

## ARTICLE 4

# Sin and Evil<sup>1</sup>

## Sin and its Consequences

We believe that the first humans yielded to the tempter and fell into sin.<sup>2</sup> Since then, all people disobey God and choose to sin, falling short of the glory of God.<sup>3</sup> As a result, sin and evil have gained a hold in the world, disrupting God's purposes for the created order and alienating humans from God and thus from creation, each other and themselves.<sup>4</sup> Human sinfulness results in physical and spiritual death. Because all have sinned, all face eternal separation from God.<sup>5</sup>

## Principalities and Powers

Sin is a power that enslaves humanity. Satan, the adversary, seeks to rule creation and uses sin to corrupt human nature with pride and selfishness.<sup>6</sup> In sin people turn from God, exchanging the truth about God for a lie, worshiping and serving the creature rather than the Creator.<sup>7</sup> Sin opens individuals and groups to the bondage of demonic principalities and powers. These powers also work through political, economic, social and even religious systems to turn people away from holiness, justice and righteousness.<sup>8</sup> Whether in word, deed, thought or attitude, all humans are under the domination of sin and, on their own, are unable to overcome its power.<sup>9</sup>

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Genesis 3; 6:11-12; Psalm 14:1-3; 36:1-4; 52:1-7; 58:1-5; 82; Isaiah 53:6; Ezekiel 16:49-50; Amos 2:4-8; Mark 7:20-23; John 8:34, 44; Romans 1:21-32; 3:9-18, 23; 5:12-14, 18-19; 6:23; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 2:1-3; 6:12; 1 Peter 5:8-9; 1 John 1:8-10; Revelation 12:9

## Preamble

The NFLT is working on an on-going project to update the existing resources (viz. Commentary and Pastoral Application) connected to our 1999 MB Confession of Faith. We are excited about this new project which will provide “Explanatory Notes” for almost every sentence of the actual Confession. In addition, we are replacing the Pastoral Application with what will be called “Living the Confession (FAQs).” While these resources do not carry the same authority as that of our Confession, we hope that these resources can provide significant help for our pastors/leaders, others within our congregations, folks interested in our MB theological convictions, and finally for prospective credentialing candidates as they move toward credentialing and leadership in our MB family.

We have already approved and printed a number of revised resources (viz., Article 8: Explanatory Notes and Living the Confession (FAQs); Article 1: Explanatory Notes; Article 2: Explanatory Notes). The NFLT has given approval in principle to Article 6: Explanatory Notes and Living the Confession (FAQs) and is seeking input from all of our Provincial Faith and Life Teams and other interested individuals so that this resource can be the most helpful to our wider family.

We are asking for input related to several larger questions: Is the particular note helpful in clarifying the statement made in the Confession—or is there something that needs to be added? (Note: Our Confession has 18 articles so there are other articles that might address what is missing but we are happy to hear what you think is missing.) Does the response to an FAQ reflect well our convictions?

The best way to provide feedback is to explain how your comments relate to a specific note or FAQ. Please send feedback to [keith.reed@mbchurches.ca](mailto:keith.reed@mbchurches.ca). We hope to move forward with final approval of these resources in Fall of 2024, so feedback is welcome at any point over the next months.

Thank you for your help (and for your prayers) as we undertake this project. While we are glad to have you share this DRAFT with others who might be able to provide helpful feedback, please do not post this online or distribute it widely at this point.

Ken Esau (National Faith & Life Director)

<sup>=1</sup> **Article 4 describes what is wrong with God’s beautiful world.** Malcolm Muggeridge once said that the “depravity [sin] of [humanity] is at once the most empirically verifiable reality but at the same time the most intellectually resisted fact.” In other words, the reality of sin in our world is the easiest of all things to prove by observation. We can see sin’s effects everywhere in our world—even in the lives of those who identify as disciples of Jesus. But the personal dimension of sin is also the most denied reality in our world. We want to pretend that we are free from sin or that we are not to blame for it. Our sins become downgraded simply to “mistakes,” unchangeable parts of our humanness and brokenness, or worse yet positives that we should embrace on our journey to personal growth and improvement. But this is not how Scripture sees sin. When we deny the presence and serious death-producing results of sin, we give sin an increasing power.

While Article 4 is primarily a description of the bad news of our present situation, it should be noted that sin is *not* an eternal spiritual power but one that had a beginning early in the history of the cosmos and will have a full and complete end at the time of the final return of Jesus. In the meantime, the spiritual power of sin (and the death, decay, and destruction of life it produces) continues to fight back “in great wrath, because [it] knows that [its] time is short!” (Rev 12:12).

