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## Our Turn—A Brief Theology of Sin

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<sup>1</sup> In 1777 Captain James Cook and his crew landed in the Tongan Kingdom of Polynesia. The sailors had been at sea for weeks, rationing food and curbing appetites, so the hospitality they received would've been a cause for both relief and gratitude. Mixed with these feelings, so the story goes, was also a considerable amount of surprise, what we sometimes call “culture shock.” The Captain and crew soon discovered two things about their hosts. First, men and women were not allowed to dine together. Second, these same men and women could have sex virtually whenever the mood arose and with whomever they desired.

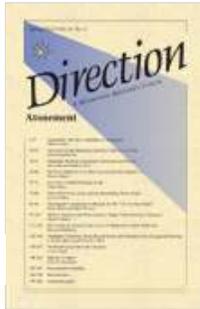
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The English sailors were understandably shocked by these cultural habits, but they were even more confused by the contrast between them. When they enquired about why men and women were not permitted to eat together, they were told that the practice was *taboo*. When they enquired further into what exactly *taboo* meant, they received no explanation, only a simple restatement of the fact that it was, indeed, *taboo*. Alistair MacIntyre explains the dilemma: “Clearly *taboo* did not simply mean *prohibited*; for to say that something—person or practice or theory—is *taboo* is to give some sort of reason for its prohibition. But what sort of reason?”<sup>2</sup>

Maybe the Tongans themselves were unclear on the concept. Maybe, to follow MacIntyre's diagnosis, *taboo* was a kind of “fragmented survival” or a “ghost of a conception” held over from a time when the prohibition was still grounded in meaning.<sup>3</sup> Maybe,



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in other words, the reasons and explanations that once supported the Tongans' moral system had simply been forgotten.

We live in such a time.

Why monogamy? Why compassion instead of cruelty? Why stifled envy instead of murder and theft? Our culture still mostly believes that certain practices are wrong, but why do we hold these beliefs? Can we provide a reason or an explanation for our prohibitions?

Friedrich Nietzsche is the Western world's Captain Cook, and his arrival in European Christendom coincided perfectly with our culture's decline into moral amnesia. His was a voice calling on the desert shores of modernity, and his message was plain: *Why?* Why is it wrong to love yourself first and seek only your own elevation? The answers Nietzsche found at the time seemed to him much like MacIntyre's ghosts; they were what he called "monsters" and "dismal spirits":

[it] is now very clearly apparent, since it has been demonstrated in many instances how the errors of the greatest [people] usually have their point of departure in a false explanation of certain human actions...a false ethics is erected, religion and mythological monsters are then in turn called to buttress it, and the shadow of these dismal spirits in the end falls across...the entire perception of the world.<sup>4</sup>

Twenty-first century Western culture lives in Nietzsche's shadow and Christians are among the few still scrambling to offer a rebuttal to his rejection of morality.

In the church, we have a simple little word for prohibited behavior, we call it *sin*. But what does this mean? Can we explain why sin is wrong without simply repeating the term as if it were an explanation in itself? What are the reasons behind the prohibitions that give the concept of sin its meaning?

The biblical story about the beginning of sin starts soon into the biblical story about the beginning of everything, and the plot thickens quickly: God made all things good but his human protagonists soon introduced an element of tragedy, and such has been the genre of human history more or less ever since. The turn started with a twist—God made humans to be “like” him: “Let us

make man in our image, in our likeness” (Gen. 1:26), but it was, apparently, not enough for us. The roots of sin are in a desire to be *even more* like him: “[Eat this]” said the serpent, “and you will be like God.” There are two primordial “likes” at the genesis of human history and the essence of sin is to be discontent with the first and try for a second; sin began as a desire to be more like God than he created us to be.

The irony gets even darker. Not only is sin an essentially impossible attempt to become more than what our creator intended, it is also altogether mistaken about the God it aims to usurp. In the very attempt to grasp likeness to God we have demonstrated ourselves to be exactly unlike him. As it turns out God is not a taking, grasping kind of God at all. In Christ we find a God who, on the contrary, does not consider his divine status something to be selfishly maintained. He is in fact the kind of God who gives so freely that he is willing to be made nothing for the sake of those he loves, nothing even to the point of death, and death on a cross.

