3: When the understanding of sin is weakened then both the understandings of repentance and justification by grace alone are compromised. To “defang” the law by recasting sin under any commandment does not aid evangelism, pastoral care, or church discipline, as justification by grace alone is undercut. While the law is to be delivered humbly (judge not lest ye be judged) it is still the Word of the holy God against sin, and it has consequences.**

**Pelagianism** is the belief that original sin did not taint human nature and that mortal will is still capable of choosing good or evil without special Divine aid. This theological theory is named after the British monk Pelagius (354–420 or 440), although he denied, at least at some point in his life, many of the doctrines associated with his name. Pelagius taught that the human will, as created with its abilities by God, was sufficient to live a sinless life, although he believed that God's grace assisted every good work. Pelagianism has come to be identified with the view, that human beings can earn salvation by their own efforts. Semipelagianism in its original form was developed as a compromise between Pelagianism and the teaching of Church Fathers such as Saint Augustine, who taught that man cannot come to God without the grace of God. In Semipelagian thought, therefore, a distinction is made between the beginning of faith and the increase of faith. Semipelagian thought teaches that the latter half - growing in faith - is the work of God, while the beginning of faith is an act of free will, with grace supervening only later.<sup>[1]</sup> It too was labeled heresy by the Western Church in the Second Council of Orange in 529.

**Contemporary Arminianism** (as seen in classic Methodism and some forms of Baptist belief) is of two minds about original sin and inherited guilt. All agree about total depravity—every aspect of human nature is corrupted by the fall and incapable of exercising a good will toward God apart from God’s supernatural, enabling grace. But some Arminians believe that children are born without any hint of Adamic guilt; inherited condemnation is not even acknowledged by them.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century distortion of Lutheranism known as **Pietism** also weakened the understanding of original sin. Pietism failed to recognize the total depravity of human nature and lost sight of the fact that a Christian is at the same time both a saint and a sinner (*simul iustus et peccator*). They therefore had an unrealistic optimism for sanctification that bordered on perfectionism. This can lead to seeing works and experiences as a means of self-justification and the self and its situation as an object of faith. *Pietism made religious experience more important than Christian doctrine and stressed sanctification more than justification. There became a double grasping of justification. The first justification was one of embracing Christ and the second justification was one where struggling, diligent life of piety was required so as to validate ones justification. Thus righteousness was no longer passive or received but perceived as active; needing to be acquired and confirmed.*

*Revivalist Charles Finney also had a weak view of original sin. Finney believed that human beings were capable of choosing whether they would be corrupt by nature or redeemed, referring to original sin as an "anti-scriptural and nonsensical dogma" (p. 179). In clear terms, Finney denied the notion that human beings possess a sinful nature (ibid.). Therefore, if Adam leads us into sin, not by our inheriting his guilt and corruption, but by following his poor example, this leads logically to the view of Christ, the Second Adam, as saving by example. This is precisely where Finney takes it, in his explanation of the atonement.*

There are various other distortions where a weak view of sin and its effects damages the doctrine of justification and therefore the right understanding of contrition, repentance, and faith.

***Regarding contemporary manifestations of substituting other words for sin, John Pless notes regarding the Emergent Church movement (several excerpts):***

Missions in the paradigm of the Emerging Church is not about bringing the faith-creating Word of the gospel to those who are without Christ. Rather, it is relational. It is entering into friendships and conversation so that the presence of Christ may be identified and celebrated. As Raschke puts it, "the unknown gods of contemporary culture do not have to be resisted so much as renamed, reclaimed, and redeemed."

Emerging Church thinkers see it necessary to make a shift away from theological propositions to a theological narrative. Here, of course, they are drawing on a methodology that has been in vogue in mainline circles for several decades. Propositional theology is seen to be an artifact of the Enlightenment while the narrative approach is argued to be both more biblical and more congenial to the postmodern period. Meaning is said not to be found in doctrinal assertions but in stories that are constitutive of reality. Propositional claims are said to be rationalist while narrative is experiential. These stories "are not about what happened," writes Mike Yaconelli. "They're about what is going on inside us. They're about the deep hiding places in us that show up and reveal not only us, but God's fingerprints on our lives."

Related to the shift from propositional truth to experiential truth is the openness to the mystical in the Emerging Church. Often this is expressed by an appeal to the emotive as subjective truth is held to be congenial to the gospel.

In Emerging Church theology, salvation is defined primarily with therapeutic images rather than redemptive ones. The language of sin is seldom employed and, when it is used, it generally describes injury or offense against self, the neighbor, the community, or creation. It is seen as victimization or brokenness or perhaps as disobedience or rebellion but not as unbelief. So while the cross and resurrection still has a prominent place within the Christian narrative, the overriding conceptuality is not atonement and the forgiveness of sins but the Spirit-led life in the kingdom of God. The gospel is variously defined, often with references to the work of N. T. Wright who is seen as offering a narrative interpretation of the New Testament that is centered in the presence of the coming kingdom.

Joel McClure offers this definition: "The gospel is that God wants you to help solve that problem, to participate with God through redeeming acts." Another Emerging Church leader explains, "We have totally reprogrammed ourselves to recognize the good news as a means to an end-that the kingdom of God is here. We try to live into that reality and hope. We don't dismiss the cross; it is still a central part. But the good news is not that he died but that the kingdom has come." The language of the Emerging Church is not shaped by the vocabulary of grace and faith but of acceptance and participation. Finally, McLaren argues that God's final judgment does not depend on Christ's work on the cross but on "how well individuals have lived up to God's hopes and dreams for our world and for life in it."

Emerging Church thinkers draw heavily on the writings of James McClendon, a Baptist theologian, in particular on the first volume devoted to ethics-of his three-volume Systematic Theology. McClendon argues that the church is a community which is "understood not as privileged access to God or to sacred status, but as a sharing together in a storied life of obedient service to and with Christ."

Missing Luther's radical move, the Emerging Church begins with life not doctrine, and with ethics not faith. While claiming to be generous, open, and tolerant, McLaren-with his incessant focus on the necessity for authentic discipleship, obedience rather than knowledge, and lives characterized by compassion-slips into a rigidity that is unattainable. While the language might sound inclusive and

undiscriminating, it is the language of the law. Is it not the case that if one scratches an antinomian, a legalist will be found underneath the surface?

We are called to faith in Christ not by a story of our own choosing or a narrative of our own communal construction but by a word that comes from outside of ourselves. It is not just a word about Christ but the word of Christ. It delivers the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection. It creates faith in the hearts of those who hear it when and where it pleases God. The rationalism that the Emerging Church so much fears in modernity is absent in Luther's understanding of the work of the Spirit in and through the gospel, but Luther does not slide into a mystical enthusiasm divorced from history. He does not share the fear of the Emerging Church over assertions. Quite the contrary, as his well-known words in the *Bondage of the Will* indicate: "Take away assertions and you take away Christianity. When, the Holy Spirit is given them [Christians] from heaven, that he may glorify Christ [in them] and confess him even unto death. . . . The Holy Spirit is no skeptic, and it is not doubts or mere opinions that he has written on our hearts, but assertions more sure and certain than life itself and all experience." Both Jew and Greek found the cross to be a scandal; even so both the modernist and the postmodernist stumble over the proclamation of the crucified Jesus. Both seek after a form of accessibility and openness while God hides himself to reason and emotion.

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