

# 8

---

---

## Sin

Sin is something that has been discussed in Christianity, and in Judaism before it, at great length. Jesus came, according to the angel (Matt 1:21), to “save his people from their sins.” Jesus himself, according to several different Biblical authors, was without sin (John 8:46; 2 Cor 5:2 1; Heb 4:15; 1 Pet 2:22; to which we can perhaps add Isa 53:9). One might expect that the definition of sin would be easy

But there is a great deal of argument over just what constitutes sin. Is it an action, an attitude, a nature, or some combination? If it is action, what actions are sin, and do motives play any part? We even have differences in the Bible, where Rom 8:28 states that “the wages of sin is death,” whereas 1 John 5:16-7 speaks of a “sin which is not mortal.” With the term “sin” being used in so many different ways, we cannot simply use the term without definition, so we will try to define sin first and then discuss it.

In defining sin, we must keep certain goals in mind. First, we want to have a recognizable definition; one that most people would be able to agree with. Second, it should be as faithful as possible

to the Biblical usages. Third, we should strive for clarity. There should be as few muddy edges as possible. Fourth, we should avoid definitions which try to define a particular theological view as truth. We should avoid compound definitions, which might be separable into their components. Rather, we should try to use a single definition. Then if we wish we may try to show that this definition is always compatible with another definition in our further discussion.

## Sin as transgression

The first definition we will consider is that given in the KJV of 1 John 3:4, namely, “sin is the transgression of the law.” Sin is literally *hamartia*, or not hitting the target—missing the mark.

This immediately involves us in difficulties. First, what is the target? What is the standard against which we are judged? Is it the law? If so, which law? Is it “everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord”? That is one instinctive answer. But it has trouble with Jesus’ apparent approval of David’s eating the shewbread (Matt 12:3-4; Mark 2:25-6; Luke 6:3-4).<sup>1</sup>

It also has trouble because everything that is not ideal has not been made illegal. Jesus’ comments on divorce indicate that even in the Law of Moses ideal behavior was not always demanded. And laws are not only made more strict. Sometimes they are relaxed. See the changes in food laws from Gen 1:29 to Gen 3:18 to Gen 9:3-4. In fact, Jesus’ scenario was that the divorce “law” was initially strict, then relaxed, then strict again.

Perhaps the standard is the ten commandments. They certainly are important. They are the only law that God wrote with His own finger. But they appear to be incomplete. For they say nothing about coveting someone’s husband.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps they can be generalized. But the generalization will have to be extreme to take into account such statements as “whatever does not proceed

---

<sup>1</sup> The story is found in 1 Sam 21:1-6, and the command in Lev 24:5-9. This view also has trouble dealing with conflicts of interest within the law (such as those cited by Jesus in Matt 12:5 where the priests perform work on the Sabbath, and John 7:22-3 where circumcision is performed on the Sabbath). However this difficulty depends upon what is considered work on the Sabbath, and could possibly be resolved if the nature of the work that was forbidden on the Sabbath is clarified.

<sup>2</sup> It is reasonable to say that they were given in a sexist and polygamous society and reflect that situation in their precise wording.

from faith is sin.”<sup>3</sup> In that case, we will need to have some guidance as to how we generalize. Breaking the 10 commandments may be sufficient to qualify as sin, but it does not appear to be necessary without considerable stretching. We will search elsewhere for a more complete definition.

### Sin as lawlessness

The starting place for our second attempt comes from a retranslation of 1 John 3:4, namely, “sin is lawlessness.” “Lawlessness” is a good translation of *anomia*. This appears to be an attitude, rather than a set of specific actions. So we may define sin as an attitude of lawlessness or rebellion. We could call this the state of sin. We should clarify the definition. The state of sin is not merely rebellion against anyone. If one rebelled against the Antichrist, one would not ordinarily be thought to have sinned. So let us say that the state of sin is rebellion against God.

But the Biblical and popular concept of sin also includes actions. The way to define sinful actions, or what we might call sins, that is most consistent with our definition of the state of sin, would be those actions which spring from, and give evidence of, a state of sin or rebellion against God. Until explicitly modified, we will use this definition in the following discussion.

What happens to the idea of sin as the transgression of God’s law? I think that it is partly included in the above definition of sins. For what better, or more accurately, worse way to show rebellion against God than to deliberately disobey what He commands (that is, His law)? But we must be careful here. For which law are we talking about? If we are looking for a universal definition of sin, the law of Moses will not fill the bill. If we truly believed that all commands of God were universally valid, we would be obligated to build the Tabernacle again, re-institute the sacrificial service, and to stone adulterers and Sabbathbreakers. I don’t think that is a live option if we believe Christ is God. The ten commandments? That is better as far as people are concerned. They are considerably more cross-cultural.

But the ten commandments fail when translated to heaven. For the Biblical testimony is that Lucifer sinned and became Satan

---

<sup>3</sup> Rom 14:23. The same principle is illustrated in 1 Cor 8, where an action (eating meat offered to idols) which is wrong to someone with one set of beliefs is right for someone with another set of beliefs, but not if the first person is watching. It then becomes sin (v. 12).

(and was cast out of heaven). Lucifer was certainly in rebellion against God. It is impossible to believe that he did not commit sins. But the ten commandments do not apply strictly. Since Lucifer had no parents, he could not dishonor them. Since angels do not marry (Mark 12:25 and parallels), they cannot commit adultery. We have no evidence of private property in heaven, and there is no evidence that Lucifer attempted to steal in the usual meaning of the term. There is no record of his killing any angels in heaven (there was “war” according to Rev 12:7, but that may not have involved immediate death). And unless his rebellion came after the creation of the earth, there was no Sabbath to keep. The law that Lucifer broke was not identical to the ten commandments, literally understood (the spirit of the law may be a different matter).

But there is a candidate law that does apply to angels, that Lucifer did break, and that is even more cross-cultural than the ten commandments. It is the two-commandment law given by Moses in Deut 6:4-5 and Lev 19:18 and quoted by Jesus as the center of the Law in Mark 12:29-31 and parallels. Supreme love to God, and love for those around us as we love ourselves, is actually a law controlling motives. Breaking that law would seem to be the state of sin as defined above.

It is interesting that the opposite of love is not usually thought of as sin but as selfishness. But perhaps (as has been suggested by others) selfishness is the root of all sin. In fact the original official line of the Devil may have been that the law of love was not necessary; that all that was needed was to allow everyone to follow what has been called enlightened self-interest.