Sin is the attempt to be more like God than he intended, and it is an attempt to be like him in a way that he actually isn't. In short, sin is a grasping at Godhood but at Godhood misconceived.

That may be about as far as we can go at this point. An explanation of sin is something like an explanation of difficulty; it's difficult because it's a logical spiral in midair. If sin hinges on a misconception of God then we cannot have much more to say without some basic correction. I will return to a description of sin after a little theology about God.

## THEOLOGY ON THE RUN

At several points during my welcome into the Mennonite Brethren family I was informed that we have historically preferred to do our theology “on the run.”<sup>5</sup> At first it sounded kind of exciting. Then, a few years ago, in an unrelated discussion, someone repeated the adage, “A person who leads with nobody following is only taking a walk.” Something clicked: What are we to make of a church that does its theology on the run with nobody chasing?

The Anabaptist movement began in a state of emergency; there was a very literal sense in which there were those who chased us, and the Mennonite Brethren movement found its feet similarly. At both crucial moments in our history we had a straightforward

approach to mission: *Stay alive*. We did not need to go into the world to explain ourselves because that world was hunting us down and demanding explanations.

The situation has changed.

There are many desirable elements to a community that restricts itself to an implicit theology and an essentially biblical vocabulary, and as Mennonite Brethren we surely display most of them. We are a “people of the book,” and our familiarity and relative comfort with the complexity of the Bible has served us well. Even in our short history, numerous cultural trends and their corresponding theological fashions have come and gone with little distracting effect. But, as is often observed, we now live in a “post-Christian” culture; our world is neither shaped nor even especially concerned by the language and grammar of the Scriptures. Under these circumstances we may want to continue to do our theology “on the run” (maybe that’s the best possible kind), but we must resist the urge to simply justify a lack of self-awareness. If we are to have anything to say to those not yet shaped by the Bible our theology will need to become more explicit and our vocabulary less exclusive.

To that end, we should be serious about the fact that the New Testament refers to God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Much of what I have left to say about sin depends on this: Is God somehow three or not really?

## ON THE TRINITY

The Trinity is somewhat in vogue today and many are already tired of so much warm-and-fuzzy-social-God *phoo-phoo*-talk. Fair enough. As with all overdue corrections, there are elements to the recovery of the doctrine of the Trinity that resemble the returning swing of a pendulum. But a certain basic truth remains: Questions about sin (and indeed all other questions of our faith) hang on what kind of God there actually is. If God is really and finally a kind of autonomous singularity, then certain things follow. If, on the other hand, God is somehow what the tradition has usually called “three persons” then some very different things follow.

For now, we can begin with a basic biblical claim: “The God of Israel has raised Jesus from the dead.” A listener today might think that sounds interesting, *I wonder what that means*, but for a first-century Jew, the meaning was as clear as fingers in the wounds of

the risen Christ, *My Lord and my God!* Thomas knew the history and anticipation of Israel; he had lived during their climax, and he came to the right conclusion. But we are not first-century Jews, nor are there any now left to make Thomas's discovery so simply. Our "mission" is to bring ourselves and others to his conclusion: This Jesus, who is obviously a human like everyone else; who was crucified and dead; who is now alive and confronting me; he must be Lord and God.

Therein lies the dialectic/paradox/conundrum at the crux of our faith. How can a man also be God?