Article 4 is a description of the comprehensive reality of sin and evil both corporately and personally. **It is only by comprehending the biblical description of sin and evil that we can understand and appreciate God’s cosmic yet personal salvation in Jesus described in Article 5.** We must understand something of the darkness before we can appreciate and move toward the light. [\[Return to article\]](#)

<sup>2</sup> The description of the first humans in Genesis 3 helps us both define sin and recognize its inevitable consequences. In the Bible, sin is both a spiritual power wreaking havoc on the world, and a way of describing human actions that result from humans yielding themselves to and cooperating with this spiritual power. It is important to keep in mind this multi-layered understanding of sin which is reflected in Article 4.

**First, sin begins with a spiritual power that is in opposition to the Creator God.** The New Testament most often refers to the primary representative of the spiritual power of sin with the term Satan (see Note 6). The spiritual power of sin entices humans away from obedience to God (Gen 3:1-5), enslaves humans (Rom 5:21; 6:12-14; 7:11-20), and produces death, decay, and destruction of life (cf. John 10:10). Human sin is not an action of true human freedom but always an act of yielding to the spiritual power of sin working against God and God’s good purposes

(Rev 12:9). The first humans succumbed to this spiritual power (aka the “tempter”) in the garden.

**Second, human sin is an act of willful disobedience of God** in relation to “any thought, desire, emotion, word or deed—or its particular absence, that displeases God, and deserves blame” (C. Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be* [Eerdmans, 1995], 13). This can involve sins of commission violating one of God’s commands not to do something (cf. Matt 5:34-42; 6:2-25; 7:1; Eph 5:18) or sins of omission where one fails to do something God commands (Lev 5:1; John 15:9; Rom 12:13; Eph 5:18; Jas 4:17). The first humans modeled both of these. They failed to properly guard the garden against the serpent’s presence (Gen 2:15) which is a sin of omission. They also modeled a sin of commission by directly disobeying God’s command and eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:17). Human sin includes not only actions but thoughts, desires, and emotions (Jas 1:13-15) that conflict with faithfulness to God, God’s character, and God’s purposes.

**Third, behind all acts of willful disobedience lies a refusal to bow in worship before God as the Creator and King.** This refusal to worship God produces a propensity to trust one’s own, rather than God’s wisdom to discern “good and evil” (cf. Rom 1:21-32). The first humans trusted their own judgment rather than God’s clear instruction to them. This refusal to worship God as Creator and King is also evidenced in misplaced trust structures (Ps 20:7; Prov 3:5-6; Jer 17:5) where we rely on everything other than God for security, happiness, and purpose. Our trust structures reveal whether we are bowing before God and trusting God—or something else entirely.

**Fourth, human sin is always a refusal to embrace one’s status as a divine image bearer of the Creator God,** denying the special dignity/value bestowed by God simply by virtue of being human; refusing to respond to the invitation to a special relationship with God; and/or failing to embrace the special capacity/calling one has been given to reflect the character (viz., love, holiness, righteousness, etc.) and purposes of God in the world (see Article 3: Explanatory Note 5).

**Fifth, sin is fundamentally an enemy of God’s Kingdom purposes of bringing God’s *shalom* to all creation.** As Cornelius Plantinga has described it:

*Sin is disruption of created harmony and then resistance to divine restoration of that harmony.... God hates sin not just because it violates his law but, more substantively, because it violates shalom, because it breaks the peace, because it interferes with the way things are supposed to be. (Indeed, that is why*

*God has laws against a good deal of sin.) God is for shalom and therefore against sin. In fact, we may safely describe evil as any spoiling of shalom, whether physically (e.g., by disease), morally, spiritually, or otherwise. Moral and spiritual evil are agential evil – that is, evil that, roughly speaking, only persons can do or have. Agential evil thus comprises evil acts and dispositions. Sin, then, is any agential evil for which some person (or group of persons) is to blame. In short, sin is culpable shalom-breaking. (Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be [Eerdmans, 1995], 5, 14; emphasis original)*

