



Position **of the New Apostolic Church on** **“The concept of sin”**



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The concept of sin

abridged version

1. Current situation

In the course of discharging our pastoral commission, we repeatedly experience that different infringements on the same commandment are by no means deemed equally serious. For example, we would feel that there is a difference between a thief's burglaries to sustain a luxurious lifestyle and a desperate, impoverished mother's shoplifting of a loaf of bread at the supermarket to feed her hungry child. Both have broken the same commandment: "You shall not steal." – and yet we cannot help thinking that the sinfulness of these respective deeds should be differently weighted. When we are confronted with such situations as ministers, we must remember that the persons concerned find themselves in a dilemma. How will God assess my deeds? Will He have understanding for me and my actions? Will He take into account the desperate nature of my situation?

Other questions arise too: Are there "major" and "minor" sins? Can one sin weigh more than another? Or must sin always be understood absolutely as a violation of divine norms?

This elaboration will explore just such questions.

The basis for responding to these questions is the Bible. Jesus Christ Himself has set the standards that apply. He always sees sinners as human beings in need of caring attention and help, even in circumstances that Mosaic Law harshly condemns. On the other hand, Christ does not hesitate to clearly expose sin and sinful behaviour for what they are.

2. Definition of sin based on Biblical evidence

Biblical evidence points to the following:

- Neither the Old nor the New Testament presents an exhaustive "doctrine of sin" or a systematic and complete "list of sins".
- God Himself always establishes righteous conduct by revealing His will. Mankind is instructed to inquire into God's will and to act accordingly.
- All deliberate thoughts, words, and deeds contrary to God's will and nature are sinful. It is also sinful to deliberately neglect to do good (James 4: 17).



- The Holy Scripture clearly defines sin as any violation of the Ten Commandments (cf. Exodus 20: 20). It is also sinful to break vows made to God (cf. Deuteronomy 23: 22), and not to believe in Christ (cf. John 16: 9). Covetousness, envy, and the like also constitute sin (cf. Galatians 5: 19-21; 1 Corinthians 6: 9-10; Ephesians 5: 5).

The following definition emerges from this: Sin constitutes everything opposed to God's will and contrary to God's nature. Consequently sin is absolute.

In assessing whether a deed is sinful or not, the only deciding factor is the divine will, as it is

- manifested in the Holy Scripture, and
- revealed in timely fashion by the Holy Spirit through the chief apostle and the apostolate, acting in the spirit of Christ's Gospel.

God endowed human beings with their own free will. They themselves can and must decide what they will do and not do in their circumstances of life. In this respect they are personally accountable to God and themselves for their deeds. This is called "personal responsibility".

By no means can human beings decide on their own what constitutes sin.

3. Differentiating between sin and guilt

The Bible speaks of both sin and guilt. In part they are used interchangeably; in part they are assigned different meanings. The distinction between the two concepts is shown most clearly in the words of the Son of God, when He defended His disciples who, according to the Pharisees, had broken the law and thus committed a sin: "Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath (Note: meaning that they sin by breaking the third Commandment!), and are blameless?" (Matthew 12: 5).

Human beings sin whenever they violate God's declared will. By sinning they burden themselves with guilt before God. The extent of their guilt can vary however. Thus, for example, the guilt of a person who is aware that his/her conduct is wrong must be deemed greater than the guilt of a person who – in line with his/her religious beliefs or current legal norms – is not conscious of any wrongdoing. The circumstances under which a sin is committed can play a role in determining the degree of guilt (see the above examples of the impoverished mother and the unscrupulous thief).

We consider sin to be that which God holds against the sinner, because he is accountable to God for his conduct. Only God can assess a person's degree of guilt. This means that guilt is relative. Sin however is absolute.



When assessing guilt, we may assume that God will take into account the various influences to which human beings are exposed, such as:

- general circumstances of life,
- social structures,
- legal norms of the state,
- need,
- pathological dispositions, and hereditary factors.

In some cases, the guilt resulting from a particular sin may be virtually non-existent. In other cases however, it may be so serious as to "cry out to God" (Genesis 4: 10).

The conclusion that we must distinguish between sin as being absolute and guilt as being of relative magnitude is of great significance in practical pastoral care.

