

HOW MANY DEFINITIONS?

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A recent article in a prominent church publication has again brought the definition of sin to the fore in Seventh-day Adventist discussions [1]. It is time, once again, to retrieve our Berean glasses and proceed to search the inspired text so as to determine the difference between truth and error (Acts 17:11).

The article in question rightly states that human beings were created to enjoy an intimate relationship with their Creator-God, to depend upon Him fully, and to cultivate His presence in their lives to greater depths as their eternal existence spread before them [2]. The article goes on to state, also correctly, that sin has distorted and shattered the model God designed for Creator-creature relationships [3]. Where problems begin to arise with the article is with its multiple definitions of sin, its consequent failure to recognize how the varied Biblical ways of describing sin are in fact synonymous, and its assumption that sin includes an inborn, involuntary state into which all humans since Adam are allegedly born.

Five Definitions?

The article in question lists the following five (5) definitions of what the Bible calls sin:

1. A broken relationship with God
2. Breaking the divine law
3. An involuntary state into which all post-Fall humans have been born.
4. Neglect of duty
5. Rejection of the claims of Jesus [4]

Such meanings as missing the mark, distortion, transgression, and rebellion are derived by the article's author from the Bible's original languages [5]. What the author describes as the "complexity of sin" is fleshed out in terms ranging from the general (e.g. evil, guilt, wickedness, and unrighteousness) to the more specific (impurity, deceit, arrogance, and injustice) [6].

But what the author seems not to recognize is that none of these terms offer clarity regarding humanity's variance from God's will unless an objective measure of right and wrong is identified. "Missing the mark" means nothing unless one knows what the mark is. Distortion, transgression, and rebellion mean nothing unless the ideal being distorted, the norm being transgressed, or the structure against which one rebels is defined. Words like

unrighteousness, impurity, and injustice provide no benchmark unless righteousness, purity, and justice are defined.

To speak of a broken relationship with God makes no sense unless the parameters and structure of that relationship are spelled out, thus enabling us to understand what the breaking of this relationship would mean. Neglect of duty means nothing unless one's duty is articulated in some objective form. And the claims of Jesus as humanity's Savior mean nothing unless it is known what we need to be saved from.

“The Only Definition of Sin”

In light of the above, it becomes clear that the only way any of the above understandings of sin receive any clarity at all is if we accept the following statements by Ellen White as articulating the sole definition of sin found in the Word of God:

“Sin is the transgression of the law.” This is the only definition of sin [7].

The only definition we find in the Bible for sin is that “sin is the transgression of the law” (1 John 3:4) [8].

Our only definition of sin is that given in the word of God: it is “the transgression of the law;” it is the outworking of a principle at war with the great law of love which is the foundation of the divine government [9].

Now we want to understand what sin is, that it is the transgression of God's law. This is the only definition given in the Scriptures [10].

What is to bring the sinner to the knowledge of his sins, unless he knows what sin is? The only definition of sin in the Word of God is given us in 1 John 3:4: “Sin is the transgression of the law” [11].

What is sin? The only definition that is given to you in the word of God is, “Sin is the transgression of the law.” The apostle says, “Where no law is, there is no transgression” [12].

“Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law; for sin is the transgression of the law.” This is the only definition of sin given in the Holy Scriptures, and we should seek to understand what sin is, lest any of us be found in opposition to the God of heaven [13].

The only definition of sin, given in God's Word, is the transgression of the law. It is not excusable, and has no defense or justification [14].

It is the privilege of every sinner to ask his teacher what sin really is. Give me a definition of sin. We have one in 1 John 3. “Sin is the transgression of the law.” Now this is the only definition of sin in the whole Bible [15].

If we have not the faith that works by love, and purifies the soul from every stain of sin, then we have a spurious faith. Christ is not the minister of sin. And what is sin? The only definition given in God's word is, "Sin is the transgression of the law" [16].

In order to let Jesus into our hearts, we must stop sinning. The only definition for sin that we have in the Bible is that it is the transgression of the law [17].

Some might wonder if perhaps Ellen White had overlooked what some hold to be another definition of sin in Scripture, this one found in Romans 14:23: "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin." But since, according to Scripture, "without faith it is impossible to please [God]" (Heb. 11:6), it becomes clear that unless one has faith, the transgression of God's law is inevitable, since the only power available to resist our fallen natures would be absent. Which means, in sum, that First John 3:4 and Romans 14:23 are simply two ways of saying the same thing.

Are We Born Sinners?

The notion that sin is a state into which all post-Fall humans are born, often called the doctrine of original sin, is argued by the article in question from a cluster of Bible verses, to which our focus now turns. The first of these is David's well-known statement following his sin with Bathsheba, in which he states, "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Psalm 51:5) [18].