I have heard this line argued very persuasively by someone who (not surprisingly) was a member of the Libertarian party. Basically, he said that it is obvious that pursuing only short-term goals is harmful in the end. That is, narrowly defined, or unenlightened, self-interest is not the best course of action. But if one takes long-term goals into account, one’s actions can be motivated by self-interest and still be beneficial to others. Thus one doesn’t steal, not because it is “wrong” or because it harms others, but because it does harm to oneself. If one is caught, the harm is obvious. If one is not caught, the temptation to steal again will be greater, and one is soon caught in a vicious circle and eventually caught anyway. In addition, others miss their property and may be tempted to steal in return, and one soon must take measures which would not have been necessary otherwise to protect one’s own (and the stolen) property. Finally, one has to deal with the

psychological burden of not being completely open with others for fear they will discover the theft (which merges into guilt). Thus one who follows enlightened self-interest does not steal. Similar lines of reasoning could be followed for all of traditional morality.

There is something to be said for enlightenment. It is not always wise for a wife to bail her alcoholic husband out of trouble. In the short run it may seem both kinder and easier, but over the long haul it may delay his recognition of the problem and therefore his recovery. In this case enlightenment is good from both a selfish and from a loving point of view.

But I strongly suspect that selfishness leads intrinsically to unenlightenment, or more accurately, the ignoring of light. I have run into a number of people who realize the dangers of sexual promiscuity, for example, but who don't really care. One in particular was very angry that people with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV—the AIDS virus) were not required to be branded in some way. He thought perhaps that everyone should be tested for HIV, and those testing negative could be given cards which they could show to each other before having sex. Pointing out to him that HIV infection may take 3 to 6 months to show on our present antibody tests (or more, we are finding out now) didn't change his position. He was simply unwilling to consider the possibility of premarital chastity. This was true in spite of the fact that it didn't affect him personally at the time (he was married, and by his account faithful). He did not want to accept theoretical limits to his freedom, even if it might mean injury or death.

I suspect that for everyone, sometime in life, there comes a time when a choice must be made between doing something which puts others first and doing something which appears to reward self at the expense of others. One may say that the choice never really happens, but it certainly appears to happen. If one's orientation is to self, then one will fail the test. But if one's orientation is to others, then one will pass.

This view meshes well with Jesus' teaching. Jesus not only seconded the two great commandments, but He also gave us the golden rule (Matt 7:12), the new commandment (John 13:44), and the famous quote, "Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will find it."<sup>4</sup> Jesus clearly thought the source of defilement came from within (Mark 7:14-23 = Matt 15:10,15-20).

---

<sup>4</sup> Which is quoted in all 4 gospels in slightly varying form (Matt 10:39;16:25 [the above quotation]; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24;17:33; John 12:25).

Jesus is not really giving us a new teaching here. He is amplifying a strand that runs through the Old Testament. It starts in Moses, where the two great commandments were given (and also the tenth commandment), and runs through Micah 6:6-8 (especially v. 8: “He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”). There are related themes in Isa 58:1-12 and Zech 7:1-10.

The apostle Paul picks up the theme again in Gal 5:13-14 and in Rom 13:8-10, and amplifies it in the “love chapter”, 1 Cor 13, and James continues it in 2:8. And of course there is the book of 1 John.

To summarize, the fundamental law of morality is the law of love, the law of active concern for the well-being of others, God supremely, and others at least as much as ourselves. The state of sin is the state of rebellion against this law, and choosing our own self-interest as we see it as the basic guide for our behavior. Sins are interactions of this basic attitude, and goals, and facts, or more accurately, perceptions of goals and facts. Thus one’s reasoning for murder might go as follows:

1. It is good for this man to live and worse for him to die (perception of goal, and I might add, the common presumption).
2. This man will die if I give him digoxin.
3. If I give him digoxin, his death will not be attributed to me.
4. If he dies and I am not caught, I will get the money from his life insurance policy (all perceptions of fact).
5. I want the money more than I want the best good for this man (motive—state of sin).
6. Therefore I will give him digoxin (sinful act or sin).

From the point of view of this theory, it is basically irrelevant whether the digoxin kills the man, or merely slows his atrial fibrillation and keeps him alive, or he throws away the digoxin and someone else takes it and dies, or God works a miracle and changes it into some neutral substance or even a helpful one. And the legal profession agrees. They are all either murder or attempted murder.

A word should be said about the differentiation of goals and facts. Facts are the realm where science reigns supreme. What will happen if something is done can be determined with a fair degree of precision regardless of one’s motives (although those with purer motives may be able to see more clearly). But goals cannot be determined by science alone. Ethics is not a branch of science. What is good cannot be determined solely on the basis of what is.

Some scientists have tried to get around this obvious weakness of scientism (the idea that science can explain everything) by saying that there is no such thing as absolute good. Good for any person is only what he or she likes. As supporting evidence, they point to varying ideas of good in various cultures.

But this theory is not a requirement of science. It is merely a necessary doctrine of scientism. Science can easily acknowledge the possibility of phenomena outside of its domain, which interact with phenomena inside its domain. On a theoretical level, the evidence is overwhelming that the origin of life lies outside the realm of science. The extant scientific “explanations” for the origin of life are so woefully inadequate that they make it highly unlikely that such an explanation, even only moderately improbable, will ever be found (see the discussion in chapter 2). We cannot reproduce the origin of life in the laboratory. Yet the interactions of life and non-living matter, and even the interactions within living organisms, follow clearly observable scientific laws.

For that matter, on a practical level, the behavior of individual humans cannot be reduced to laws at the present time. All our predictions are of a probabilistic nature, sort of like our predictions regarding individual atoms. Yet the environment around each individual human continues to obey the laws of science, and his or her interactions with it can be predicted once we make allowance for his or her mindset. So the existence of science is not jeopardized by acknowledging the existence of phenomena outside of its domain, practically or even theoretically.

And the fact that different cultures have different standards does not prove that there is no such thing as an absolute standard, any more than the fact that different cultures have had different values for  $\pi$  proves that there is no such number. People can see the truth more or less clearly depending on their background, and societies have similar constraints.

This implies, of course, that some societies are better than others, that is, closer to the ideal. Some may think that I am setting the stage for exalting American capitalist Christian society, and will object that all societies are morally equal. But first, I do not believe that American capitalism (which I believe is not basically Christian) is ideal, impossible to improve on, or even necessarily the best on the globe (on the other hand, the modifications which would help most are not communist ones). And second, one must be a moral monster to insist that our society is morally equal to that of Nazi Ger-

many *and* Stalinist Russia, and that there is no moral difference between Pol Pot and Prince Sihanouk.

It might be tempting to close the discussion here. Sin is rebellion, and sins are acts growing out of rebellion. So far we have a neat little package.

