

LIVING GRACE: AN OUTLINE OF UNITED METHODIST THEOLOGY

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For that reason preaching and pastoral care are not about offering explanations and the theoretical answers but about drawing near to persons who suffer, about bringing their laments before God, and with them—or, in case that is not possible, without them and for them—petitioning God on their behalf, that he may meet those who suffer in the depths of their need.⁸¹ Part of doing that can involve being silent with those who suffer, suffering their laments and our poverty of response, perhaps learning a new language for lament with the biblical psalms of lament, and allowing God to speak to us. Instead of forcing ourselves upon humans in need, or avoiding them, we should be accessible to them, and make space for them where they can meet God. Then, they can continue onward, comforted and encouraged for their life journey.

God accompanies God's creation. God's work of preservation begins with his Creation, which cannot endure without God, and it flows into his finished new creation, which will usher in a new world. Heaven and earth shall pass away, because this created order is temporal and thus finite. With its disappearance, God will also suspend his own limitation upon himself, which he imposed at the creation of humanity, and the powers of destruction and death will have to give way to him through whom God reconciles all things with himself, namely, Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:20). However, the consummation of the world will not occur in such a way that its past is extinguished, rather the consummation will bring to fulfillment that for which the creation was destined from the beginning—a place of fellowship with God (Revelation 21:1-4).

2.2 God's Loving Care in His Reconciling Acts

The shared starting point of the biblical message and the Christian proclamation is a common basic principle: the trustful and salvific companionship of God and humanity that was God's intent in the creation has been profoundly disturbed by humans. Humans no longer live in their original reliance upon God. Thus, their relationship to themselves, to their fellow humans, and to the entire creation has been disturbed at its root. God's renewing actions are required to repair this breach. The history of the Bible is the history of these actions of God.

2.2.1 Sin and Its Consequences

The Bible refers to the cause for the destruction of the relationship between God and humans as *sin*. The terminology used—especially in the

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Old Testament—is varied. The so-called story of the fall in Genesis 3 describes the circumstances without even using the term *sin*.

Two basic explanations for understanding sin can easily be distinguished in the biblical message:

- (a.) Sin is a deed of humans which destroys their relationship with God.
- (b.) Sin is the power and the misfortune which reigns over and destroys the life of humanity.⁸²

In contrast with this biblical viewpoint, the word *sin* is pushed to the margin in present-day nontheological use, and it is used in a rather insipid fashion. One speaks of traffic sins and even the days when it could be ironically asked, "Can love be sin?" are long gone.

And yet people nowadays do indeed experience something of the inner breakdown and the loss of roots and loss of direction of human existence. However, their "estrangement" from God is often so far advanced that they can scarcely recognize the One from whose fellowship they have fallen. At best, the broken relationship of contemporary people with God continues to be articulated whenever one hears their accusations against God for all the suffering in this world. Yet, a biblically oriented theology needs to speak of sin and its consequences. It does so precisely for the sake of those human beings, whose situation before God must be diagnosed as honestly as possible, so that we may proclaim God's gracious turning toward the world as powerfully and aptly as needed.

2.2.1.1 THE UNIVERSALITY OF SIN FROM THE BEGINNING

What is referred to in Christian theology as "original sin"⁸³ was strongly emphasized by John Wesley. He consistently includes this among the "essentials" of the Christian faith. He devoted some of his most comprehensive theological discussions to this theme and he summarized its consequences in one of his doctrinal sermons.⁸⁴ In the doctrine of original sin he sees the "grand, fundamental difference between Christianity . . . and the most refined heathenism" and he declares that "all who deny this—call it original sin or by any other title—are but heathens still."⁸⁵ In so doing they are denying the basic need for redemption that exists within humanity.

Barely one hundred years later, the Danish philosopher of religion Søren Kierkegaard proposed that "the idea which qualitatively distinguishes Christianity from paganism is precisely the doctrine of sin; and therefore Christianity quite consistently pursues the notion that neither paganism nor the natural man knows what sin is." "In paganism of course

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this sin did not exist. . . . Yet Christianity has secured itself from the very beginning. It begins with the doctrine of sin." He pointed out that it must be accepted as a revelation from God for it to be made evident what sin is. This also means that it is not the doctrine of reconciliation that is the qualitative difference between paganism and Christianity. "No, one has to begin at a far deeper level, with sin, with the doctrine of sin, as happens in Christianity."⁸⁶

The greatness and the universality of the biblical message of the grace of God is only experienced where the reality of the separation of humans from God is grasped in all its depth and radicalness.

After Paul, Augustine was the first who saw this in all its clarity and gave it a new formulation. It is true that the way in which he defined "original sin" above all as (sexual) desire and ascribed its "transmission" to the act of procreation does not conform to the biblical witness. However, in his teaching on sin Augustine firmly upheld the belief that the human ability to do good has been marred down to its very root.⁸⁷ Reformation theology rediscovered this biblical truth and emphasized it anew, and Wesley also, who otherwise gladly defended Pelagius, Augustine's theological opponent, clearly shows that at this point he thought neither as a "Pelagian" nor as a "Semi-Pelagian."⁸⁸

Within the context of American Christianity, the doctrine of original sin underwent significant alteration from the time of the early Puritans, who upheld the doctrine as a corollary to their conviction that human salvation is *sola gratia*, as the consequence of God's foreordaining will in establishing a covenant of grace with his elect, who were typologically identified as "God's New Israel."⁸⁹ The New England colonies of Massachusetts and Connecticut were established by the Puritans as Massachusetts and Connecticut were established by the Puritans as covenant communities. Significant alterations occurred in the Puritan doctrine of original sin by the time of the early nineteenth century, under the impact of the moralistic and pseudo-"Arminian" emphases that came into prominence under the impact of the Second Great Awakening. As a result, God was viewed as a Moral Governor, who does not impute sin to humanity by virtue of their solidarity with Adam but who permits actual sin and who punishes it not as an expression of wrath but as a means of establishing the authority of moral law.⁹⁰ This popular erosion of the doctrine of original sin signified a shift from theological to moralistic concerns that coincided with the building of the nation. Revisionist Methodist theologians in the nineteenth century tended to reflect this trend away from the doctrine of original sin, as Robert Chiles has documented.⁹¹

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The biblical basis for the doctrine of original sin is to be found in Romans 5:12-21. Paul says in verse 12, "Sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned."

This statement contains a double assertion: both sin and its consequences are a peril, in that through the transgression of *one person*, namely Adam, it has come upon the entirety of humanity (compare also vv. 15-19). However, the sin of the one has such deadly effect within because *all* human beings have sinned and continue to sin. Paul apparently wants to assert a double truth: each person is found to be a sinner because the power of sin has taken hold of all humanity. However, no one is merely a victim of his or her fate since all have power to sin through their own sinfulness. John 8:34 formulates this with classical brevity: "Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin."

Thus, for Paul too, sin is not simply an individual deed. (This is most-ly described by him by the term *transgression* of the law).⁹² Sin is a power that has prevailed in humanity from the beginning of the human race. Paul describes the origin and essence of sin as "disobedience" (Romans 5:19) or, even more sharply, as persons being "enemies of God" (Romans 5:10, cf. 8:7).