Falling into sin is an appropriate picture for how sin trips people up in life—causing them to fall down in pain and lie immobile on the ground rather than move forward. While the Bible does not call Adam and Eve’s original sin “The Fall,” the biblical language of stumbling and falling into sin does occur often (Jer 18:15; Hos 5:5; Matt 5:29-30; 13:21; Luke 8:13; Heb 6:6; Jas 2:10). However, the language of stumbling and falling into sin does not minimize culpability for sin. Human rebellion is behind human sin (Exod 34:7; Josh 24:19; Ps 106:43). [\[Return to article\]](#)

<sup>3</sup>All people have embraced the same willful disobedience/sin modeled by the first humans. This means that every human being (apart from Jesus) is guilty of sin (Rom 3:9-18; 5:12-14; cf. Ps 14:1-3) and has fallen short of what God intended for human living (Rom 3:23). However, theologians have debated for many centuries how the first human sin (often called the “original sin”) caused this result. Article 3: Creation and Humanity has already referred to this question briefly: “Through the willful disobedience of Adam and Eve, sin entered the world. As a result, human nature is distorted and people are alienated from God and creation. Creation is under the bondage of decay.” Article 3, Note 7 provides the following commentary related to why “since then, all people disobey God and choose to sin”:

*Christian theologians have labeled the events described in Genesis 3 as the “Fall” or the “original sin”—even though these expressions are never used in Scripture. The Old Testament writers never reference Genesis 3, and only Paul among the New Testament writers mentions the Genesis 3 events at all (cf., Rom 5; 1 Cor 15; 1 Tim 2). There has been much debate about how Adam and Eve’s sin has impacted all future humanity and the creation itself, including how that impact is transmitted to future humans, whether humans are born with imputed guilt or just a propensity to sin, and how Jesus could be fully human and yet avoid sharing the guilt of Adam and Eve. Article 3 does not wade into these intractable questions but states*

several convictions:

1. *Because of their willful disobedience, “**sin entered the world.**” Sin here is a reference to the full presence of sin in the human world and not the ultimate origin of sin or evil as a power. From the point of Adam and Eve’s willful disobedience, sin and evil are present on earth working in opposition to God’s life-giving and good purposes. Sin and evil produce wide ranging effects that fracture our relationships with God, other humans, creation, and even our own selves—while also opening the door to death, alienation, and the destruction of physical and spiritual life. God’s Kingdom intentions are threatened by these conflicting forces that disrupt each of these four primary relationships.*
2. *Because of their willful disobedience, “**human nature is distorted.**” Human nature is a reference to the fundamental and basic thought and behaviour patterns that are universal to humans. The original humans were created as divine image bearers with special dignity/value, a special relationship with God, special capacity/calling to reflect God’s character and participate in God’s purposes in the world. Even after the first humans sinned, every subsequent human being is still a divine image bearer carrying the special dignity bestowed on them by God (cf. Gen 9:6), but something significant has changed. The special relationship with God and the special capacity/calling to reflect God’s character and purposes in the world are all broken and tainted by the presence and power of sin. All people without Christ are “dead in [their] transgressions and sins” (Eph 2:1). Only God can heal and fully restore humans to what he originally created them to be.*
3. *Because of their willful disobedience, “**people are alienated from God and creation.**” Humans are no longer born automatically into a situation of health and wholeness with God and creation—what is commonly called “original righteousness” where humans are fully able not to sin. Instead all humans now stand in need of redemption. Article 3 does not dive into how this alienation is passed on to subsequent humans. The main options include:*
  - a. *All humans involuntarily (at conception or birth) are part of Adam and Eve’s sin (cf. Heb 7:9-10 for an analogy) and thus inherit Adam and Eve’s guilt as well as the tainting of human inclinations (cf. Ps 51:5; Rom 5:18-19; 1 Cor 15:22). This perspective reads Romans 5:12 about death spreading to all people “because all sinned” to mean that all people automatically inherited and participated in the first sin. Another key argument is that since Paul calls humans “by nature children of wrath” (Eph 2:3), this must mean that humans have inherited a guilty sinful nature*

worthy of divine judgment. The many biblical statements about universal human wickedness (1 Kgs 8:46; Ps 14:2-3; Rom 3:10-12) and the universal deceitfulness of the human heart (Gen 6:5; 8:21; Ecc 9:3; Jer 17:9) imply that sin and guilt must be passed on to all humans in some physical or spiritual way at conception or birth. This passing on of sin and guilt is what it means that “in Adam all die” (1 Cor 15:22).