But there is another use of the term sin which we must consider. In Lev 4:1-2 we read, "the Lord said to Moses, 'Say to the people of Israel, If anyone sins unwittingly in any of the things which the Lord has commanded not to be done, and does any one of them . . .'" This is a different concept from that of a sin as an outworking of rebellion, for it is unintentional. The Hebrew for "unwittingly" (*s<sup>e</sup>gagah*) is the same word used for someone who kills someone unintentionally in Numbers 35. It applies to, for example, someone who drops a stone on someone else without seeing him (Lev. 4:23), but does not apply to someone who hits or shoves anyone in anger and causes his death (vs. 16-21). Also in the parallel passage in Numbers 15, unintentional (*s<sup>e</sup>gagah*) sin (vs. 22-9) is contrasted with sin "with a high hand" (*b<sup>e</sup>yad ramah*; v.30).

Here we have sin without motive. It is clearly the act of doing something bad, without intending to. I see no amount of twisting that can reasonably make this definition fit with a basic definition of sin as motive.

We still have an ambiguity in this definition. What makes the actions bad? Is it that they break some rule? Or is it that they are inherently harmful? Or can we make the assumption that the rules always exactly coincide with the dividing line between harmful and beneficial actions?

There is a great deal of attractiveness in the position that harmful actions are always forbidden by the rules. It means that one does not have to choose between obeying the rules and doing good as the basic guideline for action. It also means that as long as one obeys the rules, one can make any choice one wants. It would also mean that all who have the proper sensitivity can make up the rules themselves (and it is tempting to add that if they do not make up the proper rules it is because they are not trying to avoid harmful actions).

But this approach is doomed to failure. First, not all harmful actions are against the rules. No rules before about the 19th century forbade smoking, which is definitely harmful. And Moses permitted divorce, which Jesus pointed out was harmful. Secondly, the rules cannot be taken uncritically. They change from time to time. At one point participation in the sacrificial system



was required. Later on, it was not.<sup>5</sup> I seriously doubt that anyone now believes in putting “tassels” with “a cord of blue” on the corners of all his or her clothes as prescribed in Numbers 15:37-40 (reinforced in Deut 22:12). Very few people obey the rule about hybrid cattle or clothing of blended fabrics given in Leviticus 19:19 (reinforced in Deut 22:9-11). Jesus indicated that stoning was not the will of God for all who committed adultery (for that matter, David was not stoned).

But if there is a difference between harmful acts and unlawful acts, which is sin? It is tempting to opt for harmful acts. But then what of acts which are harmful, but not known to be such until centuries later? For example, there is growing evidence that the best diet is a vegetarian one. How does this relate to animal sacrifices and eating the sacrificed meat? Would anyone nowadays who was trying to be health-conscious serve a “fatted calf”? Does that mean that Abraham (Gen 18) or the father of the prodigal son (Luke 15) sinned when they served what they thought was the best they had? What about missionaries that deliberately expose themselves to various diseases and dangers? It would appear that acts that could cause harm is not a completely satisfactory definition of sin.

But neither is unlawful acts. For in multiple instances things that are done legally but with evil intent are condemned. One can start with the tenth commandment which condemns wishing to do evil. There is the story in Jeremiah 34 of the Jews releasing their slaves, then legally forcing them back into slavery the next day. This profaned God’s name, and it is difficult to avoid calling this sin. And Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:17-48) made the same application of the Law to intents and motives.

On the other hand, Jesus apparently approved the conduct of David in eating the shewbread. It is possible to continue to insist on calling this behavior sin. But then it is not fair to insist that because we call it sin that God fundamentally disapproves of it.

And that, I think, is the real reason why the topic is pursued as avidly as it is in some circles. There is a conviction that the real problem with the world is “sin”. In some circles it is thought that if we could just avoid “sin” we could be perfect, and maybe Jesus would be able to come the second time. On the other hand, maybe we can’t stop sinning. Does that mean we shouldn’t try?

Frankly, I do not have all the answers to such questions. A

---

<sup>5</sup> Heb 13:10; Col 2:16,17. See Giem P: “SABBATON in Col 2:16.” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 1981;19:195-210.

scientific theology would not require one to do so at the outset. It will ask one to attempt to clarify the issues involved. It will also require one to acknowledge any uncertainties involved, and to acknowledge the effect that these uncertainties may have on the further development of a systematic theology. It will also encourage one to propose models while knowing that they are almost certain not to be completely correct, and possibly to be primarily in error. Towards that end, I will propose the following tentative model.

### A Three-part Theory of Sin

It appears to me that the Biblical data can be accounted for if three different definitions of sin are used. These definitions are interrelated but not identical. First, sin can be thought of as rebellious motive. Second, sin can be thought of as harmful action. Third, sin can be thought of as addiction.

It seems to me that God is primarily concerned with what has been traditionally called the heart.<sup>6</sup> Jesus made this very clear. In Mark 7:17-23 (= Matt 15:16-20) He specifically stated that what comes from the outside does not defile a human, but rather what comes from the inside. His conversation with Nicodemus (John 3) was aimed at inward, not outward righteousness. In Matt 12:33-7 (= Luke 6:43-5) Jesus makes it plain that the evil that people do comes primarily from the inside. In Matt 23:25 (= Luke 11:39) Jesus condemns those who keep clear from ceremonial uncleanness but are full of sin and wickedness. In Matt 5:28 Jesus notes that adulterous intentions are in the same category as adulterous actions. And in John 4:23-4 Jesus notes that the kind of worship God desires is “in spirit and truth”, not confined to a physical place.

This emphasis is continued by the rest of the New Testament. Romans 2:29 speaks of being a Jew inwardly, and circumcision of the heart. But there is also a similar theme running through the Old Testament. Joel 2:23 speaks of rending the heart and not the garments. And Deuteronomy 30:6 also refers to circumcision of the heart. So any account of sin must take motives into account.

But at the same time it does make some difference what one does. Matt 2 1:28-32 tells of one son who said he would help his father and didn't, and another son who at first said he would not

---

<sup>6</sup> Notice the difference in attitude between unintentional sin and defiant sin in Numbers 15:22-31.

go and then changed his mind and did. As has been said before, actions speak louder than words. For much of our lives, what we think determines what we do. And so we may catch some insight into what we really value by studying our actions (we may also catch some insight into what others think by their actions).

In addition, actions reinforce belief. Jesus recognized this when He said (Matt 6:21), "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." I do not know whether actions can *cause* belief, or for that matter unbelief (there are theological grounds for denying it), but certainly acting on one's belief or unbelief tends to strengthen it.

Finally, certain beliefs nearly demand action. Belief in the harmfulness of tobacco, or the goodness of physical exercise, takes very few accompanying beliefs to determine a course of action. The belief that truth is important will cause one to seek it avidly. The belief that Jesus is God revealed in human form will cause us, with only the accompanying belief that God is honest and the commitment to truth, to try to find out what Jesus said and to listen closely to it.