One of the first and still most common ways for explaining the claim that Jesus is both God and man is usually called *modalism*, and it goes something like this: There is one God and he appears throughout human history in various modes, at first like the Creator and Lord of Israel, then like the man Jesus, and now like the Spirit who assembles and enables the church. It is a simple explanation for the divine economy and it has a correspondingly simple flaw: If the Father, Son, and Spirit are just three different ways that God has appeared in the world then God has only ever *appeared to be* in the world. On these terms, the one God is actually none of his three "modes"; he is whoever or whatever is above or behind them. Karl Rahner makes the point: "The differentiation of the *self-communication* of God in history...must belong to God 'in himself,' or otherwise this difference...would do away with God's self-communication. For these modalities and their differentiation either are in God himself...or they exist only in us."<sup>6</sup>

Early Christians rejected modalism on soteriological grounds—if God only appears to be Jesus then we only appear to be saved—but Rahner has unpacked the problem even further: If God is not Father, Son, and Spirit "in himself" then nothing we have from him is genuine *self-communication*.

We are here in the realm of "ontology"—questions about the nature of being. Is God the sort of being that remains aloof and reveals information *about* himself, or is he the sort that reveals *himself*? Karl Barth was the theologian who first pressed the modern church to make this choice, and his appraisal can be paraphrased plainly: If God is not in charge at every point in the process of revelation then we will rush into those gaps and fill them with an idol. The only alternative to sinful humanity's default setting in idolatry is a doctrine of revelation in which God is the

subject, the object, and the one who gets us between the two. In Barth's words:

*God reveals himself. He reveals himself through himself. He reveals himself. If we really want to understand revelation in terms of its subject, i.e. God, then the first thing we have to realize is that this subject, God, the Revealer, is identical with His act in revelation and also identical with its effect. It is from this fact...that we learn we must begin the doctrine of revelation with the doctrine of the triune God.*<sup>7</sup>

The matter bears directly on the nature of sin and the atonement. If revelation is a purely epistemic exchange—if it is only about the transfer of information—then sin can be explained in relatively simple terms: God said not to do such-and-such. But if revelation is an ontological event—if the Creator participates in, and identifies himself with, the creation—then we are dealing with a triune God, and our talk of sin is more than just *because-he-said-so* prohibition.

To get to that “more” we need to take our talk of the Trinity one step further. If God does not just appear to be three but is somehow Father, Son, and Spirit in himself, and if we are in fact monotheists and not tritheists, then some account of the divine unity is necessary. In the few instances where the Bible allows insight into the inner life of the Trinity there is a repeated pattern: The Father begets, the Son obeys, and the Spirit is sent. For the sake of coming sooner than later back to the mandate of this paper, one observation will suffice: Begetting, obeying, and being sent are *relations*.

Normally we think of a relation as a connection between persons who exist prior to the possibility of that relation, but here we must ask our normal ways of thought to yield to the gospel. The Father, Son, and Spirit do not first exist and then have relations; that would be tritheism. Nor is God a single subject who first exists and then relates to the world as the Father, then as the Son, and then as the Holy Spirit; that would be modalism. To ask which comes first, the one or the three, is to set an impossible answer within the question. If God is three persons and one God at the same time then the triune relations and the divine being are just that, *at the same time*.

This kind of talk is awkward and presumptuous, especially at this pace, but with the idea of being-in-relation we have enough to come back to the subject of sin.

Our fall into sin was a grasping at Godhood but at Godhood misconceived, and we are now upon a likely correction of that misconception. The God who reveals himself supremely in Christ is not a grasping, isolated monad; on the contrary, this God participates openly in relations of love so perfect that those relations are his very being. *That* is the God we were created to be like and so we too have our being in relation. Like God, we do not first exist and then begin various relationships; the order is the other way round. We have relationships with others and *thereby* exist.

A morbid illustration makes the point: If I am told that my wife has just been hit by a bus and is now dead, there is a very real sense in which the person I was prior to receiving that news would no longer exist.<sup>8</sup> The relationship between a husband and wife is not incidental but constitutive: They are “one flesh” in more than just a strictly sexual sense because their relationship makes them who they are. To varying degrees the same is true of all our relationships, from the connections we have with the rest of creation and passing acquaintances, to the ultimate one we have with the Father through the Son by the Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