- b. All humans are born neither morally good nor morally guilty but rather as morally innocent beings. Humans are born into a broken and sinful world, but they do not become guilty of sin until they knowingly and voluntarily embrace sin. The sad news is that universally all humans “have turned away, all have become corrupt” (Ps 14:3), “all sinned” (Rom 5:12), and all are following the ways of this world, gratifying the cravings of the flesh (Eph 2:1-3), and unable to defeat the power of sin (Rom 7:14-24). This universal propensity to embrace sin and rebellion against God is why human wickedness is universal, human hearts are deceitful, and all are dead in their transgressions and sins. In this perspective, it is not inherited sin and guilt that makes one a sinner, but the universal mimicking of and identification with Adam and Eve in their sin. It is because all humans have identified with or joined with Adam that “in Adam all die” (1 Cor 15:22). Being “in Adam” is an act of deliberate identification, just as being “in Christ” is an act of deliberate identification. Jesus was born fully human with the same propensity and temptations that we experience (Heb 4:15), but Jesus did not embrace sin and thus did not join with or identify with Adam and Eve in their willful disobedience (“He committed no sin”; 1 Pet 2:22).

Both perspectives, although different, fundamentally agree about the universality of human sin (viz., “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” Rom 3:23), and about the universality of the human need for salvation in Christ (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; Gal 2:16). Both agree that humans are not the way they should be (Rom 3:9-18) and that humans are unable on their own to live out the calling and mission God has for them but are in desperate need of salvation by grace alone (Eph 2:8-9).

4. Because of their willful disobedience, **“creation is under the bondage of decay.”** This is a phrase taken almost directly from Roman 8:21 (“bondage to decay” NIV, NRSV; cf. bondage/slavery “to corruption” KJV, NASB; ESV). Creation is now home to death, destruction, and decay in a way different from God’s original intention (cf. Rom 8:19-21).

5. *Because of their willful disobedience, “humans and all creation long to be set free.” The biblical story is one of constant longing, lament, and hope for freedom as humans live in a world that is alienated rather than one that is reconciled (Rom 8:1-4). Creation also is groaning as it awaits liberation (Rom 8:21-22). Revelation 21-22 describes what this freedom will look like one day when God’s Kingdom comes to earth as it is in heaven (see Article 18: Christ’s Final Triumph). [Return to article]*

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 3-11 describes the “avalanche” of sin (to use Gerhard von Rad’s famous words) that cascaded down from Adam and Eve’s willful disobedience, gained a hold in the world through their offspring, and ultimately spread widely because of the events of Genesis 11. The spiritual powers of sin and evil **have gained a hold in the world** by inhabiting all human structures (political, economic, sociological, educational, religious), and have disrupted God’s Kingdom purposes for people’s *shalom* relationships with God, creation, others, and even themselves (See also Article 5).

Sin and evil are like a death-producing cancer tenaciously attaching itself deep inside one’s body, metastasizing to other parts of the body, and disrupting everything away from its previous “healthy” state. One can see from Genesis 3 to 11 that the world is in what could be called a “stage 4” cancer beyond the capabilities of human intervention. People’s relationships with God, others, creation, and themselves are not the way they should be. Instead of harmony and health, there is alienation, conflict, and brokenness. Article 4 states the truth of our dire situation and should make us want to call out to God “How long, LORD, how long?” (Ps 6:3; cf. 13:1; 35:17; 94:3). Article 5: Salvation is a summary of God’s answer to this plea for intervention. [\[Return to article\]](#)

<sup>5</sup> **Human sinfulness always results in physical and spiritual death even if the fullness of this physical and spiritual death is not immediately evident** (see Gen 3; Ps 52; Ezek 16:49-50; Rom 5:12-21; 6:23; 7:11-13; 8:13; 1 Cor 15:21-26; Eph 2:1-3; Heb 6:1; 9:14; Jas 1:15). The claim that “human sinfulness results in physical and spiritual death” is undeniable in Scripture (Rom 5:12; 6:16, 23; Jas 1:15) but not always clear in short-term human experience. Individuals engaging in sinful behaviours may report increased happiness and positive outcomes but Scripture claims that ultimately sinful behaviour will result in physical and spiritual death. There is no other possible outcome.

In terms of physical death, God responded to Adam and Eve’s willful disobedience by expelling them from the garden of Eden and the “tree of



life.” While this seems to have been an act of God’s grace (Gen 3:22-24), their physical bodies faced inevitable decay and eventual death because they no longer had access to the tree of life. For all humans since, physical death is a personal and inevitable reality unless Jesus returns first.

