



WHEN RACISM BECOMES MUNDANE: PROCLAIMING A HOLISTIC HAMARTIOLOGY

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“But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today’s church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.”

Martin Luther King, Jr., *“Letter from a Birmingham Jail”*¹

“We will work to be an example of how we, as brothers and sisters on this earth, should treat each other. Now, more than ever, the illusions of division threaten our very existence... We must find a way to look after one another, as if we were one single tribe.”

T’Challa, *Black Panther*

INTRODUCTION

How can the American evangelical church rise up to represent Christ in the midst of the overwhelming weight of our racial history? How can the preacher proclaim prophetically from the pulpit to a people divided regarding the state of race in our Union?

To claim I have the answers would be naïve at best or perpetuating a history of hypocritical colonization at worst. I write as a sister who has and is continuing to grapple with my

own failings in racial justice. Yes, I have been through the wringer as a young evangelical woman working at the intersection of Biblical Studies and Homiletics. I know a weariness of waiting years for those in power to muster their own courage to face the tension that faithfulness to justice requires. But my own passion for racial justice does not derive from a false equivalency between my own experiences of systems not “ready” for me and those of my brothers and sisters of color. My conviction began out of an academic study of Romans. Today, I write to address just one of the dangers I see in the entanglement between the American Church and our Western society: a neglect of preaching a holistic understanding of sin.² Our homilies and hymns do not sufficiently teach sin as more than individual actions. I do not believe much of the American evangelical church will get racial injustice “right” until she gets her hamartiology right.

For too long, much of the white American evangelical church has struggled to conceive of and address sins on “systemic” levels because this language is frequently linked to Marxism. However, Karl Marx does not have a monopoly on depicting the extent of human depravity. Sin began infecting systems not in communist revolutions but in a Garden where human sin left a curse on the ecosystem. Unfortunately, in a suspicion and dismissal of liberation theology as “unorthodox,” many evangelicals have overlooked how some elements of liberation and *Christus Victor* models fill in holes by left by an exclusively penal substitutionary motif of the atonement. In this reflective essay, I will briefly sketch how a biblical hamartiology involves viewing sin as a ruling power and as both individual and societal acts of rebellion against God. I will then demonstrate how preaching a holistic view of sin (and thus a more holistic redemption) will equip the Church to more faithfully dialogue about the realities of racism today.

SIN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

We often portray the Fall as the individual rebellious lunch of Adam and Eve which resulted in humans as “sinful and separated from God, so we cannot know Him personally or experience His love.”³ However, both practical and biblical theologians are increasingly recognizing the importance of viewing the impacts of the Fall on our relationships with God, with self, with others, and with creation.⁴ In Genesis 3:14, James McKeown makes the important observation that while men and women experience consequences from the first sin, “only the serpent and the ground are *cursed*.”⁵ Our sin has had devastating effects on human social relationships as well as on the created world.

The Old Testament narratives continue to reveal the holistic nature of sin. The murder of brothers degrades into violence so abhorrent that God must comprehensively cleanse His own creation to begin anew with Noah (Genesis 4-6). The stories of the Patriarchs recount devastating generational sins of favoritism and fear. Exodus portrays Pharaoh’s ethnic prejudice against the Hebrews, which leads to structural sins of slavery, infanticide, brutal uses of force, and religious discrimination (Exodus 1-12). Although they were permitted to enter the Promised Land, Caleb and Joshua had to wander the wilderness for thirty years because of the sin of their countrymen (Numbers 13-14). Achan’s greed in the Conquest results in the death of his fellow Israelites in battle (Joshua 7). Eli’s sons establish corrupt policies in the sacrificial system (1 Sam 2:12-17). David’s “individual” sin against Bathsheba and Uriah leads to sexual abuse of power and the death of an innocent man, as well as the eventual upheaval of his family (2 Samuel 11-12). David’s “individual” sin of conducting a forbidden census results in the deaths of 70,000 of his people. (1 Chronicles 21). Solomon and Hezekiah’s sins led to their progeny losing their kingdoms (1 Kings 11-12; 2 Kings 20).

The Old Testament prophets and priests cry out against both individual and corporate sins of Israel and Judah. Elijah

confronts Ahab on murdering and confiscating the land of Naboth (1 Kings 21). Azariah and 80 other priests rebuke King Uzziah for burning incense to the LORD (2 Chronicles 26:16-18). Further, YHWH also condemns the communal sins of Israel and Judah through the prophets. YHWH begins his list of four sins of Judah in Amos with “they sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed” (Amos 2:6b-7a). Habakkuk laments that it appears God has ignored the violence, injustice, and destruction committed by Judah, where “the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails” (Habakkuk 1:2-4). Malachi confronts the priests for their insincere religious rituals as well as Judah for marrying women who worship foreign gods and for their injustice (Malachi 1:7-3:5).

Not only do the prophets *confront* the both individual and communal sins but they also *confess* communal sins. Daniel fasts in sackcloth and ashes, confessing corporate sins of wickedness rebellion refusal to listen to the prophets. He prays, “We and our kings, our princes and our ancestors are covered with shame, LORD, because we have sinned against you” (Daniel 9:8). While still in exile, Nehemiah prays, “I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s family, have committed against you” (Nehemiah 1:6).