The Pauline observations concerning original sin are based upon the description of the sin of the first humans in Genesis 3. The history of the so-called "fall of sin" actually contains no doctrine of sin. However, it impressively describes how a breach in the fellowship between God and humanity occurred, and thereby makes clear the essence of sin. Adam and Eve appear on the one hand as individual persons who were to manifest "what is exemplary in the human attitude toward God."⁹³ They are the corepresentatives of humanity, in whose destiny human history is portrayed.⁹⁴ These persons are depicted as those who have everything that they need for fellowship with God. They experience their limitation as creatures through the prohibition not to eat of the tree of knowledge. However, the prohibition awakens the temptation within them to transgress its command, which is personified in the form of the serpent.⁹⁵ The serpent's doubting rejoinder, "Did God really say that?" leads to the declaration of taboo ("We are never to touch that!") and to the contrary description of the voice of temptation that is larded with half-truths. Their center is the assertion that promises human beings that they will be like God through the eating of the forbidden fruit and will know what is good and evil.⁹⁶

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The outward step of transgressing the prohibition of God and eating the forbidden fruit represents a very deep-going inner event, namely the attempt of humans to step over the boundary of their creatureliness and to emancipate themselves from their relationship to God. By transgressing this boundary that had been affixed to them, the human wanted to "transcend himself," that is, he wanted to elevate the meaning of his own existence into the realm of the superhuman.⁹⁷ The "original sin," as it is described in the account of Genesis 3, is therefore disobedience against God's command, but it is also unbelief, which mistrusts God's promise and displaces God as the decisive orientation and foundation for their own lives. According to Genesis 3, the fundamental human error was "the effort to free themselves from Yahweh and to determine their own lives autonomously."⁹⁸ It is therefore not surprising that Genesis 3 was viewed by many interpreters in the Christian tradition not as a "fall into sin," but rather as the actual step toward "becoming human."⁹⁹

However, the biblical account defines the consequences of this event in other terms. That which the serpent had predicted actually occurs: the eyes of the humans are opened—but the first thing they recognize is that they are naked! They are unmasked before one another. They can no longer endure their sexual differences and have to protect themselves from each other's sight. Likewise, the breach with God is documented in the need to hide themselves from God. Shame and fear because of what they have done, the need to justify themselves, and as a consequence the attempt to blame someone else now characterizes the situation of humanity, which has entangled itself in sin.¹⁰⁰ The break in the relationship with God also leads to the disruption of human community, as well as the disruption of the relationship of humans to themselves. God's "curse," whereby he charged human beings with their deed (Genesis 3:15-19), is intended to restrain them with regard to the finitude of their existence. The brokenness of human existence is painfully experienced and suffered ever anew in the joy and pain of childbearing, in the lust and misery of sexual relationships and dependency, in the success and drudgery of human struggles for daily bread within a nature that has become "two-faced," and above all in the inevitability of their own death. The subsequent accounts of the primeval history of humanity, especially the story of the first murder (Genesis 4), the condemnation of the generation of Noah (Genesis 6), and the building of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11), indicate further effects of sin within the life of humanity, including its universality and the mortal threat that it represents for humanity.

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Wesley summarized these effects of sin with the phrase "the loss of the image of God."¹⁰¹ What is critical for Wesley is that sin has resulted in the loss of the love of God, through which humans fall out of fellowship with God and forfeit the righteousness and holiness that had been bestowed on them by God. That was the *doxa*, the brilliance of God's essence, which according to Romans 3:23 all humans lose, because they join forces with sin. By their relationship with God, they have in the final analysis lost God himself in their lives. Humans in sin are *atheoi en to kosmo*—without God in this world (Ephesians 2:12), a statement that, for Wesley, refers not to a theoretical atheism that denies God but to the existential condition of human beings, who are "alienated from the life of God" and who therefore can no longer have any actual and effective knowledge of God. They neither experience the happiness of God's love that provides a harbor against the anxieties of life, nor are they able to live in the holiness of life that is marked by the voluntary love of God.¹⁰²

This practical "atheism" certainly does not keep people from paying allegiance to the service of idols. On the contrary, because "the alienated person . . . no longer seeks the destiny and fulfillment of their life in their Creator but in themselves and in the created world," such persons fabricate their own gods, on which their hearts depend and into whose strength and power they fall.¹⁰³ Paul has described this process in Romans 1:20ff., where he draws from Oriental and Hellenistic religions above all for his examples. In his description of service to idols, Wesley reproves the idols of his day, which are made not of stone or wood but out of the love of self and the world, which is shown in pride, egoism, or avarice just as much as in the absolutizing of aesthetic values or human achievements.¹⁰⁴

The kernel and mainspring of sin is always anxiety for oneself, which results from the broken relationship of human beings to their Creator and leads to a fatal self-love. Paul often describes this by the term *flesh*—creatureliness of humanity that has been seduced from anxiety to greed. The biblical concept "flesh" in the first instance shows complete neutrality with reference to that which is earthly, human, and bodily, characteristic of which are precisely human transitoriness and frailty (see Isaiah 40:6-7). However, exactly because humans reject this side of their natures, "flesh" becomes the operational basis and the fertile ground for sin, which resists God. Augustine identifies the core of sin in the self-love that is derived from anxiety for one's own life, which wants to justify and safe-

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guard one's own existence, and, as a last consequence, implies hatred toward God.¹⁰⁵ On this basis, Luther has designated fallen, sinful humanity, characterized by self-love, as those who are "in themselves crooked persons," who are "*homines incurvati in se ipse*."¹⁰⁶ By resisting each demand that comes to challenge this egoism, the "atheism" of sin consequently becomes enmity against God.¹⁰⁷

This actuality of sin is the reality of unredeemed humanity, in which each particular person finds herself or himself and which each one repeatedly makes the reality of his or her existence by his or her own sinfulness. Psalm 51:5 speaks of this fallenness of humanity when it affirms, "Indeed, I was born guilty, / a sinner when my mother conceived me." It is not procreation nor conception nor birth that are presented as sinful acts and as means of conveying original sin. Instead, sin is exposed as the essential condition of human existence.¹⁰⁸

But to what extent are humans in a position to recognize this situation without the help of God? To what extent can this condition be made evident to us? Is the revelation of the "wrath of God," that is, God's uncompromising "No" spoken against "all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth" (Romans 1:18), also evident for persons who (intend to) know nothing about the revelation of the righteousness of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ?

The answer provided by the biblical witnesses and the Christian tradition appears to be ambiguous. Paul himself declares in Romans 3:20b, "Through the law comes the knowledge of sin." That was one of the reasons why John Wesley held the preaching of the law as an indispensable condition of the Christian proclamation.¹⁰⁹ Yet, Paul himself had also acknowledged that the law can hinder a person from recognizing one's real situation before God. For it is not only through the outward, visible transgression of the law that humans demonstrate that they are sinners. Those who, measured by the requirements of the law, can regard themselves as "blameless"—so long as they seek their own righteousness by this—also live far from God and in opposition to God.

Thus, it is very strongly emphasized in recent theological discussion, especially in its systematic consideration of the relevant portions of the biblical witness, that the actual knowledge of sin emerges first from the encounter with God's grace in the gospel. How dark the darkness in which we live really is can first be measured by persons only when God sends God's light into their lives. Wesley emphasized this too when he stated that "So long as a man born blind continues so, he is scarce sensible of his

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want. Much less, could we suppose a place where all were born without sight, would they be sensible of the want of it. In like manner, so long as men remain in their natural blindness of understanding they are not sensible of their spiritual wants, and of this in particular. But as soon as God opens the eyes of their understanding they see the state they were in before."¹¹⁰

However, W. Pannenberg has claimed that "what Christians say about human beings as sinners is true to life only if it relates to something that characterizes the whole phenomenon of human life and that may be known even without the premise of God's revelation, even if this revelation is necessary to bring its true significance to light."¹¹¹ In this context, Wesley has referred to the way in which "our daily experience confirms" that the meditations and observations of the human heart are evil and certainly only evil and that forever and ever. For Wesley, this is certainly to be accompanied by the restriction that the "natural man" is unable to perceive this.¹¹²

In actuality, the brokenness of human existence is incalculable. It is not by accident that the biblical concept of "alienation" has been evident with different nuances through a long history of spirituality.¹¹³ Even in secular usage, for example, in Marxism, the term *alienation* betrays some degree of the knowledge that humans are estranged from their original destiny, and thus they are prevented from attaining a fulfilled life.

