

Sin-proneness (3)

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THE DOCTRINE of sin is not uncontroversial, and it is wise to explain what we mean by the word 'sin'. We can use the words 'sin', 'sinful', 'sinner' to characterise men doing wrong; but we can also use these words to talk about their *nature* and say it is *sinful*.

Sin-proneness and the personification of sin

Some say that the concept of sin-proneness is a *social* concept, whilst others say that it is a *physical* concept.¹ The social idea is that man is a social and gregarious creature; this is his (social) nature. Hence, in one sense, if we describe man's nature as sinful, we are making a general observation about his social behaviour. Sinful behaviour is a worldwide social phenomenon with great influence and power. When Paul personifies 'sin' he is personifying this social phenomenon, he is not making any points about man's physical nature. The choice of metaphor—'sin' is a master—is made because of the influence society has on individual behaviour.

However, a different kind of explanation is provided by the approach that takes 'sin-proneness' to be a comment about man's *physical* nature. Here the idea is that the social phenomenon of sin "entered" the world because men were *made sinners* (that is, sin-prone). The proposal on this view is that Paul personifies sin, but his choice of character—master/king/ruler—is dictated by his understanding that there is a physical cause underpinning the social behaviour.

The evidence for this second approach lies in how Paul chooses to characterise the dwelling place of the master, 'sin'. Paul locates the master, 'sin', in himself:

"If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but '*sin*' that dwelleth in me" (Rom. 7:16,17);

"For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but '*sin*' that dwelleth in me" (vv. 19,20).

This 'sin' works through desires, as shown by the following two verses:

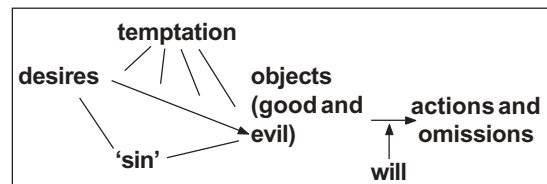
"Let not 'sin' therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in *the lusts* [*desires*] thereof" (6:12);

"But 'sin', taking occasion by the commandment, *wrought in me all manner of concupiscence* [*desire*]. For without the law sin was dead" (7:8).

'Sin' works with the members of the body (7:5,23). An example of this is given by James's personification of the tongue: "Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell" (Jas. 3:5,6). As a result, 'sin' produces death "in" Paul (Rom. 7:13).

It is apparent in Romans that, when Paul personifies 'sin' as dwelling in man, he is focused on the mental make-up of man. When Paul talks of the 'sin' in the flesh, he is not talking about arms and legs but of the mental make-up. When Paul says that "no good thing" dwells in his flesh, and he identifies this "no good thing" as 'sin'—the master—he is not engaging in biological description, but rather he is focused on man's mental make-up, he talks particularly of desires (Rom. 7:5,8).

Paul's use of the metaphor of a dwelling place for 'sin' (the members) is telling. His ascription of certain kinds of behaviour to 'sin' is also significant. He makes 'sin' into an owner of certain kinds of behaviour. In this language Paul focuses on human desire as the instrument used by 'sin' (see diagram below).



1. The notion of a 'physical' concept should be explained at this point. Man is a physical creature and his brain is an information-processing organ. If patterns of behaviour are not only learned but the result also of dispositions and tendencies that come with birth, then there is a basis for saying that men are born with a proneness to sin.

The weakness of the will needs to be carefully distinguished from desire, and Paul's personification of sin is all about human desire. The points that Paul makes about the will show that the will is impotent to handle the power of 'sin'. In the diagram we can see that human desires and the will have different positions in Paul's explanatory framework.

Paul supplies conditional analyses of the state of man and the structure of man's will. His statements amount to the view that the will of a redeemed man is weak; he does that which is against his judgement, or he omits to do that which his judgement favours. On the one hand, what Paul would do, he omits to do; his will is weak in its resolve to carry out what he knows to be the right course of action. On the other hand, his will is weak in its power to resist the things he hates: ". . . I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I" (7:14,15).

Paul presents the picture of 'sin' owning certain kinds of behaviour, and therefore steps behind the behaviour to give a deeper causal² explanation of his behaviour involving 'sin' and desire. It is this shift, behind the scenes as it were, that prevents us from saying that the personification of 'sin' as a master is just a personification of behaviour; it has something to do with human *desire*.

We can see from Paul's classical statement of the weakness of the will in Romans 7:15-21 that this aspect of human nature is *not* part of his personification of sin. His will represents a 'law' that is weak to resist the 'law' that is in his members, the law of sin:

"I find then a law,³ that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members" (vv. 21-23).

There are several 'laws' in this passage, and this might cause confusion. The first law is the law expressing the fact that man's will is weak. The second law is the law of God, which Paul holds in the mind. The third law is "in" Paul's members, and this law is described as a "law of sin". When Paul introduces this phrase, "law of sin", into his argument he is unpacking his personification of 'sin' into the descriptive concept "law of sin". This concept is what we have called

'sin-proneness'. Sin-proneness is a constituent and defining structure of man's mental make-up. We cannot overlook the moral dimension of man's nature.