This brief overview hits only but a few examples of how sin throughout the OT is both individual and communal. To be clear, the people of Israel had a special relationship with God, with certain corporate covenantal blessings and obligations. We cannot claim the same today. Neither can we expect the God who held foreign nations—outside the bounds of the Mosaic and Davidic Covenants—accountable for their sins to spare His judgment from us. Scripture reveals that the sins of individuals (particularly in leadership) as well as the sins of communities have consequences. The OT shows example after example about how leaders lacking integrity consistently lead their people into corruption and oppression. Although we do not have a land covenant with YHWH, Scripture clearly reveals that we worship

a God who defends the vulnerable, does not tolerate oppression, and holds communities accountable for their sin. Scripture also shows the faith leaders of Israel and Judah with the courage to confront both individual and societal sins, as well as to confess the sins of their own communities.

SIN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the New Testament discussions of sin, three areas are noteworthy: the depiction of sin as both a ruling power and as individual actions, the imagery of the Greek word for forgiveness, and the redemption of all creation. Evangelistic tracts are quick to quote Romans 3:23 as evidence that every individual is guilty of sin. However, Paul offers a more layered hamartiology. As Yusufu Turaki writes, "The word 'sin' is used in two ways in the Apostle Paul's letters. When it is used in the singular, 'sin' usually refers to the sinful nature we inherited from Adam. This root sin corrupts everything we do. In Romans 5:12-8:12, Paul discusses the origin, nature, power and effect of our sinful nature and how to deal with its effects on us."⁶ Moreover, Romans 6 uses imagery to portray sin as a reigning power rather than as an individual action.⁷ Fleming Rutledge summarizes the message of Romans 6:

The clear implication here is that there is no way for the human being to move from the domain of Sin to the domain of God's righteousness unless there is an invasion of the kingdom of Sin from outside. The domain of Sin leads to Death; its goal and purpose (*telos*) is Death. There is no way out of this downward-moving spiral of dissolution. But here is the good news: 'You have been set free from [the domain of] Sin and have become slaves to God; your fruit is holiness and the *telos* is eternal life' (cf. Rom. 6:22).⁸

The wonder of the Gospel is not only that we are justified but also that we are set free from Sin's dominion.⁹

Additionally, we must draw on the vivid imagery of Scripture's depiction of forgiveness. The dominant word for forgiveness in the New Testament, ἀφεσις (verbal root ἀφίημι) means, "the act of freeing and liberating from something that confines; the act of freeing from an obligation, guilt, or punishment."¹⁰ Inherent to the idea of "forgiveness" in the NT is a freedom from the power of and guilty verdict of sin.

Finally, throughout the New Testament we see a promise of the redemption of all creation. In Romans 8, Paul reminds us that creation *groans* as it waits "in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:21). God promises to reconcile the κόσμος in 2 Corinthians 5:17. In Revelation 21, we see the hope of Isaiah 65:17 actualized in a new earth and heaven. Revelation 22 shows the Garden restored and the tree of life with leaves "for the healing of the nations," and "no longer will there be any curse." (Revelation 22:2-3). Creation will be freed from the curse of humanity's sins. Our societal relations will be healed. God Himself will wipe away every tear from our eyes. Yes, the Gospel is about Jesus paying the penalty of our sins so that when we die, we can go to heaven and be with Jesus. But the hope of what Christ accomplished on the cross is so much more than an exclusively individualistic redemption.

PREACHING A HOLISTIC HAMARTIOLOGY

When we do not preach a holistic view of sin, we shortchange our listeners from hearing of *all* the goodness of the good news. But some may still hesitate to call sin "social," "structural," or "systemic." What is systemic sin? I propose that understanding "systemic sin" requires a recognition that sin reigns as a ruling power, using human institutions to advance its priorities. Systemic sin is that sin which infiltrates the systems of human society. It is not Marxist to assume that structures can be sinful; it is a simple recognition that "systems" of society are not mere amoral abstractions; they are designed by sinful humans who yield to the authority of Sin. Stephen Ray explains that structural

sin “specifically refers to the workings of sin in the world in magnitudes beyond the scope of individual actions.” He continues,

it is the act of recognizing that sin can so inundate the fabric of things that every thought, every action, and the material conditions under which those thoughts provoke actions *all* proceed along lines that are in place because of the workings of sin...¹¹

Ray then provides an example:

Put another way, decrepit and underfunded schools that prepare children for an economy which no longer exists, structurally dilapidated communities distant from economic opportunity and surrounded by environmentally threatening industries or their remnants, whose physical and economic condition breeds crime and despair, are taken to be the *natural* condition of Black people, thereby leaving unquestioned the ways that fiscal policy, housing practices and extra-legal violence have created these conditions, again and again.¹²

More pointedly he writes that structural sin is “when sin becomes the mundane.”¹³ Too often, we blame “living in a Fallen world” for inequalities without pausing to investigate how fallen humans and fallen systems might be perpetuating disparities. When we hear that “an estimated one-third of black male Americans will be in state or federal prison at some point in their lives,”¹⁴ when we learn that the age-adjusted COVID-19 mortality rate among Native Americans in New Mexico is 18 times higher than Hispanics and 23 times higher than whites,¹⁵ when we realize the disproportionate numbers of missing black children who receive significantly less media attention¹⁶ –when we hear these statistics and sigh, saying to ourselves, “it is what it is,” we have allowed sin to become mundane.