A motif that has garnered considerable attention in contemporary thought is the phenomenon which the Greeks called *hybris*, or that false pride of humanity which is one of the essential causes of their internal and external suffering. In his influential study *All Mighty: A Study of the God Complex in Western Man*, the psychotherapist Horst Eberhard Richter has investigated the causes for this development.¹¹⁴ The "God complex" refers to the human effort to seek to be as God, which has stood behind the modern efforts to emancipate humanity that have developed, either consciously or unconsciously, since the end of the Middle Ages. The therapeutic proposals of Richter are not identical with the use of the biblical message. However, his diagnosis agrees in several important respects with the biblical analysis of humanity and of the essence of sin. Research in depth psychology has exposed anxiety as being precisely the conscious or unconscious motive of human actions.¹¹⁵ Out of this anxiety, humans want to secure or rescue their lives, and if they fail to do so, they will in many instances even destroy their own lives or those of others. It is the fear that something important

is being withheld from us that provokes us to disregard the wholesome and protecting boundaries that are set by God for our lives.

The "lostness" of humanity without God is therefore a phenomenon of human existence whose symptoms even weigh heavy on those who know little or nothing about God and the message of the gospel. Its deepest cause, the broken relationship of humanity toward God, is, however, not recognizable or understandable for them. And yet is part of the "grip on life" that is part and parcel of any biblically-oriented proclamation of the gospel to challenge the hearer of the gospel about this broken relationship. Without doubt, this has always been a distinguishing mark of Methodist preaching. Only one thing must be kept clear here: it is impossible to demonstrate the necessity of the saving activity of God in Christ and its meaning for personal living if one begins with a person's own experience of deficiency. At this point, the gospel needs to speak for itself.

2.2.1.2 SIN AS A DEED

At the beginning of the last section we identified two basic thrusts of the biblical understanding of sin: sin as a deed and sin as a power. When the original sin is denoted, the second aspect naturally stands in the foreground. That was also the case with Wesley. He speaks quite emphatically at this point of sin as a "fatal disease,"¹¹⁶ that has taken hold of and corrupted the entire being of humankind. This sickness manifests itself in such concrete symptoms as pride, self-love, love of the world, lust, or false ambition. In contrast, God's saving activity in Christ is nothing other than a *therapeia psychēs*, "God's method of *healing a soul* which is *thus diseased*."¹¹⁷ The love of God, which appeared in Christ and is given through the Spirit to human hearts, is the effective means of salvation for all manifestations of this sickness, because it is able to heal the source of that evil of egocentric self-love and love of the world that issues from it.

However, for Wesley, this includes the fact that he consistently views sin as a voluntary act of a human being. This was already true of the transgression of the first humans, which Wesley characterizes as a "wilful act of disobedience," but it is also fundamentally applicable to sin in general, which Wesley defines as a "voluntary transgression of a known law."¹¹⁸ This idea of sin, with its strong orientation toward voluntary action, caused Wesley a certain degree of difficulty with regard to the character of involuntary transgression. However, it was not chosen casually. It stands in the service of the argument to prove that a Christian could be free of sinful acts. This concept of Wesley's will continue to occupy us

below. For now it will suffice for us to state here that Wesley emphasized much more the understanding of sin as a deed than did other theologians who reflect the heritage of the Protestant Reformation.

Hence, he stands without doubt in the biblical tradition. In particular, it is in the Old Testament that the word *sin* becomes "conceived almost exclusively as a deed which expresses itself in errant behavior, considered in light of God's commands."¹¹⁹ The authors of the Old Testament have a diverse vocabulary at their disposal to portray the different aspects of such errant behavior.¹²⁰ Even in the New Testament mainly concrete, particular sins are meant, where *hamartia* (sin) is spoken of in the plural. Paul faithfully consistently uses the term *transgression* for this aspect of sin.¹²¹ Naturally, the concrete character of the transgression of sin is recognized with particular clarity.

Thus, it is again the Old Testament that highlights two important assumptions of Christian discourse concerning sin and guilt.

(a.) There is no basic distinction between guilt toward humans and guilt toward God. Wherever I err in doing God's will, I will be guilty not only before God but also toward my fellow human beings. Conversely, every injury of the human rights of another is guilt against God, who protects their lives by his commandment. For those who confess their sin before God, this aspect can emerge quite clearly into the foreground without thereby excluding their guilt against their fellow humans.¹²²

It is often difficult to speak of these relationships in our present situation, in which norms that protect individuals or society are strongly relativized and are no longer identified with God's command. The reality of guilt, which consists in the fact that I destroy or defraud the environment, the rights, and the means of living for other people, is not therefore in any way less grievous, and we are not to relinquish the duty to tell people that this guilt will destroy their relationship to God, the ground of all being and all orders of life.

In the New Testament, the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer explicitly sets forth the relationship between forgiveness through God and forgiveness between human beings. It also indirectly underscores the inner relationship of guilt and punishment. Through the Greek word for "debt" or "debtor," which is used in Matthew's Gospel, an aspect of sin and guilt is drawn out that is not grasped by the terms *transgression* or *failure*. Guilt arises from the fact that we are in debt to others in some way!¹²³

(b.) A further important observation that is based upon the linguistic usage of the Old Testament has to do with the deep, inner relationship

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between guilt and punishment. In the biblical sense, *punishment*—which is often denoted by the same word as the word for guilt—is not a sanction independent of the guilty deed. In the biblical sense, “punishment” is that potential for condemnation that lies within the sinful deed itself and points back to those who are guilty if God does not turn away the effects of sin from the sinner through his gracious intervention. In the Old Testament, this consequence of guilt is not only interpreted individually and personally; for it also affects the community in which an offense occurs. If it is not punished or atoned for, the destructive potential that stems from the offense reverts back to the community and disturbs its life. This especially applies to the case in which murder has been committed.¹²⁴

If at first glance these notions appear strange to us, they nevertheless carry a deep truth within them, whose effects we are able to discern whenever offenses are no longer prosecuted or suspected within a society—that is, where a system rules that perverts the right, or where the ruling authority has become too weak either from outward or inward causes.

In the New Testament, the intertwining of sin and punishment are most clearly recognizable in Romans 1:20-32. The failures that Paul enumerates in verses 24 to 31 are already the consequences of human godlessness and lawlessness, to which God “gave them up,” and to that extent, are at the same time guilt and punishment.¹²⁵ Here and in other places in his letters, Paul binds the two aspects of sin together. Their concrete effects for the common life of humanity and their relationship to God are described, clearly in the so-called catalog of vices, but also in the depth dimension of human sin, which is made evident in the destroyed relationship with God and with the reliance upon the “flesh,” or the egocentric concern for one’s own existence.¹²⁶

The strong emphasis upon the meaning of sin as a deed in Wesleyan theology and preaching was a strength but also a hazard for Methodist preaching. One can call it a strength in that it became possible to address quite concrete problems of human life, and persons were given the possibility of confessing plainly those failures which burdened them, that they might be forgiven and attain a transformed praxis for living through patterns of therapeutic, pastoral care within the Methodist classes.¹²⁷

What this matter of speaking about sin risks is apparent. Wherever one is oriented toward the naming of concrete, particular sins, there is the peril of stereotyping based on a fixed moral code, the peril of preaching judgment, and above all, of losing the insight about how deep sin actually pen-

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etrates human existence. With reference to Wesley, it can at least be noted that when he concretized the New Testament “catalog of vices,” he placed less emphasis upon sexual lapses and more upon the transgressions of social behavior. This contrasts with the pattern found in the larger tradition of evangelistic preaching. Because of this emphasis, at times Wesley had to defend himself against attacks.¹²⁸

