IMMERSE
A JOURNAL OF FAITH, LIFE AND YOUTH MINISTRY

The Doctrine of Sin: Death, Dehumanization, and Broken Community

By: Andrew Root

Andrew Root is assistant professor of youth and family ministry at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn., where he teaches classes about theological reflection on the practice of ministry to and with young people. He earned his Ph.D. at Princeton and has published articles in The International Journal of Practical Theology, Journal of Youth and Theology, and Word and World.

There's nothing like a theological conversation with an eighth grader to alert you to the gap in your doctrinal understanding.

All of us who've worked with adolescents have had the experience of sitting in a cabin or around a campfire as the discussion progresses from a casual chat to an in-depth theological dialogue for which we soon realize we're not prepared.

The pimpled-face skater who hasn't sat still for more than two seconds throughout your conversation, now, as if taking on another personality, asks intensely, "What really is sin? When do I know I've sinned? How do I keep from sinning? And if I'm a sinner, and that's my nature, how is it possible to keep from sinning?"

If you're like me, you may have balked in the face of such questions, perhaps quoting a Bible verse in the hopes it will distract (or rather "redirect") from the significant questions being asked. Surely we all have some foundational comprehension of what sin is, some scripts and quips to fall back on that we learned in Sunday school ("All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" and "All sins are equal"—one of these is a Bible verse while the other is not).

But if we're honest we must admit that many of those sound hollow and no doubt banal to the intense inquisitor and his handful of skeptical on-listeners.

We may assuage our guilt over our ignorance and justify our confusion by claiming that such deep theological conversations are helplessly complex and abstract, and if one desires to be a good youth pastor, one must keep abstraction and adolescence in distinct corners—and therefore we're free to ignore the directness of the inquiry.

Yet, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr is credited as saying that "sin is the only empirically provable Christian doctrine." All it takes is an honest look at society or 10 minutes in front of the local news broadcast to verify that sin is a reality. However, acknowledging sin's existence doesn't help us—or the young people with whom we work—to understand it. If it's true that "all have sinned" and that Christ died for us "while we were still sinners," then there's great significance in understanding what this opaque doctrine is all about.

Sin vs. Sinning

Original sin, or what has been grossly (but no doubt rightly) called the "total depravity" of humanity, has been a tenet of the Christian faith since the time of Augustine with strong antecedents going back to Pauline theology, especially the letter to the Romans. This doctrine, rightly understood, makes it clear that there's a difference between *sin* (the state of our being) and *sinning* (the bad or wrong things we do).

We may no doubt commit sins, but this is because we live in a state of sin. Far too many times, all adolescents understand about sin is that they do, in fact, sin. They fail to recognize that all humanity is under the shadow of sin, no matter how good or bad. If one is human, one lives in the reality of sin, the reality of brokenness. Sin is the name used to describe the state of the broken relationship, at its most fundamental, between God and humanity. Therefore, while sin left unchecked can lead to deep and radical evil, it's primarily a reality born in tragedy.

The story of Adam and Eve presents people created to be with God and to be for one another, but who choose against God and blame one another. This destroys their communion with God, leaving them alone in the world. Humanity chose sin over God, too, chose to define itself apart from its creator, and therefore has tragically broken relationship with its very source of life.

Karl Barth explains the difference between sin and sinning. "Particular sins do not alter the status of a man; they merely show how heavily the general dominion of Sin presses upon him. Sin is the sovereign power in the world as we know it; and it is wholly irrelevant what particular form it takes in the life of each individual."[1]

Therefore, according to Barth, we're not sinful because of the bad or wrong things we do; we do bad, wrong, and (sometimes) evil things because

[1] *Epistle to the Romans*. London: Oxford University Press, 1933. 167

we live in a reality of sin. We too often confuse adolescents by making sin a riddle to solve ("How can I live without sinning?"), thereby making sin a problem around which to maneuver rather than a tragic reality of brokenness that's both detrimental and unavoidable. I've sat in small groups with adolescent boys, both as an adult leader and as an adolescent participant, where the conversation centered around Jesus' words in Matthew 5:28 that looking upon a woman with lust in one's heart is committing adultery. Rather than focusing on how we can live in ways that uphold the integrity and humanity of the women we meet in a culture that frequently objectifies women, we dwelt on the impossible quandary of how to "avoid lusting," e.g., stop having sexual desire towards women.

