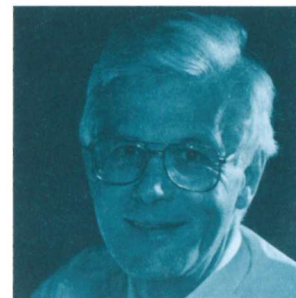


EDITORIAL

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WHAT ARE OUR CONTEMPORARY TABOO SUBJECTS? IT IS BLATANTLY OBVIOUS THAT 'SEX' CANNOT NOW EVEN BE CONSIDERED FOR THAT LIST, ALTHOUGH UNTIL 30 YEARS AGO IT WOULD HAVE BEEN A STRONG CANDIDATE. Sex,

of whatever kind, is not only talked about but observed and, on TV and film, demonstrated incessantly. While a few years ago ever-increasing ingenuity was needed to justify the inclusion of apparently gratuitous sex, this is no longer required. Death was another strong contender for the taboo of the decade until the year 2000, but there has been an increasing openness about the process of dying as well as the impact of death on families, with people being prepared to provide video diaries as well as share their reflections afterwards. The controversy over euthanasia, assisted suicides and abortions all feed into this growing openness. So what is our decade's taboo subject?

It is the recognition that 'sin' could well be a nomination for this 'award' that has encouraged us to explore this subject here in *The Bible in TransMission*. We dare to write about the unspeakable and explore the forbidden!

The issue of sin is a core concern for Christians – it is fundamental for theology and mission – but our society is marginalising the Church's social and emotional freedom to talk coherently and openly about it. The lack of common discourse does not mean, of course, that the reality of sin ceases to exist, but it does inevitably have an impact on the effectiveness of the Christian community to nurture believers and engage in our God-given mission. The lack of common discourse raises questions about how the Church might engage with society with the message of the good news of Jesus Christ, and how sin is to be understood and how it is experienced today.

These articles seek to address such questions. Here we explore the issue of sin as it is expressed in Scripture and as it can be encountered in our society today. We start with the biblical perspective – the understanding of sin, its origins, extent, impact on God's purposes and ultimately its eradication. We then turn to the mission angle and the need for the Christian community to engage with the ways in which sin might be recognised by our culture.

Nigel Wright focuses on the deep question of what the reality behind 'sin' actually is. He acknowledges that the primary testimony for the reality of evil is to be found, as far as the Christian tradition is concerned, in the biblical testimony and particularly that of the New Testament to Jesus. Given this, Wright explores the

issue as to whether evil is ontologically real (is there some supra-human reality, Satan and his cohorts?) or rather is evil real 'as a force within human social and spiritual existence' but lacking in ontological reality? The implication is then that while some language appears to be 'ontologically real' it is 'narrative and mythic'. He maintains that although this position is a minority voice within Christian history it has significant warrant to be reconsidered and is consistent with primary biblical perspectives and is 'more satisfying theologically'.

Derek Tidball's contribution is to ground us in our understanding of the biblical view of 'sin' by exploring Leviticus, particularly chapters 16 and 19. This surprising choice for many of us serves to illustrate well the many different strands such as sin as rebellion, sin as perversion, sin as alienation, as well as moral guilt. This reminds us not to allow our views to be reduced by societal pressure to some kind of 'breaking the law', let alone to succumb to other kinds of reductionism like sin as illness or acceptable diversity. These lead our society to incomprehension as to how to speak of, let alone deal with, sin and its impacts in communities. Tidball's challenge to us to have a biblically grounded, robust view of sin is timely!

According to Herbert McGonigle, John Wesley certainly had a robust view of sin, indeed of 'original sin'. Incensed by the writings of an English Socinianist, Dr John Taylor, Wesley wrote (1756–57) a 500-plus page rebuttal that exposed what he saw as the pernicious errors of Socinianism, with its reductionist Christology and repudiation of the doctrine of original sin. Wesley was convinced by an historical overview that 'Universal misery is at once a consequence and a proof of this universal corruption.' More fundamental still for Wesley was the biblical material, especially Genesis 3, 1 Corinthians 15.22 and Romans 5.12. At stake for Wesley was not only the 'seriousness of sin' and the need for divine redemption ('You were born in sin: Therefore "ye must be born again", born of God') but also the reality of God's grace. This article reminds us to think deeply about the implications of our understanding of sin for the whole of our theology and mission. Wesley was not challenging the views of Dr Taylor as an academic theologian so much as an evangelist.