That does not mean that he excluded from his sermons the realm of sexual covetousness with its consequences. Jesus’ exposition of the seventh commandment in Matthew 5:28 is cited in his sermon on original sin as an important measure for evaluating the human situation. However, the consequences which Wesley drew from Jesus’ words are most noteworthy: “So that one knows not about which to wonder at most, the ignorance or the insolence of those men who speak with such disdain of them that are overcome by desires which every man has felt in his own breast! The desire of every pleasure of sense, innocent or not, being natural to every child of man.”¹²⁹

Language about sin that is biblically grounded and oriented toward the Methodist tradition must therefore both speak very concretely about guilty behavior and must speak publicly and in pastoral care situations about the reality of becoming guilty. However, it will have to do this with sensitivity and not by prejudging the behavior of others based upon inappropriate, stereotyped standards. At times persons are guilty in completely different ways than they appear at first blush! At the same time, a complete relativizing of norms of conduct in terms of a one-sided situational ethic is certainly not appropriate for United Methodist theology.¹³⁰

When it comes to putting guilt in concrete terms, a peculiar kind of double-mindedness reigns in contemporary Protestantism. There are circles which refer to sin only in a completely privatistic sense, limited to a moralistic interpretation of the Ten Commandments. Every hint of the possibility of a structural cause for sin is rejected. However, others limit the realm of sin completely to social injustice and they bracket the question of personal failure because of their fear of succumbing to a moralistic ethic.

Once again, the Old Testament may provide us with a model here, a model in which the shared responsibility for right and wrong in society is as deeply etched as the question of personal guilt remains of elementary significance. Wesley consistently maintained an ethic that held together both the personal and the social dimensions: the responsibility for a society in which people do not find the environment for life that they need,

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and which is therefore even structurally marked by sin, coupled with an awareness of individual sin in response to which comes, in typically Wesleyan pragmatic style, a call to transformation.¹³¹

It should be of particular significance to contemporary people in their encounter with the phenomena of sin and guilt that both sides of this dynamic are made conscious to them; their entanglement in the web of guilt, from which they are unable to extricate themselves, and which they can also not deny or trivialize, and their personal responsibility, upon whose claims they repeatedly founder.

2.2.1.3 SIN AND THE LAW

Especially in Pauline theology, the significance and efficacy of sin and the law are inseparably and multifariously bound together.¹³² In Galatians 3:19 Paul says, the law "was added because of transgressions." At first that sounds as if the law is being considered as a temporary effort to stop the flow of the consequences of sin. This idea is reiterated a few verses later (3:23), where a kind of "protective custody" is mentioned in which we were kept "imprisoned and guarded under the law." A comparison with parallel statements from the Epistle to the Romans indicates that Paul did not ascribe any positive educative function to the law.¹³³ Romans 4:15 and 5:13-14 maintain that sin has exerted a destructive force in humanity since Adam. However, this first becomes recognizable and susceptible to judgment when humans are provoked to commit concrete acts of transgression through the existence of the law. Paul describes this process in Romans 7:7-12, using as an example the command "Thou shalt not covet," which first activates in persons the greed and the hidden sin of coveting that already existed within them.

On the one hand, then, sin misuses the God-given good law so that the command that was supposed to give life causes death instead, since sin sets in motion its judging power. Through the law, sin now becomes even more powerful in its death dealing power (Romans 5:20). The actual operation of the law is therefore negative: it condemns sinners.

On the other hand, it is precisely like this that the law does its real work: it makes hidden sins known and it becomes an unerring indicator of how things really stand for a person. The only positive effect of the law is that it shows up humans' guilt.

If humans first come to know sin in its true character through the law (Romans 7:7), can one then say that the law has also subjectively led them

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to the "knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20) and to the awareness of their need for redemption?

Wesley was firmly convinced of this. In his sermon on "The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law" he said, "To slay the sinner is then the first use of the law; to destroy the life and strength wherein he trusts, and convince him that he is dead while he liveth; not only under sentence of death, but actually dead unto God, void of all spiritual life, 'dead in trespasses and sins.'" He continues, "The second use of it is to bring him unto life, unto Christ, that he may live."¹³⁴ With these two functions, the law accepts "the part of a severe schoolmaster," according to Galatians 3:24. Wesley draws from this practical consequences for preaching. Conviction of the sinner comes not through preaching the gospel, but through the law. "One in a thousand may have been awakened by the gospel. But this is no general rule. The ordinary method of God is to convict sinners by the law, and that only."¹³⁵

In this discussion, Wesley remains close to the exposition that Martin Luther had given. By using the concept of the *usus theologicus* or *elencnicus* (for the theological or the converting use) he emphasizes the converting and condemning power of the law. Yet, he would most energetically contend that the law in itself is able to lead us from itself to Christ; taken in itself, the law leads one into doubt, into the impotence or the self-satisfied arrogance of those who think that they have done everything that was expected of them.¹³⁶ In conformity to this outlook, Paul also records in his own biographic comments how the law became for him the motive for his effort to attain his own righteousness, which he judged to be unblemished according to the measure of the law (Philippians 3:6; see also Romans 9:30-10:4). It was his encounter with the resurrected Christ that first of all showed Paul where he actually stood before God.

The encounter with the law can apparently release quite different subjective reactions within people, and one wonders what inferences can be drawn from it concerning the reality of sin and the human awareness of it. We therefore need to consider carefully whether that which is asserted by the term *law* is only relevant for the biblical Torah or also for other forms of "law."¹³⁷

The conflict between sinful humanity and the law plays itself out at different levels.

(a.) The conflict can be an open dispute. By establishing limits through the law—especially in the form of prohibitions—sin finds a concrete

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foothold in humans. The prohibition lures one toward transgression, the command induces resistance, then the inward rebellion of people manifests itself against God, and they fall into judgment. The term used to characterize this is *antinomian* conflict.¹³⁸ This conflict unmasks resistance to God. Of course, this conflict surfaces not only with reference to the Mosaic law. Even the heathen, who have the law inscribed on their hearts (Romans 2:15), stand in this conflict and experience in their consciences the struggle between accusing and excusing thoughts.

In view of this situation, it certainly remains an open question to what extent a person who has transgressed appropriate norms of behavior (and thereby incurred injury) is able to become aware of her or his guilt or come to an awareness of a culpable separation from God. A wealth of strategies for excuses and denials is evident.

(b.) The conflict can be repressed. Sin wraps people in the illusion that if they could fulfill the law they would find true life, and thus they are enticed to construct their own rules and norms based upon their own achievements of the demands of the law. There is no intimation of rebellion here, but a vindication of their own lives against God by using God's will as a tool to vindicate their lives before God. The command becomes the tool of their own justification of themselves. On the one hand, the consequence of this outlook is fear of not attaining this goal. On the other hand, there is the self-justification which achieves its standards through a comparison with the attainments of others. A prototype of this attitude is the Pharisee in Jesus' parable in Luke 18:9-14, and also Paul's analysis of himself in Philippians 3.