So, how do we preach a holistic view of sin? As evangelicals, we draw from the richness of the Reformation and proclaim both the wrongness of individual sins and the hope of the Gospel that we each can receive justification through the substitutionary death of Christ. But we also preach against the sins of our society. We preach the whole corpus of Scripture, including passages that condemn oppression. By understanding sin as systemic, we can recognize how our greed for our property values perpetuates housing and school segregation today. By preaching a holistic view of sin, we can account for how African Americans have been sentenced to life in prison for shoplifting socks or stealing a loaf of bread.¹⁷ By preaching against systemic sin, we can equip our church elders to plan for how we would respond if we discover our church or institutional property lies on land corruptly stolen from a native tribe. If sin is both individual and systemic, we can conceive that racism is both individual and systemic. We can recognize that over 300 years of systems of laws designed to oppress violently (and at times ethnically cleanse) certain people groups could not be entirely eradicated in a few decades.

By preaching a holistic view of sin, we can establish a communal remembrance of the sins of our history—from chattel slavery to Native American genocide and enslavement, from Jim Crow to internment camps to mass incarceration. We do not fear that an admission of the “bad” parts of our history might expose that *we* are “bad”—we already know that there is none righteous. We can gently move our listeners to understand that our Founding Fathers were fallen. As Christians, we can work through the trauma of our history and take an honest appraisal of the sins of our community, because we pledge allegiance to the King of Glory before any loyalty to Old Glory. We can love our country while recognizing that YHWH gave us no land covenant from sea to shining sea. We can remember and confess both individual and systemic sins without fear because we know that there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Confessing personal prejudices does not free the 1/9 death row inmates who are innocent. Social programs and political policies alone cannot free us from the dominion of Sin. As we preach a more holistic view of sin, may we not throw away our shot to preach the fullness of the Good News that the King of Kings will redeem all things and invites us to give the world a glimpse of the Kingdom to come.

NOTES

1. Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," April 16, 1963, full text from: https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.
2. Because of the urgency of the cultural moment, I write as an American with a priority of writing to fellow American brothers and sisters. However, I would encourage brothers and sisters to apply a holistic understanding of sin to their own cultural moments, for no society is immune to the systemic effects of sin.
3. "The Four Spiritual Laws," accessed August 30, 2020. <http://www.4laws.com/laws/englishkgrp/default.htm>.
4. Yusufu Turaki, *The Trinity of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 112.
5. James McKeown, *Genesis*, Two Horizons Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 36.
6. Yusufu Turaki, *The Trinity of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 117-118.
7. Aageson argues that δουλειν portrays ἀμαρτια as the controlling power and ημας as those under dominion. J. W. "Control' in Pauline Language and Culture : A Study of Rom 6," *New Testament Studies* 42, no. 1 (1996): 75-89.
8. Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 369.
9. In *The Crucifixion*, Rutledge demonstrates for how a substitutionary motif underlies a *Christus victor* motif of the

atonement and argues that both models are essential for understanding the extent of what Christ accomplished on the Cross.

10. William Arndt et al., [*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 155.

11. Stephen Ray, "Structural Sin," in *T&T Clark Companion to the Doctrine of Sin*, eds Keith L. Johnson and David Lauber (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 417.

12. Stephen Ray, "Structural Sin," 423-424.

13. Stephen Ray, "Structural Sin," 417.

14. Jonathan Rothwell "How the War on Drugs Damages Black Social Mobility," *Brookings.edu*, September 30, 2014, accessed June 16, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2014/09/30/how-the-war-on-drugs-damages-black-social-mobility/>.

15. Jens Gould, "Native Americans dying at a much higher rate from COVID-19," *SantaFeNewMexican.com*, August 4, 2020, accessed August 31, 2020. https://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/coronavirus/native-americans-dying-at-much-higher-rate-from-covid-19/article_392ffc22-d66a-11ea-bbd1-8fe3a1929340.html.

16. 37% of missing children are African American even though they only make up 14% of the population of U.S. children. See: Harmeet Kaur, "Black kids go missing at a higher rate than white kids. Here's why we don't hear about them," *CNN*. November 3, 2019, accessed August 31, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/11/03/us/missing-children-of-color-trnd/index.html>.

17. Bryan Stevenson's organization, Equal Justice Initiative, addresses issues with "Three Strikes" laws in several states. According to EJI, two-thirds of those serving life or "virtual life" sentences were convicted of non-violent crimes. See: "Excessive Punishment," *Equal Justice Initiative*, accessed August 31, 2020. <https://eji.org/issues/excessive-punishment/>.