Thus while it may be true that our fundamental attitude of love or selfishness is the really important differentiation, it does not follow that we will be unconcerned about actions. If anything, our concern about actions will be heightened, as the attitude of love is that which wills the most good possible for the object(s) of its love. That gets us into what is really good for our fellow humans. We are now dealing with sins as harmful actions.

We obviously do not know experimentally the complete answer to what sins (as harmful actions) are. Experiments can correlate some actions in a given set of situations with some outcomes. I as a physician would not wish to belittle the value of such information. Some ends seem on the face of it to be desirable, such as personal pleasure and happiness. Suffering in general would seem to be something to be avoided.

But as we are trying to determine the most helpful and least harmful actions, there are several caveats to be observed. First, long-term and subtle effects must constantly be kept in mind. We do not always know what the long-term effects of an action are. For most people, smoking did not become something to avoid on moral grounds until quite recently in our civilization's history. It took centuries to find out its ill effects on the smoker, let alone on the surrounding people. There may be many other actions which are harmful but concerning which our knowledge is at the same state as it was for tobacco 150 years ago (or even 50 years ago for

most of us). In addition, an allowance must be made for subtle effects. For example, there is a physiologic reaction when a normal person tells a lie. This is the basis of lie detector tests.<sup>7</sup> The means is automatically part of the end, and sometimes the only part over which we have direct control. A “calculus of love” must always be very humble about our knowledge of long-term and subtle effects.

Second, there is the problem of denial. The evidence for an action’s harm can be consciously or unconsciously buried by an uneasy conscience. The alcoholic may easily deny (or rather, characteristically denies) that his/her habit does any harm. His/her statements should not be taken at face value.<sup>8</sup>

Third, one must not leave out the spiritual dimension (which is always a temptation in our secular age). This has several implications. One regards purpose. Man does not live by bread alone. If one loses one’s purpose in life, and nothing takes its place, one’s life beyond that time is literally pointless. There are some convictions worth dying for. Hedonistic pleasure alone, without purpose, eventually fails to satisfy.

There are implications of the spiritual dimension for time. If there is anything Jesus’ resurrection suggests, it is that we may also look forward to life after death. And it is at least possible that others’ eternal destiny may be influenced by our actions. If so, we will never be able to prove that an action was good based on its temporal consequences. We need to be even more humble about our unaided ability to judge.

This has implications for the relative importance of people and institutions. We often think of institutions as bigger, and therefore more important, than people. One needs to be very cautious about such judgments. If by institutions we mean collections of people, this may be true. But if we mean organizational structures, we need to recognize that institutions are all tempo-

---

<sup>7</sup> One may argue that some people, namely those with a sociopathic personality disorder, may lie with impunity, but no ethicist worth the label would advocate being like them.

<sup>8</sup> The perceptive reader will note my heavy use of various addictions as models for sins. This is primarily because almost everyone can agree that at least the worst addictions are harmful, and therefore they may be used without getting into arguments over whether premarital sex, or capital punishment, or voting Republican (or voting at all), or other controversial areas, are sins. But also it is because some addictions illustrate points which are less obvious with other harmful actions, but no less true. In fact, it may turn out that all sins are addicting.

rary, whereas people are at least potentially eternal. Thus supporting an institution by hurting specific people is risky if not inadvisable.

There are implications of the spiritual dimension for methods. There is the authority of Jesus, abundant (although admittedly flawed) anecdotal evidence, and one double-blind controlled study<sup>9</sup> to suggest that prayer can change things somehow. Perhaps sometimes the proper thing to do is not to **do** anything, but rather to pray.

Fourth, if one is trying to avoid harmful actions, one must be sure that in a given case all relevant alternatives have been identified before one makes a decision between them. This is exemplified by Jesus' reaction to the temple tax question (Matt. 17:24-7). The obvious choices were 1. pay the tax and tacitly admit that Jesus did not have the authority as the Messiah that He claimed, and 2. not pay the tax and give the authorities an excuse to accuse Him of disloyalty. After Peter had made his reply, the second alternative also involved embarrassing Peter. Jesus pointed out a third alternative, namely, pay the tax in such a way that it was obvious that He did have the authority He claimed, while giving no technical grounds for the authorities to complain. Perhaps we should search for more viable alternatives more often, especially when the existing alternatives are unsatisfactory

Fifth, we have no theoretical basis for insisting that there are no valid rules besides love.<sup>10</sup> Certainly in practice this position is highly unlikely. For example, one could specify a set of circumstances that in the entire sweep of human history would recur, say, 20 times. Then one of two conditions follows. Either there is no right (or perhaps rather, "best") action at any time, which seems highly doubtful,<sup>11</sup> or there is. If there is, then for each situation within this group there is a right choice and one or more wrong choices. It seems highly unlikely that for every such subset, regardless of how restrictive the circumstances, there is never *any*

---

<sup>9</sup> Byrd RC: Positive Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer in a Coronary Care Unit Population. *South Med J* 81[7]:826-9, 1988.

<sup>10</sup> As has been done repeatedly by Joseph Fletcher in *Situation Ethics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966).

<sup>11</sup> It would imply that the God of precise rules in the "natural" world was a God of complete disorder in the moral sphere, and even situationists, or at least Fletcher, actually do not believe it. See *Ibid.*, pp. 24-26, and p. 104 where he condemns John Kaspar's actions, implying that a better course of action was open to him. See also Fletcher J: "Reflection and reply." In Cox H (ed): *The Situation Ethics Debate*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968, pp. 249-64, esp. pp. 256-7.

valid generalization that will be true for all such decisions. For example, how about the rule, “Between 1945 and 1992, the American President should not use nuclear weapons in a pre-emptive first strike against the Soviet Union.” If you don’t like that one, try reversing the roles of the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Frankly, I am not terribly interested in hypothetical cases. God may or may not permit these cases to become reality. But in real situations, there are at least in some classes of situations general rules which are 100% valid, and capable of guiding behavior into the most helpful way, that is, the way that maximizes good and minimizes evil, in every situation for which the rule’s preconditions are met.

Ethics can be likened to mathematics. One can start with a very few axioms, and then can build an incredibly complicated situation. But there are middle rules which are valid as long as their preconditions are fulfilled. As in mathematics, we can make mistakes (even “honest mistakes”). But there are correct answers whether we know them or not, and they follow rules as well.