4. Consequences of sin

All human misery, e.g. death, disease, fear, pain, and suffering, is ultimately rooted in sin. Sin increases the gap separating mankind from God. On the way toward a complete separation between mankind and God (which is an unavoidable consequence of sin) sinners become unrepentant and hard-hearted. Sin increasingly diminishes their strength to overcome. Ultimately the wages of sin is death (Romans 6: 23). Here a distinction must be made between physical death (i.e. the passing away of a human being) and spiritual death (i.e. complete separation between man and God).

5. Grace – forgiveness of sins

Thanks to the grace of God, forgiveness of sins is possible. It is God Himself who erases our sins. God in His omnipotence can always forgive sins. Thus Jesus was able to pronounce forgiveness of sins even before He had brought His sacrifice.

Through the forgiveness of sins, God completely erases sins and annuls the guilt that the sinner has incurred.

Forgiveness of sin does not eliminate consequences and responsibilities associated with the state or third parties. Legally prescribed punishments and the obligation to make restitution for damages are not rescinded by the forgiveness of sins.

Through His sacrificial death, Jesus Christ created the prerequisites for His ambassadors to forgive sins after His ascension into heaven (cf. John 20: 23). Through His sacrifice, the Saviour reconciled mankind with God. Jesus' perfect sacrifice replaced the imperfect sacrificial service of the Old Testament (Hebrews 8: 12-13).



Nevertheless, sinners also have to meet certain conditions in order to have their sins forgiven by God. These include:

- Faith in Jesus Christ
- Belief that the authority to forgive sins in the name of Jesus is vested in the apostolate. (The apostles have been given the authority to forgive sins in Jesus' name, however the absolution pronounced by priestly ministers in the stead of the apostle has the same effect as if the apostle himself had pronounced it).
- The realisation that they have sinned and are in need of grace
- The heartfelt desire for reconciliation with God
- Acknowledging their sins before God, as expressed in the supplication in the Lord's Prayer: "... forgive us our debts..."
- Remorse and repentance. This is associated with a desire to make good their guilt towards others
- The serious resolution to overcome faults and weaknesses
- Willingness to forgive and be reconciled,
- Grasping the absolution in faith.

6. The role of pastoral care

It is always the minister's function to identify sin, if only to guard against it. Thus it is necessary to describe certain modes of conduct as sinful.

When moral dilemmas are raised during pastoral discussions, the difference between sin and guilt should be made clear. This will help the repentant sinner tangibly feel the love of God and the grace of Christ.

At all times the power of grace should be stressed, without playing down the sin.

The objective of pastoral care is complete renewal through Christ for eternal life with God in the new creation. The cause and effect of sin – namely the Devil and death, and thereby sin itself – will no longer be found there. The minister's responsibility in pastoral care also includes the important task of providing intensive support for those who have suffered on account of the sinful behaviour of others.

7. Sin in the beyond

A person's attitude is not altered by physical death. Thus it is conceivable that such mental states as irreconcilability, hatred, and envy also exist in the beyond. Already in the Sermon on the Mount, Christ identified such states as sinful.

The Lord Jesus also described the failure to believe in Him as sin (John 16: 9). Death does not make a believer out of an unbeliever.



Moreover it is possible to sin in the beyond by rebelling against God's will, knowingly or unknowingly rejecting the divine offer of grace, or persisting in an ungodly attitude.

From this follows the far-reaching conclusion that an act of overcoming occurs when an unbelieving soul begins to believe, or when a soul abandons an ungodly attitude. Such a soul may then be numbered among the overcomers.

In the beyond souls can therefore sin as well as overcome.

Nevertheless, we can assume that those who have died in Christ will experience no worsening as regards the condition of their souls. Relevant statements on this point can be found in the Wisdom of Solomon, particularly in chapter 3: 1-3 and chapter 4: 10-11, 14.

8. Conclusion

- Sin and guilt are to be clearly differentiated in future. A conscious distinction must be made between these two concepts. Sin is absolute whereas guilt is relative. Thus in caring for the souls, ministers can provide comfort and new courage in special cases, without downplaying the sin itself.
- Sin must be identified as such.
- Everyone in a position of responsibility within the Church must exercise caution when referring to certain modes of behaviour as sin. It is reserved for the chief apostle, together with the apostolate, to provide clear directives.
- Sinning is not restricted to the body.
- Overcoming is also possible in the beyond.

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