When we confuse sin with sinning, adolescents often interpret our message as a reminder of their helpless, constant failure. It rattles around in their ears like the many messages of failure they hear as they seek to discover who they are. ("You're a bad soccer player," "You're weak," "You're fat," "You're grades aren't up to snuff," "Those thoughts you have make you a sinner!") Confusing sin with sinning often pushes young people deeper into isolation (driven to hide their sinfulness) and rarely toward salvation (confessing their sinfulness and finding grace and forgiveness). This happens because they're told of their sinning (lust, theft, cruelty, bitterness, disobedience, etc.) rather than the tragic reality of sin which impacts us all—a reality that reveals our shared participation in tragedy and culpability. For example, if the larger reality of sin is that we live in a culture that objectifies women, then simply chastising young boys for lusting, or giving them tools or devices to avoid lusting (mental gymnastics, prayers, bracelets, and accountability partners) never confronts the real reality of sin and its impact on them. Instead it creates cycles of guilt and failure, all the while perpetuating the objectifying of women—in this case by making women something to avoid in order to maintain one's purity.

Sin as Death

What then is the concrete, historical, and dare we say practical, reality of sin? It's nothing other than death itself. We see the universal, shared presence of sin in all humanity through the reality of death; we know all are sinners for all will die.

There's nothing more concrete than death, nothing more substantive than the tragic reality of relationships and communities broken by accidents, crime, and disease. Death undeniably reveals that humanity is frail and weak, that humanity is not in control. In death we understand the depth of our broken community with God; in death we see the full weight and consequence of sin. God is life and complete being, but humanity's destiny is death and the sure promise of sliding back into non-being—dust to dust. The universal reality of sin is concretely revealed in the omnipresent reality of death. "Death is the divine command—'stop'—and we cannot disobey it.

Through its narrow gate we must pass."[2] Death discloses the great difference between humanity and God. In death we hear God's "no"—a no that places again a boundary between us and God.

So then when the adolescent asks, "What is sin?" We must reply, "It is death." And what's death? Death is non-being. It's living and operating in the "no" of God. It's ignoring and denying life, which is found in God's "yes." Death, no doubt, is the end, the finality of life—but death makes itself present, walking on the stage of our lives many times before the final curtain. Death shows itself in moments of depression, disappointment, and, perhaps most fully, in isolation and rejection.

Ask any adolescent being bullied, rejected, or abused about his death-tinged experiences. Death breathes down the neck of the child whose father moves to another state after her parents' divorce, thereafter present only in a monthly check. Death stares into the face of the boy who can't find a seat in the lunchroom, turned away from table after table. Death grips the girl who leaves the slumber party early because she's mocked by those she called friends. Death is the reality of sin, the consequence of sin, because death promises (and never fails) to end community (relationship). Death puts the final and complete separation between God and humanity and between humanity and humanity (parents from children, friends from friends, lovers from lovers).

Sinning as Dehumanization

Sin is not only concrete because it means death but also because this death terror, whether explicitly or implicitly, leads us into acting on its behalf. Actions that isolate, reject, and dehumanize come from this fear of death. This is where sin moves into sinning. For instance, I knew of a straight A student who was so afraid of being rejected from her college of choice, disappointing family and friends, and losing her stellar reputation, that she cheated on her SAT. Sin is real because death surrounds us and promises to envelope us, causing us to act out of fear to protect our own being, our own humanity, even if it means dehumanizing another. When we take such actions we're sinning. But it's important to see that any single action of sinning has been engendered from fear, and the deeper reality of death (sin).

Sinning then includes those things I do that deny God (the source of life) and dehumanize my fellow human beings or myself. My sinful actions aren't wrong because they deny some perfect law of right and wrong. My actions are wrong because they ignore or destroy my connection to God and my neighbor. The Ten Commandments are for covenant living, for loving God and neighbor, and not simply a list of rigid *do*s and *don't*s. We see Jesus himself seemingly disobeying the fourth commandment when he heals a

[2] Ibid., 169.

man on the Sabbath. But he explains to the Pharisees, "The Sabbath is made for humanity not humanity for the Sabbath." By this action he reminds us that the commandments exist not to make people good or keep people from being bad, but to facilitate life in the love of God and neighbor.

To perform such actions as cheating, lying, stealing, and gossiping are wrong because they presume that by hurting another I can restore my own being. Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminded us that it's not moral absolutes that put a demand for obedience on us, but the concrete humanity of our neighbor (see *Ethics*). This is why Jesus summarizes all the law of the Torah to the rich young ruler with this one phrase, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind and your neighbor as yourself."

Sin and Sinning as Broken Community

We see the reality of sin most clearly in broken community; we taste death most fully and painfully in estrangement. Persons were made for God and each other, for community. The reality of the sinful world is the tragedy of broken community with both God and neighbor.

