

SIN IS MORE COMPLICATED THAN YOU THINK!

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THE QUEST FOR A SINLESS SOCIETY

Sin used to be easy. When I was a kid most agreed sin was about breaking God's law, especially the Ten Commandments, and that was about it. Somehow or another certain places were labelled sinful, especially the pub and the dance hall, and certain actions associated with them were considered sinful, especially smoking, drinking, dancing, playing cards, gambling and any sex outside of marriage. If I had asked the preachers I was hearing if that was their total understanding of sin they would have said it was more complicated than that. The idea of 'falling short of the glory of God' was mentioned but never really explained. Sin was said to be a three-letter word with 'T' in the middle. But essentially sin was a crime against God.

Then came the moral revolution of the sixties and sin became unpopular. In the anything goes society that was emerging, sin seemed to belong to the pre-war world which had been much more rigidly structured and had a heavy emphasis on institutionalised authorities and their associated rules. The old moral consensus was breaking down. Experimentation, diversity and tolerance became fashionable. Yet, there was no denying that there were people who did wrong, even if the categories of what was considered wrong was smaller than before. Wrongdoing wasn't just a relic of the past. It was the reality of the present. Post-war optimism and freedom had not created paradise. What was society to make of the continuing presence of wrongdoing, and, therefore, wrongdoers?

The first reaction was to judge them as sick rather than sinful.¹ Sin became an illness rather than a crime. The sinner was treated as a sick person who could be healed by medical treatment – surgery, drugs or therapy – or the imposition restorative justice. This relieved a person of the need to accept moral responsibility since they were no more culpable for their wrongdoing than they were of catching the flu. The extreme illustration of this came in Stanley Kubrick's film *A Clockwork Orange*² where a violent thug called Alex was thought to be cured of his aggression by treatment based on Skinner's behaviourist approach to psychology.

Like the mature adult who emerges from the gangling teenager, so more recently a refined view of sin as sickness has developed in which all wrongdoing is capable of rational explanation. Wrongdoers are viewed as sufferers. The cause of their suffering lies either with themselves, through, for example, a defective gene, or with society, through poverty or discrimination. The

problem may be one of heredity or environment but culpability still does not lie with the wrongdoers personally. Hence, villains have become victims. Offenders have become the offended. So the same trajectory of relieving individuals of moral responsibility is being followed.

At the same time, the category of wrongdoing continues both to shrink and be redefined. Behaviour thought to be unacceptable just 20 years ago is now frequently welcomed as a symptom of diversity and the freedom to choose one's lifestyle without restraint. Parliament has decriminalised and de-legislated much to do with private morals, believing it is not their business to tell people how to live. It has done so at some cost to the public purse. The freedom to choose how to live means, inevitably, than many make unwise choices and harm themselves or others. It is expected, of course, that the government, rather than the individual, should pay the costs involved to repair or minimize the damage done, through the health service, social services, or court system. So the price tag is met by society as a whole. To paraphrase Rabbi Jonathan Sacks who made the point succinctly: 'Our society believes in the privatisation of morality and the nationalisation of responsibility.'³ We have become, he says, a society of claimants, and that impoverishes all our lives.

Yet, while most morality has become a purely private affair, it has not disappeared altogether. Further redefinition has taken place and a new list of contemporary deadly sins is being drawn up, which emphasises the sins of discrimination, sins against children and financial malpractice. In the absence of any agreed moral consensus, a fragmented society in which the formation of individuals no longer happens in families or through voluntary associations, has difficulty in enforcing its disapproval at such practices. The absence of social capital,⁴ especially that element of it which relates to trust, means society can only enforce its will by resorting to detailed legislation in which grand moral principles are replaced by minute rules that anticipate every conceivable form of wrong-doing in the area concerned. These rules are then enforced by an army of inspectors (all of whom, of course, have to be inspected), of electronic surveillance and even of snoopers. A moral state has been replaced by a procedural state.⁵ Process rather than substance becomes all that matters. So we have been jettisoned into a new age of pharisaism.

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Society has paid a heavy price for treading this path. It still encounters evil, both on a personal, national and on an international scale, but it has no vocabulary or realistic way of dealing with it. Newspaper headlines scream 'Monster' at wrongdoers because they can't say anything else. And they still cry 'Evil', even though they have ceased to believe in it. Without a concept of sin, there is no possibility of forgiveness or new beginnings. Society, then, becomes despairing. The wrongdoer is condemned to remain on the offenders' register for a long time without hope of remission. Strategies of reform seem increasingly to fail while the resort to legislation becomes more and more frenetic. There must be a better way.