This is called the *nomian* conflict. Although obedience and the fulfillment of the law are on the agenda here, the conflict has shifted to the unconscious level. The pressure to seek to justify oneself has taken the place of a confident reliance upon God. This is also the effect of the basic sin of humanity, which is its separation from God. It hides itself under the mantle of external righteousness and piety and is thus no less dangerous than are other expressions of sin. The mark of this kind of conflict with the will of God is that the fulfilling of the law is oriented to formal, external precepts, so that the effort to stand pure and without blame often leads in situations of conflict to wronging other people in a deeper sense, in that they are misused by being made an object of comparison with our glossy description of ourselves, which then becomes a base for building a monument to ourselves. Self-justification becomes stifling for others and for oneself. In his interpretation of the

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commands in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus intensified the depth dimensions of guilt. In particular, the summary of the law in the love command opposes our effort to suppose we can formally conform to the will of God by our deeds.¹³⁹

Moreover, this form of the conflict is not confined to a direct altercation with the biblical law. Paul observed the tendency of people to "boast of themselves," that is, to cite their own achievements or wisdom, rather than God and his grace, as the foundation upon which they would build their lives and as what one considers the content and goal of life. He proceeds to expound this as a general human dilemma.¹⁴⁰ Paul has uncovered the superstitious anxiety that is produced in the religious realm, efforts to please God through the precise fulfillment of cultic commands. He found this tendency within Judaism, but also in the various forms of pagan religiosity (Galatians 4:8-10). It is evident that self-justification, as well as anxiety based on denial, emerges in a completely secular guise in the form of modern religion of success. It is unfortunately no less true that many expressions of the Christian faith can be misrepresented in a "legal" manner. In the abstract, helpful forms of spiritual discipline, like prayer or regular Bible study, can become means for measuring one's religious achievements (or lack of them).¹⁴¹

(c.) A final form of conflict is the denial of conflict. In place of rebellion and self-justification, resignation or self-surrender enters the picture. The best biblical example of this tendency is the parable of the talents (Luke 19:12-27). This might be called the *a-nomian* conflict. People feel that the law demands too much of them, and they refuse to even begin to accept its demands or arguments. They are scarcely guilty of transgressions, and they are also not inclined to justify themselves by their achievements. However, they remain guilty before themselves and God. Such a condition often conceals deep wounds and spiritual hindrances that were inflicted in childhood. However, the deep "absence of God" is reflected in this phenomenon too, an absence from which people suffer. This form of the experience of sin is only hinted at in the biblical witness. In particular it is often women in our day who show that not only the "active" form of sin in the sense of a transgression or presumption, but also the "passive" kind of sin that exists in the form of undervaluation or sabotaging of a person's own possibilities.¹⁴²

Our analysis points to a twofold result:

1. Even persons who are no longer under the influence of the Mosaic law discover through the natural and social circumstances of their lives

that their lives are both limited and "challenged." They react to this in a manner similar to that which the Bible describes as a reaction to God's law, namely, with rebellion, self-justification, or resignation. So, in the reality in which people live there is apparently a basic structure that corresponds to that of the law in a quite general sense and which signifies for people something of the greatness of the task that is set before them as well as the impotence of their existence as mere "pip-squeaks." With regard to its content, what becomes apparent as a demand or a boundary is not equated with the biblical law, even if at points it may have similarities. In particular, the phenomenon of sin can only be truly apprehended in situations where being true to God (as in the first commandment) is held as the basic issue of human life.

2. We will see below to what extent the Mosaic law, summarized in the Decalogue or the love commandment, is in the final analysis identical with a general moral law, as Wesley assumed.¹⁴³ In this context we must ask the question of whether knowledge of sin is possible through the proclamation of the law alone—in other words, apart from the gospel. We have noted how the law makes clear to different extents people's enmity with God and their need of God. However, it should also not be overlooked that sin misuses the law precisely to encourage the tendency of humans to denial and suppression. So, one is forced to establish that although humans "get to know" sin as a concrete reality through the law (Romans 7:7),¹⁴⁴ they do not have the power to recognize its significance as a radical questioning of their lives. It is also questionable whether Paul wanted to speak in Romans 3:20 about a knowledge of sin through the law before or apart from Christ. The section on "the wrath of God revealed from heaven," which concludes with Romans 3:20, is inserted into the declaration of the revelation of the righteousness of God in the gospel (Romans 1:16-17; Romans 3:25ff.). The reference to the gospel is thus a hint allowing people to recognize how things really stand with them.¹⁴⁵

From what has been said, the following consequences may be drawn for United Methodist doctrine and preaching:

1. The fact that humans cannot fulfill God's will by themselves and that they therefore also fail in their lives is a reality that must not be suppressed in Christian preaching. If it was long the danger of Methodist preaching to speak of God's law in an overly frightening manner and to force people into a heightened feeling of guilt, today the danger is without doubt seen in the neglect or even denial of the dimension of guilt, and

thus the preaching of "cheap grace."¹⁴⁶ People always stand under the law, and God's judgment for their unrighteousness and godlessness is revealed to them, whether they realize it or not. Let us not pound it into them with rhetorical means. Instead, let us repeatedly attempt to make them conscious of the situation in which they find themselves and also confront them with the reality that their lives belong to God and that they are responsible to God. They are also to know that if they fail in this responsibility they are lost before God. The symptoms of this failure are concrete guilt, and also discontentment, the "uncreative revolt"¹⁴⁷ against God and the basic conditions of one's life, or the deep resignation to which a person surrenders himself or herself. However, people do not experience this failure only in their refusal of God; it also needs to be made clear to them how they have missed the purpose for their lives in their presumed strengths, their successes and achievements.¹⁴⁸ This is true not only of individuals; social relationships and modes of conduct are also marked by the effects of sin.

2. A knowledge of sin in its full depth is only possible where it is also recognized that God, who challenges and circumscribes our lives through the law, is none other than the One who receives and fulfills our lives in his love. Only where we are held by love can we look into the depths of despair, that cavernous hole which is gaping because of our sin. Only where the greatness of God's love is grasped will the attitude of indifference, resistance, or rejection of subservience to God or of pretensions against God be recognized for what it really is: enmity against God. The love command becomes, so to speak, the point of intersection between the law and the gospel. It shows us the greatness of the demand which God rightly makes of us and it contains the announcement that we live by God's love and thus are ourselves able to love.¹⁴⁹

2.2.1.4 SIN AND SUFFERING

According to the conviction of the Bible, human sin destroys not only people's relationship with God but also their relationship to one another and to the surrounding creation. It seems to be the purpose of the Yahwistic creation story, and especially of Genesis 3, to show "that all sorrow comes from sin."¹⁵⁰ Illustrative of this is the discussion in Genesis 4 of the far-reaching destruction of social relationships. Already in the second generation of humanity, envy leads to murder, and the vicious cycle of force and counterforce escalates ever further in the history of humanity.

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Paul also sees the consequences of sin primarily in the social realm, in the corporate life of humanity. God's judgment on sin consists not in some sort of supplemental or despotic sanction. According to Romans 1:24ff., God simply abandons people to the results of their wrong decisions, decisions which replace the worship of the Creator with a false love of the creature, which have resulted in the idolatrous worship of themselves. The surrender of human beings to idolatrous self-love leads to the contamination and the destruction of their interhuman relationships in all areas of their lives (1:30-31).¹⁵¹ This then also shows that persons who live under the sway of sin are not only its propagators but also its victims. For it is always others who suffer the results of sins, like lack of mercy, avarice, malice, envy, strife, or murder. In their polemic against the rich and the powerful, the prophets in the Old Testament made clear that these consequences of sin were not only due to individual transgressions but are also often attributable to "class-specific" attitudes. Thus, already in the biblical message there is the observation that "structural unrighteousness" is also a consequence of sin.¹⁵²

Alongside the destruction of ordinary human relationships, the biblical tradition also indicates that sickness has its cause in sin.¹⁵³ This connection is easily made since death is seen as a consequence of sin (see Romans 6:23), and in biblical times (more than in the present day), illnesses are viewed as harbingers of death.¹⁵⁴ In fact, there are no places in the Bible that speak directly of this relationship between sin and sickness. However, such a relationship seems to be assumed where the forgiveness of sins and healing of illness are spoken of together as in Psalm 103:3; Mark 2:10-11; and James 5:15-16.