With that we have a mirror image of one of the clearest possible definitions of sin. Martin Luther was likely drawing from Augustine when he said: “Due to original sin, our nature is so curved in upon itself at its deepest levels that it not only bends the best gifts of God toward itself...but...in this wicked way, it seeks everything, including God, only for itself.”<sup>10</sup>

Whereas we have been created to have our being in relation—to live open to and for others—because of sin we are instead “curved in upon” ourselves. Much more than just a prohibition of arbitrarily bad choices, sin is wrong because it is an attempt to undo our very being. Colin Gunton: “When individual self-contemplation becomes the basis of the self, rather than the relation to the divine and human others on which our reality actually depends, the self begins to disappear.”<sup>11</sup>

Simplifying to an extreme: Sin is not about what kind of person we will be, it is about whether we will be a person at all.

When we sin we don't just become less good, we become less. Sin does not reduce the quality of our lives, it reduces *life*—both our own and the lives of those who depend on us for theirs. Sin is a challenge to the sovereignty of the Creator, a striving backward against the creative action of God as if to return creation to the nothingness that preceded it.

## SIN AS RELIGION

Enough said (I hope) about the form of sin, but what of its movements? How does sin look when we do it? It is a tangled mess, so we could enter it from just about anywhere and eventually discover the whole territory, but we need to start somewhere so I have chosen three to consider here: Sin is religion, lust, and cowardice.<sup>12</sup>

It should give any religious leader considerable pause to realize that his or her vocational ancestors were Jesus' most passionate opponents. It was the pastors, moderators, board members, and religious bureaucrats of Jesus' day who quickly deemed him a threat to their status quo and began plotting his assassination.

In a classic among the many showdowns with these religious people, Jesus put the matter very clearly, "Because you claim you can see," he said, "your guilt remains" (John 9:41). The needy blind man had just embraced Jesus and received a consequent newness of life, but the religious leaders did neither. We often say that sin "separates" us from God, and religion does just that. In effect Jesus said, "You are separated from God *because you claim you can see.*" Again *grasping* is the fatal gesture: Religion is sin because it grasps at knowledge of God and claims success; it is not content with receiving God as he freely reveals himself and prefers instead to have an idol it can handle.

Søren Kierkegaard can help us mark the subtle slip. There is an "infinite qualitative difference" between the Creator and creatures, he said.<sup>13</sup> It is a difference so complete and categorical that only God himself can navigate it. Knowledge of God is not possible "from below"; whatever we might presume or grasp at from here will be just a claiming to see what we cannot. Knowledge of God is only possible if it begins from his side of the qualitative difference; it is always a gift from there. In other words, *by grace we have been saved through faith; and that not of ourselves, it is*

*the gift of God.* Knowing God—being saved—is not possible “of ourselves”; it is only and always an initiative of God’s alone.

Here again the nature of revelation is crucial. If our primary aim is to receive data from God and continue along our moral way then we do indeed take those directions and make various claims to see. But if we genuinely depend on God moment by moment for even the faith that makes receiving his grace possible, then our claims are considerably more modest.

As I understand the situation we must choose between God and whatever bits of him we have grasped, reduced, and fitted to our capacity to understand. Christianity becomes a religion when we equate our knowledge of God with God himself, when we don’t put our faith in Christ but in however we understand Christ. On such terms Jesus’ request in John 17 is doomed; the church will never know unity as long as it confuses faithfulness to a Person with a stubborn grip on beliefs *about* that person.

When the Pharisees asked “What? Are we blind too?” it was intended to be both rhetorical and accusatory. But Jesus’ shocking *Yes!* was the reply of grace. We *are* blind. Religious sin is the arrogant presumption that our eyes are our own to point wherever we please, but grace means these eyes are just blind balls unless they are directed and lit by the one who gave them in the first place.

In this respect religious sin is characteristic also of the staunchly secular mind. Where modern science has capitulated to atheism it has become the epitome of all claims to see. Objectivity and dispassionate observation function as alternatives to faith, and the myth of certainty displaces grace. This is religion *par excellence*.