WISDOM FROM A SINFUL SOCIETY

There is a better way and it lies in a return to a biblical understanding of sin, and God's answer to it. Much insight can be gained from the book of Leviticus. It is dismissed by many as a book of arcane procedures, but that is far from the truth. It set before Israel a vision of how to live in a wholesome society and deal with the failures, both individual and social, that occurred. It provided a way for the social body to be repaired when damage had been done to it. Care certainly needs to be exercised in interpreting it.⁶ Uncleaness, for example, sometimes refers to a ritual rather than a moral uncleaness and is not automatically equated with sin. It teaches by way of analogy rather than logical argument, by drama rather than rational explanation. Even so, it offers rich insights for a society without a moral compass.

Leviticus is premised on Israel being the covenant people of God and in relationship with him which distinguishes them from others. Yet it recognises realistically that even they were sinners who from time to time did wrong and breached their covenant relationship with God and each other. It does not assume perfection, but rather the fall. A failure to admit this leads to an inability to rectify it. Leviticus assumes that people are made in the image of God and therefore morally responsible individuals. It treats them not as passive victims, though they may have been in Egypt (see Lev 26.13), but as active doers who can take steps to overcome their wrongs. The book is built on these foundations.

Sin is primarily an offence against God. Leviticus begins with the burnt offering (Lev 1.1–17), which expresses dramatically the default position of the children of Israel. They belong wholly to the Lord and represent

that by an animal being wholly sacrificed to him; nothing is withheld from God. The offering is said 'to make atonement' (Lev 1.4). Forgiveness for specific sin may not be in mind here, but rather the need to be accepted by God, in spite of one's sinful nature.⁷ Other offerings, such as the guilt offering (Lev 5.14–6.7; 7.1–10), teach that sacrifice is needed because God has been offended in specific ways.

Sin is also an offence against one's neighbour. The extraordinary thing is how easily Leviticus moves from a breach of faith with God to a breach of faith with one's fellow citizens. Two examples, among many, illustrate this. The guilt offering was required when 'the Lord's holy things' had been abused (Lev 5.15), when a person does something 'forbidden in any of the Lord's commands' (Lev 5.17) and equally when anyone deceived their neighbour (Lev 6.1). Similarly, in Leviticus 19, the great ethical chapter of the book, rules about dealing with God and with one's neighbours or fellow Israelites jostle side by side without any apparent attempt to separate them neatly one from another. Since Leviticus is written by priests and is a very orderly book, the apparent disorder here is significant. It teaches us that although sin against God and sin against one's fellow human beings are distinguishable, and not to be confused, they are inseparable. Sinning against one's neighbour is to be 'unfaithful to the Lord' (Lev 6.1).

Sin is inward and endemic. Leviticus is not only concerned with outward actions and ritual behaviour. Chapter 19 has a good deal to say about inner motivations and the emotions which give rise to behaviour (see, for example, vv. 18 and 32–34). The actions condemned clearly arise from emotions and attitudes and that are formed in the inner self. While some offerings relate to specific actions the annual Day of Atonement (Lev 16) was more comprehensive in its remit. Its purpose, as is stressed, was to remove 'all the sins of Israel' (v. 21), whether known or unknown, committed or omitted, outward action or inner attitude. That this Day was to be celebrated annually, even though many thousands of other sacrifices had been offered during the year, was a way of acknowledging that sin is deep within human nature, endemic and hard to conquer. It ensured that even the sins of which they were not conscious were forgiven. Whatever victory they may have had over it this year, until the coming of Christ, there was still need for another sacrifice next year. Thomas Long stated this strongly: 'the whole Day of Atonement ritual, repeated annually, is like a sledgehammer to the human spirit,

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NOTES

1. This view is explored in K Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1975).
2. The controversial film, produced in 1971, was based on Antony Burgess's novel, published in 1962.
3. J Sacks, *The Politics of Hope* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997), p. 132.
4. See R Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York/London: Simon & Schuster, 2000), especially pp. 288–89; and J Sacks, *The Home We Build Together: Recreating Society* (London: Continuum, 2007), pp. 130–2.
5. On the procedural state see, Sacks, *Politics*, p. 120.
6. On these issues see G Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1979); and D Tidball, *The Message of Leviticus* (BST; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004).
7. Wenham, *Leviticus*, p. 55f.
8. T Long, *Hebrews* (Interpretation Commentaries; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), p. 101.
9. AD Hayes, 'Atonement in the Book of Leviticus,' *Interpretation* 52.1 (1998), p. 13.
10. On this paragraph see D Tidball, *The Message of the Cross* (BST; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), pp. 71–4; and J Goldingay, 'Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God', in John Goldingay (ed.), *Atonement Today* (London: SPCK, 1995), pp. 39–53.
11. See Tidball, *Leviticus*, pp. 216–48.
12. The Gospels do not always clearly distinguish between salvation from sickness and salvation from sin. 'Saved' and 'healed' are sometimes synonyms. This area needs further exploration in a society that views sin as sickness.
13. R Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to read the Bible politically* (London: SPCK, 1989), pp. 24–6.