Human sinfulness is universal (cf. Isa 53:6; Rom 3:23; 1 John 1:8-10) and it produces spiritual death that without divine intervention will lead inevitably to an eternity separate from God. There is no human treatment plan to overcome this inescapable progression toward death and separation. There is no path of moral goodness or self-improvement or mental self-discipline that will overcome it. Without divine intervention, spiritual death and eternal separation from God are universal human realities.

In terms of spiritual death (brokenness of one’s relationship with the Triune God), human sinfulness was a human choice that led Adam and Eve to willfully disobey and then hide from God (Gen 3:8-9). Human sinfulness turns individuals away from worship, submission, and obedience—and toward shame, hiding, and fleeing from God’s presence. Human sin “defiles” people and thus creates a barrier for spiritual health and relationship (Mark 7:20-23). While God continues to reach out to overcome spiritual death (e.g., Gen 4:6-7), human sinfulness can also cause God to turn his face away from sinners who are foolishly committed to their course of action (e.g., Isa 59:1-3).

This reality of eternal separation from God is not because God is arbitrary, hateful, or harsh, but because of how sin steals, kill, and destroys all that is good and beautiful. Sin pushes people away from even wanting to worship, submit, and obey the Triune God and live in the spiritual relationship that God intended. Sin is a force of separation that must be overcome in order for spiritual healing and reconciliation to occur. However, God also acts to make things right, fully establish his Kingdom purposes, and oppose everything that is working against that Kingdom. Sometimes the expression God’s “wrath” is used to describe God’s actions that bring justice and stop ongoing evil and destruction (John 3:36; Rom 12:19; Eph 2:1-3; cf. Ps 79:6; Isa 13:9; 48:9). God’s wrath is a way of expressing God’s actions of intervention and judgment against everything that produces evil and destruction. John Stott has famously defined God’s Wrath as “his steady, unrelenting, unremitting, uncompromising antagonism to evil in all its forms and manifestations” (*The Cross of Christ*, IVP, 2006 [171]). [\[Return to article\]](#)

<sup>6</sup> As mentioned in Note 2, the word “sin” is used in Scripture in reference to human sin but also to the spiritual or cosmic sin power that opposes God and inhabits structures in opposition to God’s Kingdom purposes.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word “satan/Satan” or “the Satan” can refer to a human or spiritual entity who functions as an adversary or accuser. While the exact nature and role of Satan is unclear in the Old Testament, the New Testament uses the name Satan to refer to the spiritual power in opposition to God (Matt 4:10; 12:26; Mark 3:23; 4:15; Luke 10:18). Satan is also known in the New Testament by many other titles including the “evil one” (Matt 5:37), the “enemy” (1 Peter 5:7); the “Devil” (Eph 6:11), “prince of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), “Belial” (2 Cor 6:15), “god of this age” (2 Cor 4:4), the tempter (Matt 4:3), the “father of lies” (John 8:44), “Beelzebul” (Matt 12:24, 27; Mark 3:22), the “ancient serpent” (Rev 12:9; 20:2), and the “dragon” (Rev 12:9; 20:2). While Satan’s purpose is always to lead the whole world astray (Rev 12:9), he is destined for certain destruction when Jesus returns (Rev 20:10).

New Testament Scripture shows that Satan is a non-eternal, limited spiritual being, who seeks to rule creation and entice humans to live in pride and selfishness rather than in worship, love, and community (Matt 4:8-10; John 8:44; Acts 13:10; Gal 5:19-21; 2 Tim 2:26; 1 Peter 5:8-9). This spiritual power “prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8) and is an “enemy” to God and God’s people. While human sin needs to be forgiven, the spiritual power of sin needs to be defeated and ultimately destroyed for creation to move fully to healing and salvation. At present, this spiritual power enslaves humanity (John 8:34) producing physical and spiritual death.