The so-called postmodern mind is only slightly better off. Here’s the insistence that we downgrade our epistemic ambition, but with no transcendental point of reference this modesty is finally despair. By rejecting not just modernity’s idols but also God, postmodernity is both an embrace of our blindness and the despondent claim that there is no one left to heal us. This is dark, yes, but the point here is that the postmodern mind is at least aware of its blindness; it lacks the grasping/claiming attitude common in its predecessor, and so is generally closer to faith.

All sin is twisted, but religion may be especially so. It is the near miss that produces a deeply held posture of self-congratulation. When we believe ourselves successful in our

aims, why look around for improvement? When we think we can see perfectly well, why adjust the status quo for someone who can heal the blind?

Jesus spent much more time with prostitutes and sinners than he did with religious professionals. Usually we think he did this out of a duty-bound obligation to his “mission”—that he would surely rather be spending his time at more religious things like, say, a study conference—but if religion is a sin then maybe Jesus spent his time with irreligious people simply because he liked them more or, more to the point, because *he is more like them*.

## SIN AS LUST

Sin is whatever turns us inward and away from the others on whom our being depends, and religion is the first and most deadly because it is the turning away from our first and most constitutive relation. But sin is more than that too. Not only do we turn away from our Creator, we also turn away from other creatures. In this respect sin is lust.

Bob and Sue claim to love each other. But Bob and Sue are sinful, so Bob’s primary interest is not Sue but the effect his relationship with Sue has on himself. And Sue is no different. She thinks she loves Bob, but what she really loves is the way he makes her feel. This is a caricature of course; sin is actually much more complicated, but it is nonetheless a picture of the deterioration of love into lust.

Just as religion is a turning away from God and inward upon the religious self, so is lust a turning away from the beloved and inward upon the loving self.<sup>14</sup> If religion is displacing the rightful recipient of worship with the would-be worshipper, lust is displacing the intended recipient of love with the would-be lover. As ever, sin takes its characteristic shape as a curve inward instead of the outwardness to others that is our original likeness to God.

I have so far avoided the question about how evil exists in the first place, but a word or two here will help us understand the nature of lust.

First, a disclaimer: The reality of evil and the confession that God is good are ultimately incommensurable. On Christian terms there can be no finally satisfying theodicy. The gospel does not seek to explain evil, only to explain how God deals with it on the cross.

That said, we have already come as close as Christianly possible to a definition of evil: Sin is whatever tempts the human stewards of creation to take it and themselves backward from God's good intentions and toward the nothingness from which it was formed. In other words, evil exists only as a positive lack of goodness; it is not properly a part of creation but is an ontological misdirection of it.<sup>15</sup>

Lust is evil as such. When we love others, we find ourselves within a relation that is mutually constitutive, but lust denies that mutuality. Instead of the giving and receiving that characterizes love, lust seeks only to take. It keeps the other removed and distant, and maneuvers the self in any direction that will sustain the isolation. Lust is a unilateral parody of love; it is self-destructive, parasitic, and oxymoronic: A lusting person can no sooner become finally isolated from others any more than a religious one can finally make an idol divine. In existential lingo the result is *angst*. When we face the abyss inside us instead of the divine and human others around us, those others become—they *seem* to become—the very opposite of life and fullness. “Hell,” said Jean-Paul Sartre, “is other people.”<sup>16</sup> Robert Jenson puts the matter this way: “If the soul does not love God, neither will it finally love anything but itself or rather its own consequent vacuity...when we love him we are kept from total incurvation and so are free to love friend or spouse or child or enemy also.”<sup>17</sup>

With the mention of “free,” I need to make an important point of clarification: Lust as I mean it here refers to more than the sexual version, and indeed more than simply a style of interpersonal relation. Lust is sinful humanity's social motif, and it is a pattern of life that has been especially embraced by our own culture. We like lust so much that we have given it a more palatable name—we call it “freedom.” Stanley Hauerwas says this: “The modern conception has made freedom the content of the moral life itself. It matters not what we desire, but that we desire. Our task is to become free, not through the acquisition of virtue, but by preserving ourselves from being determined.”<sup>18</sup>