► pounding away year after year with its constant battering away on the theme of sin ... it works only to drub into us that we are sinful, sinful, sinful – guilty, and unacceptable to God.⁸

Leviticus uses a variety of vocabulary regarding sin, especially in reporting the Day of Atonement, to make sure that 'all bases are covered'.⁹ It is 'wickedness', 'rebellion' and 'sins' (Lev 16.21 NIV) or 'iniquities', 'transgressions' and 'sin' (NRSV). These varied terms show sin to be complex. Sin is wilful rebellion against a legitimate authority, political or parental. From this perspective, it is the commission of a legal offence and a break of relationships. But it also included other types of wrongdoing. At the same time, it is about a perversion of our human nature and a straying from the path, consciously or not. The context also makes it clear that sin is moral and spiritual pollution that defiles those who commit it and the community to which they belong. Sin is more than mere disobedience, though it is not less than that.¹⁰

Several other features of Leviticus' understanding of sin are relevant for our society. *It refuses to accept that sin is a private matter*, of no concern to anyone except the one who commits it. Sin profoundly and inevitably affects the whole community. We aren't isolated individuals but people in relationship and therefore what I do matters to others. The chapters calling people to live holy lives (17–26) are premised on that. For example, chapters 18 and 19 – the one detested and the other so admired (in parts) today – both have the same objective that lies not only in encouraging holiness before God but the creation of strong, healthy and stable societies where the social capital is high.¹¹

Its approach to sickness and the way to become clean again (chs 13–15) may well provide a basis, through analogy, for seeing sin as sickness though not in any simple way.¹² Maybe, at this point, contemporary society has a true, if partial, insight.

Leviticus also recognises that *the way to restrain sin is not to provide a comprehensive set of legal statutes*, as our society seeks to do, but to set before God's people the vision of the sort of society they should be.¹³ It does this sometimes by laying down grand principles (e.g. 19.15–18) and sometimes by providing specific illustrations of its vision (such as, 19.9–10, 27–28) and sometimes both at once (as in 19.32). Its concern is not procedural but that of the formation of healthy character and stable relationships.

The final word is this: for all its dwelling on sin and wrongdoing, the message of Leviticus is that God has provided a way of making amends, of atonement and therefore of forgiveness and starting over again. Unlike contemporary society, it does not leave a person forever condemned by their wrongdoing but gives the means by which sin may be carried away (Lev 16.22) and the sinner relieved of its burden. ■

BIBLE SOCIETY RELEASES *THE PASSION*

The Passion – TV's first full-scale dramatic treatment of the Gospels for 30 years – made it onto the front page of the Radio Times and was stripped across peak time viewing slots on BBC One this Easter. Churches promoted it to their communities, around four million people watched each episode and critics lavished praise for its 'vitality' and 'gritty take on the Easter epic'. But by Easter Sunday the rolling credits of the closing episode finally gave way to TV normality. What now?

Since Easter, a small team of Bible Society staff and experienced education writers and advisers have been hard at work to deliver a major resource including the full series on DVD and a raft of church and schools resources.

'Aside from making compelling viewing, the film is also a vital tool to introduce and explore the Christian faith to a wide and modern audience,' Michael Pfundner, Bible Society's Bible and Church Development Officer explains.

'To help churches and teachers make the most of this opportunity, Bible Society commissioned creative and reflective activities suitable for churches and schools, comprehensive RE resources for Key Stage 3, GCSE and 16+ RE and has developed discussion resources for home groups and enquirers' groups. These will be included with a 2 DVD set of the series on an accompanying CD Rom, so that materials can be printed off or projected. A printed school teachers' book will also be available.'

'The series tells a fuller and less harrowing version of Jesus' last week in Jerusalem than Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*,' Michael explains. 'It gives churches, school teachers and lovers of good drama an opportunity to experience and explore the Easter story that is really too good to miss.'

To find out more and register your interest, go to www.biblesociety.org.uk/thepassion