Scripture does not provide an explanation for Satan’s (or the spiritual power of sin’s) exact origin but it is clear that Satan had a created beginning, rejected his rightful role in the world, and has embraced an identity as the “father of lies” (John 8:44). Satan embodied pride and selfishness by claiming kingship over creation (Matt 4:8-10) in conflict with God who is the rightful Creator, Redeemer, and King. Pride and selfishness are at the root of all sin, not wanting to bow in worship and obedience before God, and not wanting to offer up one’s life in service to this God. Some see Isaiah 14:12-14 with its bold declarations of pride and selfishness as a possible reference to Satan’s journey of rebelliousness against God and the embrace of death rather than life. Humans are easily tempted to embrace pride and selfishness (Ps 36:1-4; Ezek 16:49-50) and thus “image” or reflect Satan’s purposes rather than God’s. When Peter attempted to lead Jesus away from his divine calling of self-sacrifice, Jesus responded by saying, “get behind me Satan” (Matt 16:23). [\[Return to article\]](#)

<sup>7</sup> In this sentence that paraphrases Romans 1:25, Article 4 makes three assertions about what people do when they embrace sin.

1. Sin is always a move away from God, away from the rightful posture of worship of God, and away from life itself.
2. Sin always blinds people to God's just, loving, and righteous character (2 Cor 4:4) and makes them believe and perpetuate lies about God and God's word to them ("You will not certainly die"; Gen 3:4).
3. Sin always moves people toward idolatry and worship of self (Ps 36:1-4; 52:1-7; Mark 7:20-23; Rom 1:21-32; Eph 2:1-3). Every idolatry involves giving some created thing worship and service that it is not worthy of (Ps 106:19-21; Jer 2:11). This worship turns the worshiper further away from their divine calling (Rom 12:1-2) and more and more into the likeness of the created things that they are worshiping (Ps 115:3-8).

Sin is fundamentally a heart posture away from the worship and service of the Creator God and toward the worship and service of some element within the creation. It is also movement away from truth and toward lies. In this way, sin always pushes humans away from God's Kingdom and life-giving purposes and toward spiritual and physical death. [\[Return to article\]](#)

<sup>8</sup> Because sin entices people away from God through disobedience, pride, and selfishness, humans begin to worship what is not worthy of worship (cf. Rom 1:25) and this opens them to bondage to unseen but real demonic principalities and powers. Demonic principalities and powers (one could also call them simply "demons" or "demonic beings") share with Satan the same goals, objectives, and ultimate demise. All demonic entities seek to "steal, kill, and destroy" life, health, and human and creational flourishing (cf. John 10:10). In the Gospels, a key part of Jesus's ministry was driving out these death-producing demons from individuals enslaved by them (cf. Matt 8:28-32; 17:18; Mark 1:34). Jesus's actions signalled the arrival of the kingdom of God (Matt 12:28).

These demonic powers not only produce deathly consequences for individuals directly, they also twist, corrupt, and enslave humans through perverted human institutions (e.g., political, economic, social, religious) that move them away from God's purposes of holiness, justice, and righteousness (Ps 58:1-5). No human institution is free from the influence of these powers.

The good news is that Jesus in his birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension "disarmed the powers and authorities" and "made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Col 2:15; cf. 1 Cor 15:24). Disciples of Jesus are told to take their "stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and

against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:11-12). Disciples of Jesus are told: “Do not let sin reign in your mortal body... [O]ffer every part of yourself to [God] as an instrument of righteousness. For sin shall no longer be your master” (Rom 6:12-14). The “one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). Through Jesus, God offers true life and freedom from bondage to the spiritual powers of sin and death (see Article 5: Salvation). [\[Return to article\]](#)

<sup>9</sup> This sentence describes how all humans without Christ are under the domination of sin in word, deed, thought, and/or attitude (John 8:34; Rom 3:9). This does not mean that humans without Christ are completely incapable of God-honouring words, deeds, etc., but that ultimately, they cannot overcome sin and become righteous worshipers of God on their own (John 1:12-13; 6:44-45; 1 Cor 12:3; Eph 2:8-9). They are trapped, enslaved, and in desperate need to be freed from sin’s power (and the guilt and death that comes from slavery to sin). This does not mean that Christians no longer struggle with the spiritual powers of sin, but that through Christ, the domination and slavery has been broken (Rom 6:17-18).

Article 4 ends with a pessimistic announcement of our inability as humans to free ourselves from the domination and power of sin, moving us further and further from God, God’s calling for us, and from life itself. This gloomy but truthful assessment provides the foundation and looks forward to the good news of Article 5: Salvation. [\[Return to article\]](#)

## ARTICLE 4

# Sin and Evil

## LIVING THE CONFESSION

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In the church, we believe that sin is a concept that must be understood with reference to God and God's plan for creation. It is not simply a moral term to describe what a society considers to be wrong. For example, when a shopkeeper defrauds a customer, this is not merely breaking the law but also an instance of faithlessness to the customer and to God. Sin is any act, thought, desire, emotion, word, or deed, or the absence of these, that displeases God.