Freedom as the Bible tells of it is a matter of obedience (Hauerwas uses the broader term “virtue”), but sin puts it again in the exact opposite direction.<sup>19</sup> According to our culture “freedom” is a matter of “preserving ourselves from being determined”; it is a freedom *from* divine and human others. The gospel, on the other

hand, is about a freedom *for* those others.<sup>20</sup> The contrast could hardly be more distinct, and the stakes could hardly be higher. If we define freedom as unhindered desire and if we want a society in which individuals are “free” to pursue those desires in an unhindered way, there is little if anything to keep us from what Thomas Hobbes called “a war of every man against every man.” In such a situation, he said, “nothing can be unjust.”<sup>21</sup> This injustice is the product of lust. Try as we might, humans cannot escape the fact that we are communal creatures, so when the connections within our communities become opportunities to take (lust) instead of to give and receive (love), we do not become free, we become brutal.<sup>22</sup>

Whatever else we might say about the twentieth century, it was sinful humanity’s grandest effort so far to pursue freedom on its own terms. Robert Pippin sketches the results: “...modernity promised us a culture of unintimidated, curious, rational, self-reliant individuals, and it produced...a herd society, a race of anxious, timid, conformist ‘sheep,’ and a culture of utter banality.”<sup>23</sup>

When such a culture is mostly benign it is simply boring, but when the balance has tipped toward the malicious, we have seen how easily “conformist sheep” will collude in totalitarianism.

Ten years into the twenty-first century and the West is already reeling in a kind of freedom hangover. Capitalism may be the best possible form for an imperfect economy, but hypercapitalism appears to be home to roost. Now our lust or so-called freedom is enshrined in what Slavoj Žižek has called “institutionalized envy” and the destructive results are taking effect.<sup>24</sup> Humans can only curve in upon themselves so far before there is little else left to grasp.

Lust in this respect is also at the root of our impending ecological crisis. Ludwig Feuerbach was among the first to lay the blame on Christians: “Nature, the world, has no value, no interest for Christians. The Christian thinks only of himself and the salvation of his soul.”<sup>25</sup> Feuerbach has dualism in his sights, the idea that our salvation is not within the material world but from it, and in this respect he is undeniably accurate. Christians have long dabbled with an essentially Gnostic view of salvation and the earth has suffered for it. But there is a further insight in his condemnation and it is that the Christian “thinks only of himself.” The ability to conceive of oneself as disengaged or independent

from the creation, either in eternity or a self-orbital bubble, is a posture Christians and other sinful humans share; it is our propensity for unilateral relations with the earth. Usual mantras warn of this dynamic by calling it *consumption*; we could also just call it *lust*. Wendell Berry brings the point back to us: “No wonder so many sermons are dedicated exclusively to ‘spiritual’ subjects. If one is living by the tithes of history’s most destructive economy then the disembodiment of the soul becomes the chief of worldly conveniences.” 🙏

We must not fall for the dualistic, “disembodying” perversions of the gospel, and so we must realize that lust is a reduction not only of our personal relations but also of our social, political, and economic lives. The creation itself groans because we do not live as we should; it longs for salvation from our lust.

### SIN AS COWARDICE

Sin is religion and lust, and it is also *cowardice*.

Jesus once told his closest followers that he was about to leave and prepare a place for them (John 14:1ff). Then he added, “You know the way.”

I imagine an awkward pause at that point.

I imagine the disciples quickly snapping back into the moment and wondering what they had missed. This sounded important. *Jesus is going somewhere. He wants us to meet him there. Where was I when he gave directions?*

There were twelve men more or less listening to Jesus at that point, but only one of them had the courage to speak up. We usually call him Doubting Thomas: “Ah, Lord,” he said, “we don’t know where you’re going so how can we know the way?”

Thomas was simply stating the obvious. The disciples plainly did not know the way to God, and only he—the one less hindered by his own ignorance, the one brave enough to admit that he didn’t know—only he was able to ask the obvious question.