But there is a misunderstanding that needs to be excluded from our consideration, one that has already been tackled in the biblical writings themselves, namely, the assumption that individual and particularly severe illnesses can always be traced back to especially grave sinful acts. There are psalms of lament, in which the psalmist confesses that his eyes were opened to his sin through an illness (see Psalm 32:1-5; 38:2-9; 41:5, etc.). However, there are also other psalms that protest passionately against the insinuation of such a correlation between sin and sickness (see Psalms 35 and 102) or at least do not even consider the topic. Within the context of the entire biblical witness, it is the book of Job that once for all prohibits any general conclusions to be drawn about the link between the sickness of individuals and a particular offense that was committed. Of course, this does not exclude the possibility that an affected

person may recognize and confess their belief in a connection between sickness and guilt.

In the New Testament, the possibility of a fundamental connection between sickness and a particular sin is expressly rejected in John 9:2—which would raise certain problems for a person born blind. For Jesus, his healing the sick and his exorcism of the demons are signs of the approaching reign of God, which indicate that God's Lordship is stronger than those powers of evil which bring disease. However, Jesus never mentions a particular connection between sickness and sin in the case of specific persons, and, in Luke 13:1-5, indirectly excludes such a connection.¹⁵⁵ It is precisely the possessed, whom Jesus helped, who are examples of the fact that humans have become victims and suffer under the power of evil, nowhere is it even hinted at that they are guilty as individuals for their condition.

For Paul, it is an important component of the community of faith to acknowledge that Christians no longer stand under the power of sin (Romans 6). The consequences that Paul draws from this, however, concern the ethical sphere exclusively, and particularly the behavior of Christians among one another and toward other persons. Paul never says that Christians are supposed to be set free from the burden of sickness and from bodily weaknesses. Of course, he reckons with the healing power of God, but he perceives that the vulnerability of the human body is an unavoidable sign of the fact that Christians still wait full of hope for the conclusive and complete deliverance of their bodies (Romans 8:18ff.).¹⁵⁶

Wesley essentially follows Paul's lead at this point. As we will see, one of his central theological concerns is that the victory over sin is a reality that is really experienced in the life of the Christian. Wesley also understands the existential realm, in which this reality is lived and experienced, to be the area of one's relationship with God and with one's fellow human beings—in short, the dimension of love.¹⁵⁷ Love overcomes the most horrible suffering that sin causes, which is the social results of sin. However, bodily and spiritual weaknesses are for Wesley regarded as conditions that humans are required to bear until their deaths. That does not exclude the fact that Wesley, as a medical practitioner, is also aware of the healing effects that a new inner attitude toward life has upon the health of humans, nor that he quite consciously reports on miraculous healings that were occurring in his day.¹⁵⁸ However, there is no basic linkage between the forgiveness of sins and the healing of illnesses.¹⁵⁹

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Before we consider the consequences of our discussion for a contemporary theology of The United Methodist Church a third aspect of the destructive power of sin and its implications for life on this earth must be mentioned. In Romans 8:20, Paul emphasizes that the entire creation has been subjected to decay because of human sin, and that it is waiting with anxious longing for the salvation of the children of God, through which it will also be transformed into its imperishable reality.¹⁶⁰ Wesley adopted this point of view and from it developed the conviction that not only humans but all forms of life were originally created in a condition of imperishability,¹⁶¹ inviolability, and immortality. We will need to return to this question at a later point when we address the relationship between sin and death.

Hermeneutically, such considerations draw contemporary expositors into a peculiar situation. On the one hand, it will be difficult for them to share these concepts in light of the knowledge of natural science in our day. Sickness, as well as the phenomenon of the food cycle, in which some life forms kill and consume other forms of life, should be regarded as a very ancient phenomenon in nature that cannot properly be attributed to the results of primeval human history.¹⁶² On the other hand, there is a wealth of signs today that indicate that people have endangered the existence of creation through their hubris. What is fascinating and also shocking about this is that the cause of this danger can with precision and certainty be traced back to a human attitude that the Bible refers to as original sin. Humans want to be like God and they fail to fulfill their destiny as those created in the image of God to represent God's creative and protective concern for this world. The tragedy of this phenomenon lies in the fact that this attitude had its beginning precisely within the Christian culture, which has certainly followed in a secular form the command to "take dominion" over the earth.¹⁶³ Both of these observations would suggest that the relation of sin and suffering is to be anchored less in the conditions of natural law, and that it is rather to be described as a consequence of the basic disorder that is seen within human existence.

Thus, the relationship of sin and suffering has distinct dimensions. The fact that suffering or illness turn out to be a consequence of concrete guilt and sin in the case of one person cannot be excluded, and yet it does not permit us to make a general rule to that effect. More frequently, guilt and sin work themselves out in the suffering that we inflict upon others. And frequently a direct connection between the guilty conduct of some and the suffering of others cannot be proved at all. The sovereignty of sin

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also manifests itself within the structures of unrighteousness, which become anonymous causes of want, suffering, and illness. Voluntary acts by persons of goodwill can accomplish little in circumventing these causes. Since they can see through these structures and do not readily participate in such patterns of behavior, it is often the ones who live in conscious fellowship with God who have to suffer under the opposition and rejection by others.¹⁶⁴ One of the important traits of a United Methodist theology is the fact that it critiques the destruction of the depth dimension of human fellowship and of those persons' relationship to God in such a way that one cannot speak of the one apart from the other. The disruption of relationship with God invariably has tragic implications for the common life of humanity as well as the relation of humanity to creation as a whole.

2.2.1.5 SIN AND DEATH

The destructive power of sin is most radically revealed in the fact that through its rule even death has attained its power over humanity. Paul presupposes this relationship in Romans 5:12: "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned. . . ." In Romans 6:23 this notion is strengthened by saying, "The wages of sin is death," and then the contrast is stated, "but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (compare also 1 Corinthians 15:56). Paul obviously interprets Genesis 2 and 3 to mean that it was through sin that death first entered into the world of creatures.¹⁶⁵

It is questionable whether this corresponds to the original intention of Genesis 2 and 3. The account of paradise and the fall into sin certainly leaves open this question. According to Genesis 2:9 and 3:22, 24, the tree of life was withheld from humanity, and Genesis 3:22 precludes that in those primeval conditions humanity was represented as being immortal.¹⁶⁶ The finitude of life is part of the creatureliness of humanity;¹⁶⁷ it would have been fatal for humanity and the creation to break through this boundary; therefore, the first human beings were hindered from stepping over this threshold.¹⁶⁸

However, a second difficult problem of interpreting Genesis 2 and 3 is connected to this. Was the threat of death expressed in 2:17 fulfilled, or was the serpent who had denied this from the beginning to be regarded as correct? The old account leaves this question open and thus permits different possibilities of interpretation.¹⁶⁹

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For Wesley, the answer to both of these questions was clear. All life lost its original immortality through the sin of humanity, and God's threat of punishment became true in that the first humans did perish in "spiritual death," as a result of their sinfulness, in the sense that they fell out of fellowship with God.¹⁷⁰ However, for their part, contemporary expositors would not be able to ignore the fact that, according to our knowledge, death and dying are unavoidable marks of multicellular life. Therefore, we will need to interpret the biblical statements concerning the relationship between sin and death not as biological statements, but rather in terms of their anthropological and theological dimensions. Among the most important marks of human existence is the fact that humans know about their impending death. Martin Heidegger has correctly characterized human existence as "being unto death."¹⁷¹ A person experiences this "being unto death" with anxiety, and as an occasion for concern or also for either resistance or denial. For the death of a human being is not simply the "perishing" of an organism; it is my own life that unmistakably and irreplaceably comes to its end. "Fear of death pierces deep into life. On the one hand it motivates us to unrestricted self-affirmation, regardless of our own finitude; on the other hand, it robs us of the power to accept life. Either way we see a close link between sin and death. The link is rooted in sin to the extent that only the nonacceptance of our own finitude makes the inescapable end of finite existence a manifestation of the power of death that threatens us with nothingness."¹⁷² Simply stated, because I cannot accept the limitation that is placed upon my life, the biological end of my life becomes an all-threatening death. However, I cannot accept this limitation, because my fellowship with the Creator, who has created my life and who also encloses it within his boundaries, is destroyed. That which is "deathly" in the death of a human being is therefore the fact that one dies the death of a sinner; that is, the death of the one who is distant from God and thereby distant from life. Death is therefore "an essential consequence of sin" rather than a "punishment that God has arbitrarily set and imposed."¹⁷³ Death makes final and irrevocable that which occurred within life. "The moment of death ends the possibility of a new decision and makes final everything that has taken place."¹⁷⁴