### Sin and its Consequences

God is not arbitrarily offended. God has initiated a covenant with humanity, an agreement which establishes a relationship between God and people. Living rightly within this covenant relationship leads to *shalom*, a concept from the Old Testament prophets webbing together God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and peace. Throughout the Scriptures, God outlines the expectations of the covenant relationship which promote His plan of *shalom* for creation.

In the church, we regularly remind ourselves of who God is through our worship. Spiritual leaders must also take seriously the task of teaching and reminding the church of what pleases and displeases God. North American society is moving away from concrete definitions of right and wrong and toward a definition of morality in terms of relativism and tolerance. For many in society, moral tolerance is now the only good, and moral intolerance the only evil. In this context, it is increasingly important for the church to be intentional about teaching the biblical view of sin.

Sometimes pastors are hesitant to provide clear teaching about sin because of abuses of this teaching in the past. In the history of the Mennonite Brethren, some churches have defined sins with a list that goes beyond the Scriptural definition, banning activities such as dancing, playing cards, buying insurance, or choosing a spouse from another denomination. Jesus cautions about legalistic definitions of sin by pointing out that it is not outward activity that defiles a person but what comes from the heart. Keeping this advice in mind, the church must still provide concrete teaching about what constitutes sin.

Throughout the history of God's people, the defining of sin has played an important role in forming the character of the followers of God. In

the Old Testament, the list of Ten Commandments plays a central role by describing in condensed form the conduct that accompanies a covenant relationship with God. In the New Testament, the church (Acts 15:28-29) and Paul (Eph 4:25-5:20; 1 Thess 4:3-6) instruct new Christians coming from a pagan background with other lists of sins. Around the 13th century the church taught that seven deadly sins were fatal to spiritual progress: pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth.

### **Personal Dimension of Sin**

While being firm in teaching about sin, pastors also need to pay careful attention in their counselling to discerning the situations of individuals. For many spiritual leaders and others in power, for example, pride is a common and dangerous manifestation of sin. Liberation theologians remind us, however, that pride is often a sin of oppressor groups. These oppressor groups can assume that pride is a root cause of sin for everyone, and often warn the oppressed against the pitfalls of pride as well. In reality, the opposite may be true. The root cause of sin for many oppressed people may not be pride but attitudes of passivity and self-depreciation. To overcome sin, the oppressed need to develop a healthy sense of pride, not be taught to confess it as sin.

While some come to the church with a shallow view of sin, others come carrying burdens of guilt. Any church with a high view of discipleship and ethics will have among its members those who are burdened by feelings of guilt that they do not measure up to the standards. In dealing pastorally with these individuals, it is important to realize that not all guilt is bad. Guilt may be a means of grace, the work of the Holy Spirit convicting an individual of sin and leading to genuine repentance.

False guilt comes when a person has truly repented but has not been able to accept forgiveness or to forgive themselves. The injury of wounded psyches and broken relationships is often very deep, with lifelong effects. The journey toward forgiveness is neither automatic nor immediate. The church must walk patiently beside those struggling to forgive and to be forgiven, challenging them with the hope that complete forgiveness is God's way and a true possibility. Increasingly pastors are referring individuals seeking God's forgiveness and freedom to Christian counsellors, who can provide more in-depth, long-term support.

The church should model and encourage the discipline of daily personal repentance and acceptance of forgiveness. In the worship service, many congregations incorporate into the pastoral prayer a time for silent, personal confession followed by thanksgiving and acceptance of forgiveness from God.

## Social Dimension of Sin

In the church, we believe that one member's sin affects the spiritual health of the entire congregation. To be part of the body of Christ means we run counter to the individuality of our culture and take responsibility to lovingly bring to one another's attention the sins we discern. Pastoral counselling, Bible studies, and care groups can provide ongoing support for persons struggling to live a life of Christian freedom.

Because sin is a breach of a covenant relationship, the consequences of sin spread beyond the individual who is committing the sin. When a relationship has been violated, personal repentance is not always sufficient to restore the relationship. Churches also need to facilitate reconciliation between people.

The practice of the Lord's Supper emphasizes the need for forgiveness to be a regular part of all Christian relationships. The invitation to communion emphasizes that participation is for people who are in right relationship with God and with each other. It is the responsibility of the church to teach that if church members have sinned against another and have not asked for forgiveness and reconciliation, they should abstain from Communion until they have confessed their sins to individuals wronged and have asked for forgiveness.