In Romans, Paul has in his sights two types of person. The first type of person is one who is "in the flesh".⁴ Paul was once one of these people when the motions of sin worked in his members to produce fruit unto death (v. 5). In fact, Paul includes his Jewish readers in this description, because he invites them to remember that they were once "in the flesh". The fleshly mind cannot be subject to the law of God (8:7).⁵

The second type of person is more complicated, because the second type of person has been converted to Christ. This person's mind is "spiritual" and he walks after the spirit; in this sense he is not "in the flesh". However, 'sin' still remains in his members, and, still prone to sin, he experiences conflict between the law of his mind and the law of sin in his members (7:23). Paul is now this second type of person.

When describing this second type of person, Paul deploys the figure of 'sin' as a master, and he is careful to locate the dwelling place for 'sin' as in his members, linking his desires to 'sin'. However, Paul is also careful to reserve the 'mind' in this type of person as the place where the spirit of life in Christ dwells (vv. 22,23).⁶ In our discussion, we have characterised Paul's desires as his 'mental make-up' and said that this is sin-prone; and we have followed Paul in reserving the mind of the redeemed man as the seat of his service to God (v. 25).⁷

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2. The point here is that in this context the metaphor of ownership is appropriate to model causal explanation.
 3. This 'law' is the weakness of the will and different from the 'law' in the members and the 'law' of the mind in the redeemed man.
 4. It is important to recognise the variety of ways that this phrase is used; sometimes as a description of circumcision, sometimes as a description of human nature, and sometimes about bodily presence.
 5. This is unambiguous, for a 'cannot' says a lot about the *nature* of something.
 6. In unregenerate individuals the 'mind' is still dominated by 'sin'.
 7. The concept of personal identity in Paul's thought seems to preclude a simple view of the pronoun 'I'—more so when we take into account 1 John. There seems to be one 'I' that sins and one 'I' that does not sin, and also one 'I' that is aware of this state of affairs.

Conclusion

The origin of sin-proneness as part of man's make-up is a topic that has exercised the minds of many Christian writers down the ages. If we say that God brought about a change in Adam's nature as a result of the Fall, a moral objection is often raised to such a suggestion. It is the same one that Paul addresses in the simile of the potter and the pot: "Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth He yet find fault? . . . but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to Him That formed it, Why hast Thou made me thus?" (9:19,20).

The weakness of this view, according to critics, is that this is unjust. The general thrust of objections is that a God of love would not do such a thing.⁸ However, there is a general reply to this argument, and it is this:

God set up this order of things in order that He might teach man about the choice that he had made.

Fundamentally, Adam disobeyed God, and as a result God gave Adam over to this way of life (1:24,28) so that he might learn about disobedience. Accordingly, God created a propensity for these things within man. The learning of obedience through the suffering of the works of the flesh was thus introduced.⁹ The love of God is shown, therefore, not just in preserving Adam from death on the day that he sinned, but in making provisions for his instruction in the matter where he had fallen.

(Concluded)

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8. The same moral argument can be levelled against the view that God created man with a sin-prone nature in the beginning prior to the Fall. The argument is more acute when directed against this view because there is no Fall to explain why God might choose to create man in such a way.
 9. So it is that the dispositional nature of man is modelled upon the behaviour that Adam, Eve and the serpent portrayed at the time of the Fall.

The temple at Shechem*

Tony Benson

JUDGES 9 GIVES a detailed account of the doings of Abimelech, a son of Gideon by a concubine from Shechem (8:31), who ruled the Shechemites for three disastrous years before dying ignominiously when a woman dropped a millstone on his head from a fortress he was besieging. The narrative refers to those favourable to him giving him money to establish his rule, the money being taken from "the house of Baal-berith" (9:4), evidently the temple of a local god of that name, which means 'Lord of the covenant'. When civil war broke out between Abimelech and his followers and the men of the city, resulting in defeat for the latter, a thousand of the defeated people took refuge in "the hold of the house of El-berith" (v. 46), evidently the same building, 'El-berith' meaning 'God of the covenant'. Abimelech set fire to this building and they all died.

Evidently, then, Shechem at this time must have had a temple big enough to contain a thousand people and strong enough to act as a fortress in time of trouble. The Jewish-American archaeologist Lawrence Stager has examined the findings of archaeologists who have excavated Shechem (now called Tell Balata, and situated

close to the modern Palestinian city of Nablus) and has concluded that the remains of this temple-fortress have been discovered, but never correctly identified.¹ The building that he identifies as the temple of Judges 9 was discovered in 1926, during the course of excavations carried out by Germans and Austrians between 1913 and 1934. Further excavations were carried out between 1956 and 1973 by an American expedition, and its leaders concluded that this temple flourished and was then destroyed before Israel conquered the Land, being replaced by a much smaller building, which was the one destroyed by Abimelech.

Stager, however, thinks that previous excavators misinterpreted the evidence, and that there was just one temple there, which was the one referred to in Judges 9. The supposed second, smaller, temple did not exist, and if it had its dimensions were not adequate for it to be the temple of Judges 9, given that the latter could hold a thousand people.

* All quotations from the RV.

1. "The Shechem temple where Abimelech massacred a thousand", *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Jul./Aug. 2003.