Conversely, it ought to be such that where God's saving and justifying grace has led a person out of sin's absence of God and into the life that bestows fellowship with God, then death and dying begin to appear within a new light. The border that is set for our lives remains. However, it lies

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in the hands of God. Even death cannot separate us from his love (Romans 8:38-39). Whoever believes in Jesus Christ will live, even if that one dies (John 11:25). In its emphasis upon "holy dying," early Methodism perceived a particularly important aspect of holiness, that is, the intensive fellowship with God, the victory over sin, and the joyful testifying to that reality as Christians entered into rest or went home "triumphantly."¹⁷⁵

In our day, we have come to stand against such standards of judgment since we know that the manner in which a person suffers her or his death is particularly dependent upon somatic processes. The struggle of death is first of all a struggle of the body against death. For that reason, it always remains as a sign of the "brokenness" of our human existence. And yet, the certainty that God's hand securely holds those who belong to him, even in death, remains valid apart from the external manner of our death. It is a sign that the power of grace and the love of God are stronger than the power of sin and death, whenever we are able to experience in the company of the dying the way this certainly provides them with inward support and comfort.

2.2.1.6 SIN AND THE POWER OF EVIL

According to biblical understanding, people bear full responsibility for their sinful actions. However, persons find themselves at once in a vicious circle of the actions undertaken through their own responsibility and the fact that these actions are ruined by the power of sin. Thus, in particular situations the power of sin and of evil can be cited as a cause for human sinning. The power of evil is personified in the form of Satan or the devil. Instead of living under the wholesome rule of God, persons who sin give themselves over to the destructive power of evil. "Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning" (1 John 3:8; see also John 8:44). This assertion is also related to another: "The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil." Whether a person is descended from God or from the devil does not imply that her or his fate has been predetermined. Rather, that is decided in the encounter with the freeing word of Jesus.¹⁷⁶

In the history of Christian faith and spirituality the first part of 1 John 3:8 has unfortunately received the primary emphasis, so that the second sentence ("The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil") has been largely robbed of its meaning and effect. The realistic analysis of the "structures of evil," which reach much more

deeply and are more effective than is the evil will and deed of an individual person, degenerates into merely a belief in the demonic. Yet the history of demonic beliefs is in many respects a piece of the history of calamity! There are therefore not a few Christian theologians who are of the view that it would be a service to Christian preaching and theology if the language of the devil were to be abandoned.¹⁷⁷ In the face of a world in which the diabolical is rather on the rise than in decline, one would first need to very carefully investigate the actual function of the biblical language concerning the power of evil.

(a.) In the Old Testament, the figure of Satan plays only the role of a marginal figure. Above all, Satan is not his proper name, but it signifies the adversary, the enemy, and the accuser.¹⁷⁸ The function of the accuser also signifies that figure in the heavenly world that confronts us in Zechariah 3:1 and in Job 1. In the history of Job, the role of Satan almost appears to be tantamount to that of a "heavenly public attorney." The fact that the motives of the godly are questioned and tested is an admissible, and indeed almost a necessary concern. And yet, the mistrust does not proceed from God, even if God allows the testing. Nor is it a question of whether calamity comes from God or the devil. Job struggles alone with God about why he was suffering, and this conforms to the line of thought found throughout the entirety of the Old Testament.¹⁷⁹

The serpent in Genesis 3 is not yet identified with the devil in the Old Testament.¹⁸⁰ Yet, it is also the personification of a temptation which assumes power over humans through the skill of its questioning, without this thereby excusing them. The cause of sin is not the serpent or the devil, but rather the sinful deed itself.

Meanwhile, 1 Chronicles 21:1 names the figure of Satan as the author of David's temptation, while the older account in 1 Samuel 24:1 says that God suggested these thoughts to David in his anger. This renders significant the struggle concerning the question of whether temptation to sin can proceed from God. This tension also permeates the New Testament expressions that deal with this theme.¹⁸¹

(b.) In the intertestamental period, the concept of the devil developed in early Judaism beyond these Old Testament beginnings, to the idea of the devil as a power standing over against God.¹⁸² Even as the angels exist to serve God, so Satan rules with the help of his demons. These powers contend for the heart of humanity. Those who surrender themselves to the power of evil are the children of darkness, and those who belong to God are the children of light.

The New Testament shares this view of a flawed world, but it also takes over the presupposition that at last even the kingdom of evil will be subjected to the Lordship of God and will be overcome by it. However, this takes place precisely through the work accomplished by Jesus.

The devil appears as a spiritually articulate tempter, and he is sent away by Jesus (Matthew 4:1-11). Through Jesus' power, being able to drive out demons, Jesus breaks into the kingdom of Satan, and he establishes the rule of God (Matthew 12:24-29). The figure of Satan and the demons also make clear that the suffering and self-destructive behavior of certain people is due not simply to their individual sins; they are victims of the powers that gain their strength from connections that transcend individuals and that follow from the openness of humanity to the power of evil.

Thus, in the New Testament, the figure of the devil becomes the epitome of the suprahuman, God-opposing potential for danger and destruction that lies within this world. It explains why people close themselves off to the gospel (2 Corinthians 4:4; Matthew 13:37-39; John 8:44). It characterizes the destruction that threatens those who fall out of fellowship with God (1 Corinthians 5:5), as well as the danger to which Christians are still always exposed (2 Corinthians 11:14; Ephesians 6:11-12). Apocalyptic traditions expect a final, decisive clash between God and his Christ and the devil and his minions (see 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12; Revelation 13:19). However, these powers already realize that before God the power of Satan is already broken (Revelation 12:7-12).

Thus, a "soteriological functionality" of the declarations concerning Satan" predominates widely in the New Testament¹⁸³—that is, these statements are not for the sake of understanding Satan himself; they are made with reference to the events of salvation that the gospel is announcing.

(c.) If we attempt to systematize the biblical message, two possible consequences for the relationship of God and Satan transpire.

(1.) The figure of Satan is a form that speaks of the dark side of God, of the hidden God, who appears as an enemy. What actually has no place in our conception of God, namely that God tempts and accuses, that he destroys and kills, becomes evident here, and this speaks of a tension "which exists within the circumstances of God Himself."¹⁸⁴ Luther expressly asserted that God appears in the guise of the devil.¹⁸⁵ This aspect is alien to Methodist theology.

(2.) There is no longer a division in the image of God: Jesus sees Satan as lightning that has fallen from heaven (Luke 10:18), and the Revelation to John reports the expulsion of Satan from the heavenly realm

(Revelation 12:7-12). The voice of the accuser has become silent before God, no matter how much he may yet rage on earth. For Wesley and early Methodist theology, the fact that the power of evil is broken is the pivotal point for speaking of the devil.¹⁸⁶

The devil, who is subdued by Christ, is certainly not as yet annihilated. Thus, further data about the devil is given in the witness of the New Testament: "That the one who is subdued by means of this faith is still active due to the eschatological reservation, should be emphasized in light of the ever-present danger of a Satanic resurgence. The assertion that evil is Satanic therefore represents the negative corollary to the assertion that salvation is the activity of God."¹⁸⁷

In view of all that which is "infernal and Satanic" in this present world, the dimension of evil as a power needs to be taken seriously still today and ought not be reduced either to "nothingness" or merely to moral aberration.¹⁸⁸ The power of sin has attained a life of its own in this world, that goes far beyond the effects of evil deeds and the evil will of individuals.