Thus the second proposition of situation ethics, “The ruling norm of Christian decision is love: nothing else”,<sup>12</sup> can only be true if one allows derivative norms (perhaps limited, perhaps always recognized as derivative) to be formulable at least in theory. And the sixth proposition, “Love’s decisions are made situationally, not prescriptively”,<sup>13</sup> is wrong. Some decisions can be made prescriptively. I would be afraid to visit a doctor who, although loving, made all his decisions situationally and never prescriptively; who did not have routines which he used on all cases which fell within certain limits. In fact, I would doubt that doctor’s love. For love requires us to try to find out what is good and then practice it, and the only justification for not having such rules is that either there are none (which is nonsense—witness the success of science) or that we don’t know them. And make no mistake. Medical practice rules are intended to be moral in the strictest sense.

Sixth, since there are rules, and God knows all the rules, it is certainly possible that He could reveal them.<sup>14</sup> So we do well to pay attention to the rules that claim revelation as their authority, and if the claim is reasonably convincing, we need to follow

---

<sup>12</sup> *Situation Ethics*, p. 69.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>14</sup> If God is all-wise and good, then He will not ask us to do anything that is not best for us or for our neighbors. So the most loving thing to do would be to obey God. We must never forget that Jesus commanded us to love God first, and secondly our neighbor. It is reasonable to believe that our love for God will never be in conflict with our love to neighbors, but we may not be able to love our neighbors truly unless we love God first.

them when determining the best thing to do.

Are there any rules that are universal for humans, other than love? The only serious candidates I know of are the 10 commandments (it is of interest that when situationists take aim at law they do so primarily at the 10 commandments). There are several reasons for their claim. First, they are the only words that we have that were not just spoken but directly written by God. Second, several of the latter commandments are repeated in the New Testament, often with the implication that they are synonymous with, or at least included in, the command to love one's neighbor.<sup>15</sup> Third, while provisions of the rest of the Mosaic law, specifically circumcision<sup>16</sup> and the sacrificial system<sup>17</sup> are declared to be non-binding, the provisions of the Decalogue are, if anything, tightened.<sup>18</sup> This is not totally out of keeping with the intent of the Decalogue: Jesus' command (to men) to avoid looking at a woman to lust after her is merely restating a provision of the 10th commandment which states, "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife." (Ex 20:17, repeated in Deut 5:21)

Are the ten commandments reliable as absolute standards? I don't know that one can prove them reliable or unreliable using empirical evidence, due to the inherent limitations noted above in our methods. So we are stuck with how reasonable they are, and how strong is their revelational authority.

I will not try to cover all the evidence that could be adduced regarding the reliability of the 10 commandments as absolute rules. I will say that I am convinced that at this point they are the best indicators of good I know, not coming into conflict with the imperative of love in all my personal decisions, and often being a helpful corrective to my instinctive preferences. This does not mean that following them one will never have pain, or even apparently avoidable pain, but it does mean that a life of obedi-

---

<sup>15</sup> See Matt. 19:16-22 = Mark 10:17-22 = Luke 18:18-23; Rom. 7:7-12; 13:8-10; James 2:8-12.

<sup>16</sup> Acts 15 and multiple Pauline passages.

<sup>17</sup> See note 5.

<sup>18</sup> See Matt. 5:17-48. The law that Jesus says will not have one small letter or stroke pass from it "until all is accomplished" in v. 18, includes the Decalogue (vs. 21,27), and the command to love one's neighbor (v. 43). The rest of the Mosaic law could be interpreted as being changed (vs. 31,33,38, although in all fairness none of the reinterpretations may actually be in violation of the spirit of the original commands. Even the Lex Taliones of v. 38 may have actually been originally an upper limit to punishment rather than an exact prescription).

ence is likely to cause less pain and more pleasure for all concerned in the long run. The 10 commandments are reasonable, and often more reasonable than they appear at first glance to modern man. For example, take the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me." There is no reason to object to its spirit. There is only the objection to the letter that one may sometimes appear to worship other gods for good enough reason. But this assumes that life with compromise is better than martyrdom. A case can be reasonably made that God does not need double agents. In fact, double agents may be deceived into doing more harm than the good they plan to do later. They may not live to finish their plans. And they may even wind up switching sides without fully intending to at the start. Remember, Jesus was confronted with the same temptation and walked away from it. God may even have a surprise in store for us, as He did for the three companions of Daniel (Dan 3), and possibly for Jesus Himself (the resurrection). The case against the first commandment is not strong enough for me.

The second commandment forbids the worship of images, or the making of images for worship. One may argue that historically the majority of Christians have ignored the import of this commandment. But perhaps the majority of Christians have not fully understood the value of this commandment. It may be as relevant now as it was when first stated. It might keep us from honoring the creature (even the "saint") instead of the creator, as suggested in Rom 1:19-23. (This does not necessarily mean that people are "lost" if they bow down to images. We are now discussing the best actions, and actions which are not as good and therefore may be called harmful. We are not trying to establish the rebellion, or lack thereof, of the participants in those actions.)

The third commandment forbids saying God agrees with something when He does not. The challenges to this commandment usually ask us to assume that we can control the situation, when we only have a certain amount of influence. Our control extends only to our own behavior (and sometimes not that far). It may be better to maintain our integrity than for us to gain some temporary good. (Frankly, I have never seen a situation where invoking God's authority falsely actually could reasonably help someone, but I have seen multiple situations where invoking God's authority falsely, especially by professed Christian leaders, has resulted in disastrous consequences for many people.)

The fourth commandment tells one to rest on the seventh-day Sabbath. Again the vast majority of Christians have not fol-



lowed the commandment. But they may be the losers. A day of rest from the constant grind of making a living may not only be desirable for physical health, but helpful to allow one time to meditate and communicate with God. This may be even more important in a culture which puts time pressure on people.

And the choice of day may be important. Some years ago Harold Lindsell wrote a book called *The Battle for the Bible*.<sup>19</sup> In it he documented the fact that within approximately fifty years after turning its back on the doctrine of the verbal inspiration of the Bible, a Protestant church would cease to hold any but minimalist Christian positions, barely distinguishable from the secular culture.

He made his point well. However, I was struck by the fact that there was one glaring exception to his general thesis. The Seventh-day Adventist church has from its inception specifically avoided saying that there were no errors in the Bible. And yet in its 150+ years it has never drifted anywhere close to where it is homogenized with society.<sup>20</sup>

One may attribute this to a number of different causes. However, I think that the most significant one is that the Sabbath stands guard over supernaturalist doctrine. Without the Sabbath, only an authoritative Bible (which is usually thought to require inerrancy) has kept one a supernaturalist. When errors have been allowed, the first one was usually assumed to be the creation story. If that story was myth, the pressure was on to remove more and more miracles until finally one capitulated on the resurrection of Jesus, completing the transition from supernaturalist to naturalist belief. However, with the Sabbath, one has a constant working reminder of the reality of Creation week with its inherent supernaturalism, and the finding of minor differences in the Biblical accounts does not lead to abandonment of the supernaturalist position. Perhaps the fourth commandment is also more relevant to modern life than previously thought.