Sin is cowardice as a fear of the unknown. As lust was the impulse to take from others, cowardice is the refusal to receive from them.

As creatures, we are meant to receive our being from others, but as sinful creatures we resist their participation and

infringement. This is why we rally so quickly to defend our beliefs. What I think about God and the world is like scaffolding around my identity. These beliefs support and uphold my presentation of myself to myself. My so-called “worldview” is really more about the skeleton that allows me to stand (be identified) in the world than it is about the eyes I use to see it. And our beliefs don’t just sustain our *self*-identification, the others around us too—the same others from whom we receive our being—identify us according to our beliefs. When those others have shared beliefs they form a cohesive community, and when I share those beliefs within that community, those same beliefs are affirmed and so become stronger aspects of my identity.<sup>27</sup>

For a community unhampered by sin, sustaining and re-affirming its scaffolding would be perfectly fine since the language and beliefs of such a community would be in keeping with the way things actually are. But for every *real* community—the church included—sin means our beliefs do not always correspond to the way things are. And the problem gets worse: In sin we are not only often wrong about God, the world, and ourselves, we are also unwilling to adjust those mistaken beliefs. *That* unwillingness is the sin I am calling cowardice. Since our beliefs—mistaken or otherwise—prop up and insulate our identities, we are unwilling to entertain anything that might question those beliefs because questioning them would *threaten who we are*.

Just think of the last time you read a book by someone with whom you disagree. We tend not to do that. Similarly, we usually choose to read papers and watch television news by those who report on events according to the slant we prefer. During an election, we listen to those who explain our political options according to the way we’ve already decided to vote. Or, for a pastoral example, consider the adulterous spouse: He or she will systematically determine who within his or her social group is a “real” friend based on whoever will “support” the already desired infidelity. Our beliefs make us who we are, and so we protect and defend those beliefs by avoiding persons or voices that might call them into question. As humans bent backward by sin we are intrinsically frightened of whatever might jeopardize our false sense of self-security; we fear those who threaten to infringe upon us and so we select only the voices that re-affirm the persons we already are.

Such is the dilemma at the core of a complaint I recently overheard at a pastors' conference: "Wherever the Apostle Paul went, they started a revolution. Wherever I go, they serve tea." When a pastor or a theologian receives only grateful accolades, a vocational crisis is due. To be a servant of the church is precisely to be someone who demands from others the courage to engage in a revolution against the fear that bends us inward. But it is a dangerous calling. We stoned the prophets and crucified the Son because we feared them. They did not affirm our frightened self-defenses and they would not remain silent, so they were rejected.

Philosophers of science sometimes call this "confirmation bias"—the tendency to favor evidence that confirms what we already believe. Such is an obvious problem for anything that hinges on objective decisions (e.g., science), but more to the point for us, a bias in favor of what we already believe is also a bias in favor of *who we already are*. And a bias in favor of who we *are* is contrary to becoming who God wants us to *become*. In short, we cannot be transformed by others if we reject anyone who might ask us to change. Robert Jenson makes the point: "When I maintain my opinions merely because I already hold them, I shut myself against the future and so against the new possibilities others represent to me. And so I violate community."<sup>26</sup>

And "violate" is indeed the right word here since anything that isolates the self and forms a breach in relations is a kind of ontological violence.<sup>27</sup>

Two Mennonite Brethren characteristics come to mind here: First, we are peacemakers; we aim to build instead of break connections between persons and within communities, and second, when it comes to forming our opinions we are committed to a "community hermeneutic." Both of these are exactly necessary if we are ever to experience Christian transformation. Peacemaking on these grounds is not an odd addendum to a list of propositional beliefs about God; it is the being-in-relation expression of who God is within a world bent on avoiding him. And a "community hermeneutic" is a safeguard against the sin of cowardice; it is a kind of institutionalized vulnerability that lures us out from the confirming confines of whatever we already want to believe. Genuine community requires genuine courage.<sup>28</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "The first service one owes to the other in the

fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love for God begins with listening to his Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them...[we] forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking. <sup>30</sup>1