But a straightforward reading of this verse simply tells us that David was born into a sinful context, surrounded by sin. It does not say, "*As a sinner* did my mother conceive me." Nothing in this verse or its surrounding verses declares sin to be involuntary.

Another verse quoted by the article in defense of inborn sin is Psalm 58:3: "The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies" [19]. But this verse says nothing about the whole world being estranged from God when they are born; it speaks only of the wicked. Ellen White speaks of this in her counsel to neglectful parents relative to the rearing of children:

Children are left to *come up* instead of being *trained up*. The poor little children are thought not to know or understand a correction at ten or twelve months old, and they begin to show stubbornness very young [20].

I tremble especially for mothers, as I see them so blind, and feeling so little the responsibilities that devolve upon a mother. They see Satan working in the self-willed child of even but a few months of age. Filled with spiteful passion, Satan seems to be taking full possession [21].

The mother's work begins with the babe in her arms. I have often seen the little one throw itself and scream, if its will was crossed in any way.... These little ones cannot discern what spirit is influencing them, and it is the duty of the parents to exercise judgment and discretion for them. Their habits must be carefully watched. Evil tendencies are to be restrained, and the mind stimulated in favor of the right. The child should be encouraged in every effort to govern itself [22].

We find the same principle at work in Isaiah 48:8, which describes certain persons as "transgressor[s] from the womb." But again, the context refers to those among God's people who rejected His counsel and were thus steeped in iniquity from the start of their lives. It is not a description of all humanity, nor is it a condemnation of inborn fleshly urges apart from an action of the will.

The article in question lists a number of other verses (Eccl. 7:20; Isa. 64:6; Jer. 13:23; 17:9; Rom. 3:23; 8:7; Eph. 2:1,12,19; I John 1:8) which the author claims prove that humans are born sinners [23]. But the fact is that none of these verses say anything about birth as the point at which humans become sinners. Both on their face and in context, all of these passages describe human sin as a matter of conduct.

The article likewise references the famed passage in Romans 7:15-25 as evidence that sin is a part of humanity's inborn nature [24].. But again, nothing in this passage says anything about humanity's birth-nature. Paul in these verses is simply describing his condition apart from Christ, as the contrast he draws with the first thirteen verses of the following chapter bears witness (Rom. 8:1-13). Birth is never mentioned as the point when people become sinners; in fact, birth isn't mentioned in these passages at all

In Romans 7:14-25 Paul depicts himself as captive to the law of sin and death; in Romans 8 he declares himself "free from the law of sin and death" (verse 1) because he now "walk[s] not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (verse 4). In Romans 7 Paul is in "captivity to the law of sin which is in [his] members" (verse 23); in Second Corinthians 10:5 he exhorts his readers to bring "into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." In Romans 7 Paul cries for deliverance from his "body of death" (verse 24); in First Corinthians 9:27 he declares, "I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection."

In other words, while Paul is clear in these passages that those not subject to the Holy Spirit are captive to the flesh, nothing in any of these verses says that anyone is captive to the flesh at birth. Paul is clear that the universal sinfulness of the human family is due to the fact that "all have sinned" (Rom. 3:23; 5:12). Nowhere in Paul's writings, or elsewhere in Scripture, is it taught that human beings are born sinners. The equation of our inborn sinful nature with

sin itself is a teaching found nowhere in either the Bible or the writings of the Spirit of Prophecy.

Separation from God

The article in question declares that human beings since the fall are “born as sinners separated from God.” Yet the Bible never speaks of humans being separated from God at birth. Nor does the Bible speak of separation from God as the cause of sin, but rather, that sin is the cause of separation from God. God declares through the prophet Isaiah:

But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you (Isa. 59:2).

Notice it is not Adam’s sin that has made this separation. Our own sins have done this. Ellen White agrees:

Just as soon as we separate ourselves from God *by sin*, which is the transgression of His law, Satan takes control of our minds [25].

By choosing to sin, men separate themselves from God, cut themselves off from the channel of blessing, and the sure result is ruin and death [26].

God does not separate from His people, but His people separate themselves from God *by their own course of action* [27].

So long as the people of God preserve their fidelity to Him, so long as they cling by living faith to Jesus, they are under the protection of heavenly angels, and Satan will not be permitted to exercise his hellish arts upon them to their destruction. But those who separate themselves from Christ by sin are in great peril [28].

Their iniquitous practices did that for Israel which all the enchantments of Balaam could not do—they separated them from God [29].