The fifth commandment receives little objection. The same is true of the sixth if it is translated, "You shall not murder." And the ninth commandment is also relatively non-controversial as it reads, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."

---

<sup>19</sup> Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976.

<sup>20</sup> I do not mean to say that it has not drifted, or that there is no possibility of further drifting, but that the more or less official church position, and the substantial majority of church members and leaders, are still supernaturalist with a wide gulf doctrinally between them and the modernist position.

The tenth commandment seems unexceptionable—in fact, it is the one commandment that a situation ethicist would be forced to agree with, as it deals with motives. That leaves “You shall not steal” and “You shall not commit adultery.”

The prohibition against stealing becomes easier to swallow when we realize that stealing involves taking someone else’s property (which he/she must therefore rightfully own), knowing that he/she does not (or would not) approve, and with the reasonable likelihood that it will not be returned intact (or that he/she will lose the use of it).<sup>21</sup> Even in the proverbial case of stealing to keep one’s children alive, one has to ask whether there are better ways (prayer, or direct asking, for example) to accomplish the same goal, and one has to remember the loss of integrity that might result and the further cover-up behavior that might be required. And it is rarely the case that one stealing episode will suffice to feed children. If one is trying to control the situation, one must remember that the choice to steal once is usually the choice to make stealing a way of life, and one’s children may still starve in the end, or pick up their parent’s stealing habit.

We finally come to the commandment that sticks in the craw of modern man,<sup>22</sup> that which forbids adultery. It will do no good for a Christian trying to avoid obedience to appeal to the New Testament, for if anything the commandment is strengthened there. One of the four requirements that was made of the new Gentiles was to abstain from fornication (Acts 15:29; compare v. 20), and we have already seen what Jesus did with the commandment.

This is thought by many to be outdated. We no longer have to worry about pregnancy, venereal diseases, or discovery, they say. Contraceptives can prevent pregnancy, antibiotics can cure venereal diseases, and our urban and mobile society makes discovery unlikely, so the major reasons for avoidance of adultery no longer apply. Besides, the rule was made when women were considered property, and doesn’t apply today.

This reasoning can sound plausible, particularly if one is in a difficult marriage, or if one is in the company of a sexually attractive person. But it is flawed. First, although perhaps it is somewhat less likely, pregnancy is still a major complication of

---

<sup>21</sup> That is not to say that the spirit of the law, as in the case of the 6th and 7th commandments, does not go much further than the letter.

<sup>22</sup> I am using the term “man” in the gender-inclusive sense, although I suspect that men have more difficulty with the commandment than women.

extramarital sex, and even more so of premarital sex. Second, with the spread of herpes and AIDS (along with papillomavirus), the control of venereal diseases by antibiotics has become hopeless. And discovery, while technically more avoidable for each incident than in the past, is still a major problem.

The reason for the latter lies in the nature of adultery, and indeed of any clandestine activity. It can be (temporarily) enjoyable, or it can not. If it is not, it was not worth it almost by definition. If it is enjoyable, one is either caught or not. If one is caught, again it was not worth it almost by definition. If one is not caught, then one can stop after the first time, in which case over the long haul it is likely to cause enough frustration at not being able to repeat it to counterbalance the initial pleasure, not to mention the dishonesty required to keep it hidden, and the lack of openness and sharing with one's spouse and the damage this can cause the marriage relationship. But suppose one does not stop with the first time. The risks are now replayed, and although each individual time is unlikely to be discovered, eventually one will either stop (in which case the problems noted above will still apply), or one will be caught (in which case it is not likely that it will be thought to be worth it), or one finally loses enough interest in the marriage relationship to attempt termination.<sup>23</sup> In that case, from a scriptural perspective at least (see Jesus' teaching on divorce), if not from a worldly perspective, one will have lost something of arguably greater value than the pleasure one got from adultery.

But what about "sacrificial" adultery, of the kind described in *Situation Ethics*, pp. 164-5?<sup>24</sup> The intention behind the presen-

---

<sup>23</sup> I say "attempt termination" because, as divorced people find out, the relationship never really terminates. The ex-spouse remains always in memory, if not as a complication of relations with mutual friends, children, monetary affairs, etc., etc.

<sup>24</sup> Briefly, the story is as follows: A Mr. Bergmeier in the German army was captured by the Allies near the end of World War II. His wife and children (15, 12, and 10 years old) were in the part of Germany overrun by the Russians. Mrs. Bergmeier was picked up by a Russian patrol and then taken to the Ukraine, without being able to get word to the children about what had happened. Mr. Bergmeier was released after the war and found the three children. He then hunted for his wife.

Mrs. Bergmeier learned of his search from the commandant of the prison camp who reportedly was sympathetic. However, the camp rules did not allow release to Germany unless she became pregnant, when she would be considered a liability. She finally decided to have intercourse with a (German) camp guard, and became pregnant. She was sent back to Germany where her family welcomed her, and also little Dietrich when he was born, and were reportedly grateful to him for reuniting their family.

tation of the case seems to be to present an actual case where adultery appears clearly to be the loving thing to do.

One can ask several questions about this scenario. These are legitimate, and do call into question what at first glance is the obvious conclusion. First, God's ability to act is left entirely out of consideration.<sup>25</sup> Second, were all the other ways of handling the situation exhausted? If the commandant of the camp was as sympathetic as he was described as being, could he not have let her family know where she was so they might try to get her released? We also do not know (and more important, she did not know at the time) how long the prisoners were kept in the camp after her release. A mother becoming pregnant by someone else in order to be reunited with her family might be understandable when otherwise she would never see them, but much less understandable if it only hastens the process by 3 months.

Thirdly, one has to ask what the prospects of "success" (in this case reuniting with the family) are prospectively. One of the concepts that stands out starkly in medicine, and especially emergency medicine, is that all the really difficult decisions (perhaps all decisions) must be made prospectively. What makes some patients difficult to treat is that they do not have their diagnoses stamped indelibly across their chests. A person rarely comes in complaining of myocardial infarction. Most of the time the complaint is chest pain, or sometimes abdominal or back or neck or arm or jaw pain. I know of one case of sore throat which turned out to be critical myocardial ischemia. And often even after the proper investigation, we cannot be sure who has heart disease and who does not. We may elect to keep the patient in the hospital until we are sure. This means that we may admit 100 people to the hospital for every one that we eventually help. The fact that a patient was sent home and came to no apparent harm does not mean that the decision to send all similar patients home can be recommended prospectively. One has to have a group of patients, so that one can make reasonable estimates of risks and

---

At christening time, the parents sent the children home and asked their pastor whether it was right for Mrs. Bergmeier to have done what she did, and whether they should feel grateful to the guard and happy with her choice and the child's appearance. Here the story ends.