Sinning then isn't first a spiritual state, but rather a social reality, born from the ever-present reality of impending death. Sinning makes my neighbor a tool for my own use. Sinning ignores the "no" of God, acting instead as though I am God, seeking to save myself from my own existential state. The fear of death clutches me and won't release me even if I sacrifice the humanity of my neighbor to it.

Sinning breaks down community, thwarts freedom, and sets people in opposition, neglecting responsibility. Sinning makes death (the state of sin) operational and therefore denies that I'm accountable to the God of life and to others who live with me. We do dehumanizing things (sinning things) because we fear. We fear death in its myriad of faces and we seek to protect our being from its promise.

Students and Sin

When discussing the doctrine of sin we must point the adolescent not into his or her subjective inner state to show the reality of sinning, for this can be easily manipulated. It isn't difficult to make adolescents feel guilty or bad about themselves, to make them feel the need for a savior. We must point instead to the objective social reality of dehumanization and broken community that the adolescent feels and in which adolescents participate—the state of sin and death. How do we know we're sinners? Not because we don't measure up when we try to compare ourselves to a standard of good and find ourselves falling short (having bad thoughts, not praying enough, lying, or disobeying). We know we're truly sinners in the moments we confront a deep fear and find ourselves acting on death's behalf.

One of the moments in my life when I was painfully aware of my own sinfulness happened one night when I was sitting at dinner in my college

cafeteria with some friends and a few acquaintances. An attractive girl I had a crush on walked by our table. My friend elbowed me, and gestured to her, teasing, "Hey, there she is!" A girl at our table, mistaking her for someone else, asked, "Is that Tami?" Feeling deeply embarrassed and terrified of being exposed, I answered, "No! I'd never like Tami, she's ugly!" A minute later, someone stood up to leave from the table behind me. To my horror, it was Tami, who turned to me with a penetrating gaze before walking away. I was flooded with shame and awareness that because I felt threatened I was willing to sell her out to maintain my own standing among my friends. Because I feared the reality of sin—death, estrangement, humiliation—I sinned. In my own weakness and attempts at self-preservation I dehumanized another person.

To convince adolescents that they're sinful and have committed many actions of sinning is unnecessary if we free the doctrine from its opaque theological baggage and see sin as death and sinning as dehumanization. What's needed (and perhaps more difficult) is an invitation to face death (sin), recognize one's weakness and brokenness, and confess one's participation in dehumanization (sinning). We need to talk honestly about the deep pain in the crevices of human experience, both the pain we feel and the pain we inflict on others.

When we see the doctrine of sin this way, we free it from abstraction and place it in the consciously concrete reality of the adolescent. There's no hidden mystery about sin and sinning; Sin is death and sinning is that which dehumanizes and breaks relationship with God and neighbor. When we proclaim this message the adolescent isn't pushed further into shame and estrangement, but can find solidarity with us. We too have been dehumanized and have dehumanized others; we too are struggling to confront our own deaths; we too are in need of new community that can extend beyond death.

A New Community

This new community Jesus Christ offers all humanity by taking death unto himself, suffering its wrath and bearing the dehumanizing actions of his contemporaries. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus is the Christ of God who is at the same time the poor weak human Nazarene who was betrayed, dehumanized, and put to death by humanity only to overcome death with life, breaking the power of sin and sinning, of death and dehumanization.

Sin isn't a disease, and Jesus' atonement a preventative immunization. Sin cannot be overcome by us—not by praying or trying or striving to be holy and good. Acknowledging sin (death) and our own participation in sinning leads us beyond pointed fingers and labels of who is righteous and who is not, for none are. Instead it pushes us into the arms of a suffering

God and a strong Christ who finds strength in weakness and who promises us life beyond death.

Christ provides us with a community where sinning has no value, for death has lost its power. "O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:55) We find freedom from sin through community with Jesus Christ who overcomes our sinfulness by bearing it.

I never had the courage to seek Tami's forgiveness. I wish I'd been able to go to her and apologize for what I'd said. It would've required that I admit my own weakness, telling her that I'd felt embarrassed and spoken to protect myself. It would've required me to ask for her forgiveness. It would've invited both of us into the community of broken, sinful, forgiven people whose lives are in Christ. Followers of Christ aren't sinless, and aren't commanded to be sinless. They're those who, by the strength of the Spirit, are able to ask forgiveness for their participation in sin and seek reconciliation with those against whom they've sinned. They're those who struggle against that urge to protect themselves and seek to resist the pull to dehumanize others. They're those who strive to live in awareness of their own and other's weaknesses and share God's forgiveness and restoration.

We must talk about sin with young people by acknowledging its inescapable reality in the world—the tragedy of death and estrangement from God that we must bear—and then sharing together in the hope of a human God who bears this tragic reality with us and promises us life beyond it.