References to personal evil, that is, to the devil, in this context can emphasize that this power confronts us in its operation and its consequences in many situations, through a *modus operandi* that works itself out resolutely and often with diabolical intelligence. Yet, it is certain that to speak of this reality with personified attributes must always remain a figurative language at its deepest level, since that dimension which denotes a personal relationship at its deepest level (the "I-Thou" relationship) fails to be addressed by that language.

As helpful as it is to note that in the seventh petition of the Lord's Prayer and in the question that is asked candidates for church membership in The United Methodist Church ("Do you renounce evil and do you trust solely in the grace of God?") the question remains open as to whether evil or the evil one is intended,¹⁸⁹ it is equally important that this question does not at the same time restrict the realistic assessment of the power of evil. The act of turning to Christ is more than an activation of goodwill; it has to do with a change of power so that the liberation through Jesus Christ is concretely carried out through the renunciation of the powers that had enslaved us and through the constant petition on behalf of our deliverance by Christ.

In view of the negative experience with demonic belief, some definition of "rules of discourse" are to be commended:

—To speak of the diabolical, the satanic, or the infernal places several possibilities of linguistic expression at our disposal with which to charac-

terize that which is inhuman in this world, with its evil and animosity toward the sacred. However, this ought not to lead us to demonize human beings or groups of humans. Even the person who appears to be a tool of the devil remains God's beloved creation in Jesus Christ.

—If we perceive the demonic as an "overwhelming power to whom people are delivered and who so completely robs them of their personhood that they can no longer resist that power which, as it were, simultaneously devours them,"¹⁹⁰ we will be able to recognize the proper limits of bondage and not confuse victims with wrongdoers. However, at the same time, this knowledge is undertaken with the certainty that in Christ the power of the demonic is overcome and we need give up no single person. Thus, the ritual act of exorcism, which is inevitably endangered by misuse, is not as needed as is the patient accomplishment of care and resistance through the power of Jesus Christ. In the encounter with Christ, people are even set free to see through false excuses by rebuking the devil, and to become capable of becoming genuinely responsible in their actions.

—"The devil is not an object of faith. However, as a confession to God, every Christian confession of faith is in reality a repudiation of the devil and the scheme of this perverted world."¹⁹¹ Therefore, we can always only refer to Satan in terms of negation, in the sense that those enemies have already been overcome by Christ. This reality has not often been acknowledged within those circles in which the role of Satan has been a matter of emphasis. Their peril lies not only in the fact that they actually tend to limit the power of evil to the realm of the occult, and thus do not do justice to the real scope of its activity. It lies primarily in the fact that in their constant concern about the devil and his intrigues, they actually strengthen the authority of the demonic, and in their opposition to the occult and demonic possession they become prisoners of their own anxiety. If the Son of God has come to destroy the works of the devil, then he also frees us from constant preoccupation with this theme.

2.2.1.7 SIN AND GRACE

Why did God not prevent Adam and hence his descendants from falling into sin? Why has God given them the freedom to make decisions that are contrary to God and to God's commands? Wesley asks this question in different contexts. And alongside the answer that this freedom conforms to the essence of humanity, since God wanted to create humans as those who stand over against God,¹⁹² a quite amazing answer comes to light that

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Wesley acquires by his exposition of Romans 5:15-21. That is to say, if Adam had not sinned, and if Christ had not died, then we would not have come to know the fullness and the depth of the love of God. Thus, love for God and one's neighbor actually first becomes a possibility through God's redemptive work and, by inference, through the means of Adam's fall! "And herein appeared not only the justice but the unspeakable goodness of God! For how much good does he continually bring out of this evil! How much holiness and happiness out of pain!"¹⁹³

Wesley in no way derives an "excuse" for sinful humanity from this affirmation. At the same time, human sin cannot finally stand in absolute opposition to God's redemptive intentions. Instead, sin needs to be of "service" to humanity in a particularly dialectical and unanticipated manner. Insofar as Wesley accepted the profundity of Pauline thought in Romans 5:15-21, to that extent he also made the angry outcry of Romans 6:1-2 his own, the outcry with which Paul repulses all misunderstandings of this line of thought. To speak of sin and grace not only means to speak of the surpassing of the effect of sin by the effect of grace; it also means preaching the overcoming of sin itself through the liberating grace of God. This should become the center of Wesleyan soteriology and its doctrine of grace.

2.2.2 God's Covenant Faithfulness

In the midst of the Christian proclamation is the fact that God has responded to the inability of humans to help themselves through the sending of Jesus. However, that does not mean that the time before this event had simply been "void of salvation." God's gift to his fallen world in the "Son" is a sign of the nature of the living God and is not limited to the coming of the Incarnate Word in Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, John 1:1-13 sketches the "history of the logos," whereby God encounters humans from the time of the creation—albeit without them accepting him!¹⁹⁴

2.2.2.1 GOD'S FAITHFULNESS TO CREATION AND TO HUMANITY

The biblical account of primeval history is already infused with the witness that God has not simply abandoned humanity to its fate after the fall.¹⁹⁵ The guilt of humanity is exposed without indulgence, but God's concern for his creation does not cease because of this. Genesis 3 movingly explains how God makes clothes for the naked humans to cover them. Even Cain, the murderer of his brother, receives from God the

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"mark of Cain," which was not primarily a stigma that would brand him as a murderer but a sign to protect him from willful assassination.¹⁹⁶

This juxtaposition of human guilt and divine faithfulness is set forth most impressively in Genesis 8:21-22. The same statement that leads to the decision of God to destroy the creation, as reported in Genesis 6:5-7, becomes the basis for God's decision in 8:21-22 to renounce further judgments of punishment in the future. "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth."¹⁹⁷ The parallel priestly account in Genesis 9 speaks of the covenant which God established with Noah, his descendants, and with everything which resided upon this earth. God's "covenant" with his creation is therefore not an alliance between equal partners concluded by means of fulfilling predetermined conditions. Instead, it is God's one-sided pledge of unceasing faithfulness and trustworthiness, and it also includes the obligation of humans to have reverence for life.¹⁹⁸

In particular, it is the Psalms that describe in the tradition of the Old Testament how it is God's faithfulness to his creation (most English Bible translations have "righteousness") that enables and preserves the lives of humans and animals (Psalms 36:6-10, 65:6-9, 89:11-15, 93, 96, 104). God's faithfulness restrains the powers of chaos, which repeatedly threaten creation, and it provides for the wholesome ordering which makes salutary life possible.¹⁹⁹

Though some of these psalms appear at first glance to depict life in a highly idyllic manner (for example, Psalm 104), nonetheless they do not obscure the fact that the creation is marked by death and destruction after the fall and the flood. Hence, the process of devouring and being devoured belongs to the reality of nature, and the forces of nature which bring ruin repeatedly threaten the existence of the globe. However, God's faithfulness and goodness prevent the powers of destruction from gaining ascendancy.

In view of these statements, a Christian theology stands before a twofold responsibility. It has to demonstrate the fact that the world which was marked by sin, that is, by the need for God and enmity toward God, is, according to the biblical witness, not a godforsaken and godless world, but a world that continues to live by God's faithfulness—though admittedly in the form of a "broken" existence, which includes the sign of preservation, but also the experience of threat and destruction. With regard to God's pledge of faithfulness, it has to consider what kind of promise humanity's common responsibility can and must perceive, and