<sup>25</sup> If the lady in the story honestly believed that God would not act to help her directly, then I cannot be sure that she was not motivated by love, but we are not discussing that. We are discussing the very best way to handle the situation, and the fact that the lady did the best she knew does not mean that with more knowledge she would, or at least should, have done differently

benefits, before one can make recommendations.

And working prospectively, there are several uncertainties. The lady is dependent on the camp commander's word that she will be released if she becomes pregnant (this is the same commander that knows that her family is alive and looking for her, but can't get a message through to them). There is also the possibility that the intercourse she engages in will not result in pregnancy. Women in stressful situations such as concentration camps are known to be less fertile than usual. How long is she prepared to try? And if she tries and is unable to become pregnant, would she have been better off not trying? What is the probability of that eventuality? Her husband may also not be as understanding as he eventually turned out to be. Since the decision regarding adultery must be made prospectively, such uncertainties must be taken into account, even if they did not eventuate in this particular case.

Fourth, the story as told is not over. The husband may not be as accommodating in the future. What happens if little Dietrich finds out about his paternity? And if the "parents" try to keep this information from Dietrich? One can certainly see some complications that have not surfaced yet.

However, proceeding in this fashion is not likely to be much help. For one arguing for a situation ethics point of view will simply try to find a more obvious and extreme example, and eventually one is likely to be found. If there is nothing intrinsically harmful about committing adultery, eventually the case will be found where it seem the best in prospect as well as retrospect, and the theoretical point of the situation ethicist will be made, namely, that love can dictate the breaking of any rule, especially the ten commandments. In fact, for many, even given the above cautions, the case we have discussed has already made the point.

But one factor seems to have been overlooked, or more precisely denied.<sup>26</sup> That is that some actions have effects that are essentially inseparable from the actions themselves. For example, telling a lie, even one which the person has determined beforehand is "necessary", causes a psychological reaction big enough to be indicated by a physiological response. For another example,

---

<sup>26</sup> For example, Fletcher insists that "no act apart from its foreseeable consequences has any *ethical* meaning whatsoever . . ." (*Situation Ethics*, p. 126, italics his), and specifically, "If people do not believe it is wrong to have sex relations outside of marriage, it isn't, unless they harm themselves, their partners, or others."

policemen who shoot suspects who turn out to be unarmed and not dangerous are emotionally devastated, even though they may have shot them “in good faith” (there may be problems even when the suspect was armed and dangerous). Those experiences make for profound guilt experiences which are not easily psychologized away. Thus, for practical purposes, there are some means which are inherently worse than others, and which a simple preponderance of external factors in their favor does not justify.

Can the same thing be said of adultery? We will never know experimentally for sure. Sexual activity in and of itself produces physiological disturbances, so that an approach similar to a lie detector is not likely to be helpful. Any change could simply be attributed to the sexual activity itself. And in any case the most damaging part of the act may be the decision to commit it, which is not likely to be monitored, and if the decision were monitored any physiological reaction could be attributed to sexual arousal (this is in addition to the ethical difficulties in conducting the experiment, and the question of whether one trusts the experimenters to report and interpret the data accurately).

But theoretically it isn't too hard to believe. Consider what adultery is. It is deliberate sexual activity with someone when at least one of the parties has promised exclusive sexual commitment to someone else.<sup>27</sup> Thus adultery involves not only sexual activity, but also the keeping of promises. This is why the act can be damaging in and of itself. Adultery is an affront to integrity. One of the most important values, if not the most important value, is integrity. It is one that is necessary if we are to be safe to be around for eternity. And that means that adultery is intrinsically

---

<sup>27</sup> It is interesting to note that God did not start by forbidding fornication, or sexual activity outside of personal commitment. He did not even forbid polygamy. From that one may deduce that adultery was a minimum requirement. The spirit of the law, of course, may extend beyond the letter.

It is also interesting that if we moderns were making the law, we would most likely have outlawed rape rather than adultery. While it sounds worse (and I think is worse), it is also harder to effectively define, both in prospect and in retrospect. Some cases are obvious. But one rapidly gets into the gray zone of he says/she says, with the man saying “but she enjoyed it”, or “she is lying”, and the occasional abuses from the other end such as the use of rape charges to get what one wants (“if you don't do what I want now, I will say that I really didn't want the sexual activity later.” In all fairness, men's abuses in this area are probably far more common than women's). This can be particularly damaging in the marriage relationship. Thus adultery, which is usually more clearly defined, is actually more practical.

harmful, in a very important way. It can even be argued that this damage outweighs any good that adultery might do.<sup>28</sup>

This does not mean that no one can commit adultery without believing it to be the best course. I believe that in the example given, Frau Bergmeier thought she was taking the best action. But that is not the same as saying it was advisable, or the best possible course under the circumstances.

The foregoing discussion is certain not to be pleasing to the modern secular point of view. It will be argued that pleasure, including sexual pleasure, is good, and we should stop making all those restrictive rules which crimp our style. Besides, some of those restrictions are ridiculous.

It is true that some have extended their restrictions to illogical lengths. Some have insisted that sexual intercourse is only for the production of children, and should only be engaged in with that end in view. This view, if taken to its logical conclusion, would not only forbid birth control but would also forbid intercourse except during ovulation, and would forbid intercourse with a spouse who had his or her gonads (or uterus) removed, or who was past menopause. It should also welcome artificial insemination as a way to have children without the “evil” of sexual intercourse. It also has trouble with the fact that sexual intercourse is so inefficient at producing children. It would seem that God intended that not all intercourse would result in children, and that therefore some intercourse serves some other purpose. God’s original plan apparently included sexual intercourse.<sup>29</sup> Finally, there is the counsel of Paul in 1 Cor 7:5, “Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, . . . Then come together again . . .” It is difficult to see how Paul could say this if he had felt sexual intercourse to be intrinsically evil.

Some of the halfway positions are even worse. There is no motivational difference between using the rhythm method of birth control and, say, using a condom. Neither are, strictly speaking, “natural”, and both are aimed at avoiding pregnancy while enjoying intercourse (and neither one is 100% reliable—the condom can break). For that matter, withdrawal is precisely analo-

---

<sup>28</sup> If it is believable that adultery is never the best course, and if one believes that it was forbidden by God (and reinforced by Jesus), then one is obligated to try to follow their counsel. Deliberate disobedience at that point becomes rebellion as well as adultery.