Our next two articles seek to consider how people do experience 'sin' today, how this impacts on our Christian understanding and should help shape our

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► mission. Alan Mann argues that shame is a more widespread and useful concept in our age for understanding adequately the biblical notion of sin as 'missing the mark'. Although he recognises 'shame' is difficult to define and so difficult to see, it is fundamentally about a breakdown of relationship, isolation from one's self, others and ultimately God. Mann also considers the appropriate emphases that shame generates with respect to atonement and challenges us to be nuanced in the way we explain the core of the gospel to those beyond the confines of the Church. This article provides a serious challenge for all who are committed to communicating the gospel in culturally appropriate ways.

Chris Sunderland's article provides a more direct cultural engagement for us, as he underlines the theological implications of the environmental movement. He draws our attention to the way Christians 200 years ago wrestled with the evil of slavery, not only in terms of campaigning for its abolition but also in generating a consensus that it was sinful; something we all now accept as obvious. Similarly, our exploitation of the environment is becoming seen for what it is, another form of sin, not least because the Western Church has largely capitulated to the negative spiritual power of capitalism. Although environmentalists are suspicious of the Church, they should be considered as potential allies. Sunderland seeks to highlight the theological connections and also to open us to respond missionally to the difficulties they may have with the Church, as they perceive it.

Even more praxis based is the account of the Bringing Hope project by Carver Anderson and Nicola Smith. One of the biblically warranted aspects of sin is the damage it does to communities and society. A clear demonstration of this is the rise of youth violence, gangs and guns. Recognising the spiritual roots to this social evil, Anderson and Smith explain how Bringing Hope transforms individuals and stimulates hope in broken communities. The project has its basis in the words of Jesus in Luke 4.18: 'God's Spirit is on me; he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor, sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the burdened and battered free, to announce, This is God's year to act' (*The Message*). The story of Paul's conversion also provides guidance for them: it is the story about how one violent individual, Saul, was transformed; but it is also the story of how the communities he persecuted struggled to

accept his transformation and become part of it. This translates into peer-led mentoring and to the use of restorative justice to build up the traumatised community. This account can challenge us about the practical application of scriptural paradigms as well as the need to grapple with the seriousness and toughness of sin.

Colin Chapman's 'An Islamic understanding of sin and brokenness in society', might seem initially rather 'offbeat'. A moment's reflection, however, shows how relevant this is to the discussion. Chapman identifies five topics related to 'sin' from a Muslim perspective and then sympathetically (if inevitably on his own admission, 'simplistically') explains the Christian take on these issues. They include, the Fall, original sin, the reality of God forgiving, God's provision for human weakness and the contribution of Islamic societies to a life pleasing to God. Through this intriguing presentation he provides us with some basic material for sharing our beliefs about sin but also encourages us in our conversations to be 'vulnerable enough to speak about our own brokenness and bear witness to the healing that we have found in Christ'.

In the final piece, which is a departure from the usual update on recent developments at Bible Society, James Catford reflects on the death of his father and the transforming power of God to bring new life in the darkest times of life. James reminds us of the debilitating and counter-productive nature of sin. Righteousness is far more attractive and compelling. 'The best thing we can do with our lives is to invest them in God. It's the safest, happiest, most certain and most realistic thing we can do on this earth.'

This edition of *The Bible in TransMission* offers a valuable resource to challenge our thinking and enrich our mission and preaching. Through the lens of sin we are prompted to consider the potency of salvation and the significance of God's grace. We might well find ourselves challenged, not only to think again about 'sin' but to *do* mission in sinful contexts with a renewed confidence in the supremacy of the gospel of a good God. ■