Many who might be fruitful in God’s service become bent on acquiring wealth. Their whole energy is absorbed in business enterprises, and they feel obliged to neglect things of a spiritual nature. Thus they separate themselves from God [30].

“That Holy Thing”

The article in question seeks to prove the inborn nature of human sin by contrasting Jesus, who was born “that holy thing” (Luke 1:35), with the remainder of the human family [31]. But this claim encounters a serious problem in the very next chapter, which cites the Mosaic law that “every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord” (Luke 2:23). Obviously these are fallen beings, with fallen natures, about whom the law of Moses

is speaking. Yet they are called holy, just as surely as the ancient prophets are called holy by the apostle Peter (II Peter 1:21), despite the fact that they too possessed fallen human natures (James 5:17). Indeed, all followers of God, who must still subdue their inherited fleshly natures (1 Cor. 9:27), are commanded, “Ye shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy” (Lev. 19:2; see also Lev. 20:7; I Peter 1:15-16).

In another statement Ellen White is clear that this verse (Luke 1:35) simply denotes the fact that Jesus never sinned, not that He was born with a different fleshly nature than the rest of post-Fall humanity:

The humanity of Christ is called “that holy thing.” The inspired record says of Christ, “He did no sin,” He “knew no sin,” and “in Him was no sin.” He was “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners.” He tabernacled among men. This testimony concerning Christ plainly shows that He condemned sin in the flesh [32].

Notice how the fact that Jesus “did not sin,” and that “He condemned sin in the flesh,” are cited here as reasons as to why He is called “that holy thing.” When Scripture and Ellen White state that there was “no sin” in Jesus, this is simply affirming that He never chose to sin or cherished sinful desires, not that He never felt the inner urge to sin [33]. In addition, the citation above of the Scripture that declares Jesus to be “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners” (Heb. 7:26) is used by Ellen White to describe the condition expected of God’s people on this earth:

Cultivate whatever in your character is in harmony with the character of Christ. Cherish those things that are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, and of good report; but put away whatever is unlike our Redeemer.... Every soul that gains eternal life must be like Christ, “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners” (Heb. 7:26) [34].

Elsewhere she writes:

God did for us the very best thing that He could do when He sent from heaven a sinless Being to manifest to this world of sin what those who are saved must be in character—pure, holy, and undefiled, having Christ formed within [35].

God calls upon us to be like Him—pure, holy, and undefiled. We are to bear the divine image [36].

Let’s keep in mind the affirmations of the same author that the sanctified believer will still possess a fallen human nature, and must still wrestle against the desires of that nature, so long as this life lasts [37]. This obviously means that to be “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners” (Heb. 7:26) is in no way incompatible with possessing and subduing such a nature.

At the bottom line, the phrase “that holy thing” in Luke 1:35 is never used by the inspired writings either to convey the notion that Jesus was born with a different inherited humanity than the rest of us, or to present the purity of His humanity as beyond the reach of the sanctified Christian on account of a presumably different birth-nature.

Total Depravity?

The article in question states, “Not only a part of a human has sinned, but the whole person, therefore everything is affected and corrupted by sin” [38]. But the following Ellen White statement takes a different position, and gives us the reason why:

As we see the condition of mankind today, the question arises in the minds of some, “Is man by nature totally and wholly depraved?” Is he hopelessly ruined? No, he is not. The Lord Jesus left the royal courts and, taking our human nature, lived such a life as everyone may live in humanity, through following His example. We may perfect a life in this world which is an example of righteousness, and overcome as Christ has given us an example in His life, revealing that humanity may conquer as He, the great Pattern conquered [39].

While the present article is not focused on the question of Christology, what is noteworthy in the above statement is that the reason we know humanity is not “by nature totally and wholly depraved” is because Jesus came and took “our human nature.” If sin involuntarily corrupts every part of post-Fall human beings, the above statement would be wrong regarding both ourselves and the human Christ.

Conclusion: How Many Definitions?

In summary, the attempt of certain ones to make the definition of sin nuanced and complicated is contrary both to the inspired consensus and to simple logic. To speak of the “complexity of sin” in terms of everything from “missing the mark” to “distortion,” “rebellion,” “breaking a relationship,” “impurity,” “injustice,” “wickedness,” “unrighteousness,” etc. etc [40], makes no sense until we introduce the objective standard of God’s will found in the divine law. Ellen White’s repetitive insistence that First John 3:4 (“Sin is the transgression of the law”) is the only definition of sin found in Holy Scripture, is both consistent with the overall Biblical message and compellingly logical. Without an objective standard by which choices and conduct can be measured, the divine will becomes inscrutable and humanity’s relationship with God undefinable and unknowable.

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