<sup>29</sup> See Gen. 1:28. Before the entrance of sin, God said, “Be fruitful and multiply”, using the same terms which He used in Gen 9:1, there obviously with sexual activity in mind.

gous to having intercourse at the “wrong” time of the month (neither takes any equipment), and yet some systems would condemn one and condone the other.

But if one grants that sexual intercourse within the God-given limits is good, it may still be true that outside these limits it is bad. God apparently intended that the sexual relationship be permanent, exclusive, and publicly declared. That is a pretty good definition of marriage.<sup>30</sup>

As for crimping style, any ethical code worth mentioning, including a situationist one, will tell one not to do some things that one *feels* like doing. Witness Fletcher: “But as Christians they [a young unmarried couple] would never merely say ‘It’s all right if we *like* each other.’”<sup>31</sup> Nor are we allowed, even in modern society, to rape.<sup>32</sup> Sexual activity is not to be indulged in regardless of the circumstances.

The present societal sexual restrictions are not necessarily optimal, either. One of the unexpected results of the loss of sexual exclusiveness is the spread of disease. Promiscuity is unhygienic. One would not casually share toothbrushes with friends. One should be similarly cautious with genitals. This aspect was camouflaged by the advent of penicillin. But almost predictably, diseases resistant to antibiotics spread, such as herpes, papillomavirus, hepatitis B, and AIDS. If the population were to suddenly become monogamous, these diseases would die out within little more than a generation. Furthermore, an individual couple’s commitment to monogamy virtually ensures that they will not get these diseases. So this solution is workable on a personal as well as a societal level. And there is no other solution which approaches it in efficacy.<sup>33</sup>

I will not enlarge on the topic further, except to point out that the ideal as understood by Jesus is still given in Genesis 1 and 2, and we do well to heed this advice.

<sup>30</sup> Jesus took his model from Genesis 1 and 2. If one argues that these chapters were mythical, and expects me to take him/her seriously, then we need to go over the material in chapters 2-5 again. That is why they were presented first. Without them as a foundation, much of the rest of this book would be invalid.

<sup>31</sup> *Situation Ethics*, p. 104, italics his.

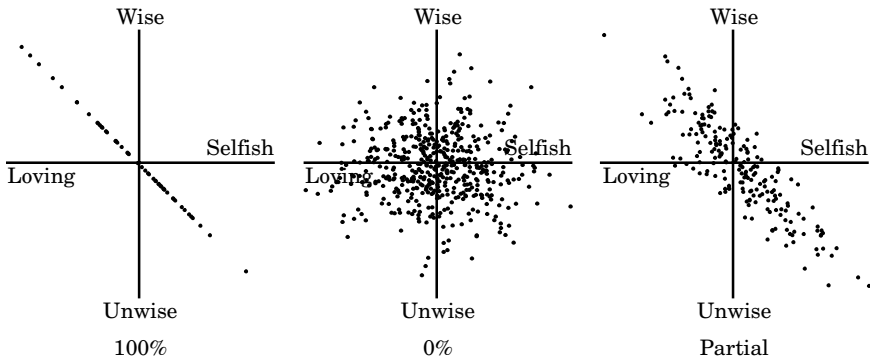
<sup>32</sup> That is not to say that it doesn’t go on, or even that it is always punished, but that it is morally and legally unacceptable.

<sup>33</sup> Some may wonder why so much space has been devoted to the seventh commandment compared to the others. It is because modern secular society usually considers sexual activity between consenting adults as victimless, not a crime, and not worthy of any sanctions, including from God. In fact, unless net damage is done, it is to be encouraged. This attitude has also infected the church (see Fletcher). Most of the other commandments are not nearly as controversial.



So love should be our motive, and the ten commandments should be at least one guide to conduct. One way of analyzing actions is to divide them into loving and unloving, and into wise and unwise, or best and more harmful. Some actions which are selfishly motivated may turn out to be objectively wise decisions, and some which may not be as wise may have been meant well. There should be some correlation, but for our purposes at least it may not be 100%. This explains why a term like “sin” which is used in one sense may be used in the other sense as well without the conscious differentiation always being made, and yet why it is not wise to confuse the two.

Correlations of wise with loving actions



But this model without modification would suggest that without outside force and with adequate knowledge, one who is loving will always act in the best way. Some will maintain this. If your works do not measure up to their standards, and you have been warned, then you are without excuse and must be just basically selfish.

This view has trouble with Romans 7 where Paul says, “For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members.” (vs. 22-3) Paul is apparently speaking from personal experience, as he uses the first person. Furthermore, it is evident from both the Bible (for example, 1 John 1:8-10) and personal experience<sup>34</sup> that con-

<sup>34</sup> No converted person that I know of has suddenly changed his actions to absolutely ideal ones on a permanent basis at the moment of conversion. Those who say they have are often the most blind.

version does not result in perfection understood in the usual sense of the word. This brings us to sin as addiction.

The idea that sin is addictive is as old as the Bible. Jesus noted in John 8:34 that “every one who commits sin is a slave to sin.” Proverbs 5:22 speaks of the sinner as, in the phraseology of the King James Version, “holden with the cords of his sins.” It is also becoming increasingly recognized today, as the model for alcoholism has been found to fit other compulsions to a degree which is surprising considering the varied physical nature of the practices involved. It might even be proposed that all sin rapidly becomes an addiction, and the only reason we do not have a Greedy People Anonymous or a Proudful People Anonymous or a Bigots Anonymous is because the sins in question are harder to define and detect.

This leads to the question of whether the 12-step program, arguably the most successful way to deal with addictions, is not inherently Christian in the highest sense. Perhaps both Christianity and 12-step programs might be benefited by a constructive dialogue (in fact, there has probably been some such dialogue).

It also means that we must be careful assigning motives to people who do what we dislike. They not only may not understand, but also they may be acting under compulsion (and our likes may need correcting).

Some would also define a sinful nature. Presumably this nature is demonstrable in some way; otherwise a scientific theology would have trouble accepting it. It could be equivalent to a characteristic of actions apart from the will (like an addiction at certain points), or it could be part of the attitude of selfishness, or else it could be otherwise demonstrable. Perhaps it is like the inherited tendency to alcoholism.

I will now stop building this model of sin, not because one could not go on, but because one could go on forever. Then the observations made so far would not be published. I will summarize by saying that there is no single completely adequate Biblical definition of sin, but that the term is used for a cluster of related concepts. Sin can be a matter of selfish attitude, a matter of harmful action, or it may be an undifferentiated combination of the two. It may also be an addiction, which is presumably equivalent to a character trait. It may even be a “nature”, whatever that is.

When we read the word in a Biblical text, or a theological construction, it behooves us to ask what definition is in the mind of the writer.