## CONCLUSION

When Jesus said that he came to give us life to the full and that we should love God with all we are and our neighbors as ourselves, he was saying the same thing in two different ways. The full life is the life that loves God and others: We should love God and others as if our lives depend on it *because our lives do depend on it*. Sin is *taboo* because it denies this dependence and isolates us within ourselves. It is the attempt to grasp anything that will secure us against the invading love of God. Religion is the worst because it is an attempt to grasp God himself, lust is the most destructive because it is an attempt to grasp others, and cowardice is our last defense because it is an attempt to grasp even ourselves.

## NOTES

1. This paper was originally delivered at the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Study Conference, "The Mystery of the Cross," Kitchener, Ontario, October 28, 2011.
2. Alistair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 111.
3. Ibid.
4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, all too Human*, tr. Gary Handwerk (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 45.
5. See, e.g., Lynn Jost and Connie Faber, *Family Matters. Discovering the Mennonite Brethren* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred, 2002), 6.
6. Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (London: Burns and Oates, 2001), 99–100.
7. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, pt. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 296.
8. I have used this illustration for so long but I think I took it, or a similar idea, from Alan Torrance.
9. On these lines the evangelical mantra about being created for a relationship with God is a half-truth. We are not created *for* relationships—with God or anyone else—we are created *by* them. We do not pre-exist our relationships as if we could take or leave them; those relationships *are* our existence.
10. Martin Luther *Lectures on Romans* (1515–16), ed. W. Pauk (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1961), 159. Cf. *WA* 56:304.

11. Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many. God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: University Press, 1993), 118.
12. Relying in this and much of the following on Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *The Works of God* (New York: Oxford University Press), 133ff.
13. On this see, e.g., Murray Rae, *Kierkegaard and Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 203n. 97.
14. Jenson, 139.
15. The explanation of evil as a positive lack has roots in Augustine. See *City of God*, tr. Marcus Dods (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1888), 447, and the idea that evil is a backward misdirection of creation is from Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, e.g., 4.38.3. Cf. Douglas Farrow, "St Irenaeus of Lyons: The Church and the World," *Pro Ecclesia* 4, no. 3 (1995): 333–55.
16. A line, to be fair, not from Sartre himself but one of his most memorable characters, in his play *No Exit* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1989), 45.
17. Jenson, 140.
18. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame, IN: University Press, 1983), 8. Cited in Jenson, 140.
19. And here we must insist that legalists please return what is in fact a relational term. We can only obey Christ if we are relationally near him, and wherever the Spirit enables such proximity, there is freedom.
20. This point gleaned from a conversation with James M. Houston.
21. Cited in Jenson, 143.
22. A fuller treatment would include concessions about the way elements of "individualism" are crucial to a healthy democracy. Cf. John Ralston Saul, *The Unconscious Civilization* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 2005), passim.
23. Robert Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 22. Cited in Gunton, 13.
24. Žižek credits this phrase to Daniel Bell in *Living in the End Times* (New York: Verso, 2010), xiii. A rendition of Churchill's famous quip about democracy comes to mind: *Capitalism is the worst form for an economy. Except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.*
25. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, tr. Marian Evans (London: Trübner & Co.: 1881), 287. Cf. Lynn White "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," in *Science* 55, no. 3767 (10 March 1967), 1203–1207.
26. Wendell Berry, *What are People For?* (New York: North Point, 1990), 96.
27. Cogent points and general direction here from Peter Rollins. <http://peterrollins.net/?=2933>.

28. Jenson, 147.
29. Introverts, relax. Jesus may even have been one of us (Lord knows people can be irritating). There is an immense difference between spiritual solitude and ontological isolation. But no space here to clarify.
30. “[Nietzsche] would probably not be very happy with the use made of his oeuvre during the hundred years since his death. After all, what he valued was courage. And today courage is required to dissent from his views.” Czeslaw Milosz, *Roadside Dog* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 1998), 24.
31. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 97.

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