Jesus' teaching on church discipline in Matthew 18 places the responsibility for making relationships right not only on the offender, but also on the one who is hurt. The gospel instructs us to show love to all involved. We show love to the victim by actively supporting the one who may feel powerless to confront an offender who will not listen. We show love to the offender by limiting knowledge of the offence to persons or groups involved with helping bring about true repentance. It is in keeping with these principles of forgiveness that churches often call in trained Christian mediators to help resolve complex conflicts.

In the case where the believer has openly done something wrong, the New Testament illustrates that a public confrontation is in order. In Galatians 2, Paul admonishes Peter publicly because he sinned publicly. When a person refuses to repent of a sin after being openly challenged by the entire congregation, that person is to be put out of the church in order to encourage the person to rethink his or her position. Churches need to take this discernment very seriously. God gives the covenant community of the church a large role to play in the actualization of forgiveness. "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt 18:18). When the church gathers in the power of the Holy Spirit to discern the forgiveness of sins, God is there among them and will bring to pass what they discern together.

### **Life in the World**

In the world where people do not live by the covenant relationship that God has established, Christians are frequently confronted by people who sin. Many of the Psalms are cries to God by people who feel that they have been grievously wronged. The Scriptures counsel God's people to trust God to protect them and not to take revenge themselves.

In response to sin in the world, the church also proclaims the message of liberation from the enslaving powers of sin. In a society which understands genetic disposition, addiction, victimization, and multinational corporate structures as powers which are greater than individual human will, the good news of the gospel comes in the form of liberation. Christians have the responsibility to take liberation from sin beyond the walls of the church. For example, some congregations have made public demonstrations in response to war; others attempt to shape political bills to promote justice; still others do long-term one-on-one work with people who need help overcoming addictions. By the work of Christ through the church, God addresses situations of hopelessness and despair.

The message of Jesus' liberation of people from the power of sin goes hand in hand with the message of Jesus' liberation of people from the power of evil spirits that controlled them. Jesus cast demons out of people and gave his disciples the power to do the same. When the demons did not listen to Jesus' disciples, he instructed them to pray and fast. There is still a place in the church for casting demons out of people—however, much care must be taken.

Today it is easy to take one of two extreme positions on the subject of demons. The first is a complete denial of the existence of personal forces of evil. The danger of this position is that

if we regard evil as impersonal, we may underestimate the depth of that dominion which behaviour patterns, ideologies, and institutions exert over lives. People may regard these forces merely as a pressure which may be resisted or rejected. They may discover too late that they are borne along by an intentionality which they are powerless to break (Finger, vol. 2, 163).

The second extreme is a view that demons are everywhere or that all problems are caused by these personal forces of evil, and that exorcism in the name of Christ is the only solution for these sins. The problem with this position is that it can cause much damage when put into practice. Many of our sins are caused when a God-given characteristic becomes



unbalanced. For example, a healthy view of oneself made in the image of God can become pride; a healthy appreciation for God's gift of sex can become lust. Attempts to identify and exorcise demons without true spiritual discernment can damage the healthy, God-given characteristics of one's personality. Often, rather than the instant solution suggested by exorcism, God's way of liberation comes through accepting forgiveness and following biblical guidelines for long-term discipleship, thus allowing the Holy Spirit to shape our lives to God's glory.

In response to the reality of sin, the good news is that Jesus offers hope through forgiveness and liberation. The challenge for the church is to continually accept and actualize this forgiveness and liberation in ways that represent God's kingdom here on earth.

### **Bibliography**

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## Article 4: Sin and Evil

Out of the depths we cry to You, O Lord;  
in your mercy, hear our prayers.

**We confess that we were dead in sin,  
cut off from you,  
cut off from each other—  
rebels wandering in a wilderness of our own making.  
We long to put off the sin that so easily entangles;  
but in our own strength, Lord, we cannot.**

Father in heaven, do not lead us into temptation!  
**The human heart is deceitful above all things;  
how dare we trust in ourselves?  
Pride and greed make their home within,  
and we quickly turn to worship anything but you.**

Father in heaven, rescue us from the evil one!  
**The devil prowls around,  
like a lion seeking someone to devour.  
Powers and principalities rage against us,  
seeking to deceive and enslave.  
Yet greater is the One who is in us  
than the one who is in the world.**

Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.  
**Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.**