

**Issues of Sin: The Bible and the Holy Spirit**  
or  
**A Letter to Opa**

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***Introduction***

After having read and watched (on DVD) much material supporting and opposing homosexual activity and marriage/blessing, it seems that the issue at stake is whether or not such activity is sinful. I think all sides would agree that we should not bless activities or “lifestyles” that are sinful, such as murder, robbery, or adultery, to name a few. The argument arises over those activities that some consider sinful which others do not. Those who oppose blessing same-sex relationships consider gay sex to be sinful because of the clear Biblical strictures against it. Those who support blessings do not consider the activities sinful, not because of a lack of Biblical understanding, a defect of faith, evil intentions, or a desire to “conform to the world,” but because of a different Biblical interpretation of the issue.

This is not the first time in the history of the church that “new” interpretations of the Bible have led Christians to no longer see certain behaviours as sinful. In this paper, I will first define sin and then outline some examples of when the church has come to some wholly new conclusions on what has previously been deemed sinful behaviour. This paper does not argue why proponents of same-sex marriage/blessings have come to the conclusions they do (there are many books and papers that do that), but argues that such change is possible, and indeed moved by the Holy Spirit.

***What is Sin?***

Sin, in the Bible and in our contemporary Christian language, is used both as a verb and as a noun. As a verb, it describes both sinful activity and a state of being. Used as a noun, the word “sin” functions more as an adjective, labelling certain activities as examples of what it means to be sinful. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew words for sin tend to reflect the verbal nature of sin, that is, a sense of being, rather than a contained act. The first, *pesach*, is often translated as transgress (or transgression as a noun), and it means to rebel, revolt, either against God or another nation. In this sense, sin is a deliberate action against God, one that violates the covenant and the rights of others.<sup>1</sup> The second, *avon*, is a noun relating to iniquity or guilt, in this sense a state of being that is permanently damaged by a sinful act, rendered twisted, distorted, deviant.<sup>1</sup> The third, which is often translated as “abomination” or “abhorrence” (specifically in the Levitical texts), is *toehva*, and it is used to list ritual and ethical sins. Ritual sins are sins against God, like intermarriage with idolators (foreigners), while ethical sins are those against humans, like keeping someone’s cloak overnight as a pledge. The fourth, *hatah*, is the most commonly translated as sin, and it is a verb that has, at its roots, the sense of missing the mark or failing to fulfill an expectation.<sup>1</sup> For the Israelites, sin was a denial of reality because it removed people from what they were originally created to be.<sup>1</sup>

In the New Testament Greek, sin is primarily described as *hamartia*, which reflects the Hebrew meaning of sin, to miss the mark (often used by Paul). Another word is *skandalon*, which means stumbling-block, trap, offense, something that prevents you from achieving your goal. Paul tended to understand sin as a force that invades people and strengthens our own evil impulses. For Paul, sin is more of a way of being than a series of acts.<sup>2</sup>

In the Book of Concord, the Augsburg Confession, II - Original Sin, describes sin as an “evil lust and inclination” or “concupiscence” that makes one unable to truly fear God and have faith. (In essence, incapable of obeying the First Commandment, To Love, Fear, and Trust God Above All Things.) Again, sin here is more of a state of being - a verb - than a noun.

I don't believe that anybody would argue that sin, as a verb and a state of being and a will to evil, changes. We are not any less inclined to rebel against God than we were before. However, it is possible that sin as a noun, that is to say as a list of actions that demonstrate our sinful nature, does change. Certain sins (actions reflecting our sinful nature) such as eating pork or shellfish (Lev 11:7, 10), women wearing men's clothes (Deut 22:5), or contact with leprous people are no longer considered to be sins. No one would argue that our sinful nature has changed, but clearly certain actions are no longer considered to be reflections of that nature. In essence, the Biblical stricture against those sins no longer holds authority.

### ***When Sin Becomes Not-Sin***

The process whereby a group of faithful people decides that the Bible's prohibition against certain sins is no longer authoritative is straightforward but hard to do. When an issue is presented that challenges previously held beliefs about whether or not particular actions are sinful, the following happens. First, the Biblical witness is examined. In the case of homosexual activity, we can all agree that the Bible has been exhaustively examined. However, as Christians, our process does not, and must not, stop there. Next, we take into account the movement of the Holy Spirit. Then, when the witness of the Holy Spirit is sufficiently present, change is made, even if there is contrary, or a lack of, Biblical evidence.

The most compelling Biblical example of this takes place in the Book of Acts, Chapter 10, when Peter is sent to the Gentile, Cornelius. Although the common interpretation of this text is that Gentiles who do not keep kosher are welcomed into God's fold, the issue at stake is actually circumcision, not kosher food laws. Gentiles were not circumscribed, and it can not be emphasized strongly enough how important circumcision is and was to the Jewish identity. In the Old Testament, God tries to kill Moses because he is not circumcised, the entire clan of Dinah's intended fiance must be circumcised before marriage is allowed, and the Plaut Commentary to the Torah says that “neglecting to circumcise a child was, therefore, more than merely neglect of a rite; it was a rejection of God's sign and was subject to divine punishment, to being “cut off from the people,” ie. from the covenant.”<sup>3</sup> Plaut goes on to say that throughout history, Jews have observed the rite of circumcision “even at the risk of death.” For the Jews, and for the Jewish Christians, circumcision was an unquestioned requirement for belonging to God's people and by extension, to being in covenant with God. To refuse to be circumcised would be a rebellion, rejection, revolt, transgression - in short, a sin. And yet, in Acts 10, God reveals to Peter via metaphor and analogy (that is, not directly or literally) that one who is outside the covenant because of non-circumcision is no longer outside of God's circle of acceptance. More to the point, this person, Cornelius, is filled with the Holy Spirit and marked as holy enough to receive the presence of God despite his sinfulness. It is of crucial importance to note that Cornelius and his household are baptized, but that they are *not* circumcised or asked to change in any way who they are (ie. Gentiles) in order to enter into God's covenant through Christ.

There is no question that these Gentiles were contra Scripture, and in Acts 11, the disciples in Jerusalem challenge Peter to defend his reasons for being with “uncircumcised men.” They know, and Peter knows, that baptizing Gentiles has absolutely no Scriptural background, and indeed runs contrary to the very essence of who God's people are. Yet, by the witness of the

Holy Spirit, these disciples come to a new understanding that non-circumcision for Gentiles is not sinful.

This happens a second time in Acts 15:1-11, and the disciples again question the righteousness of those who are not circumscribed, and again the witness of the Holy Spirit, falling upon Gentiles throughout Phoenicia and Samaria, testifies contrary to Scripture. Circumcision, the bottom line requirement for Jewish salvation as proved by the Scriptures of the Old Testament, is no longer necessary. Only the “grace of the Lord Jesus” will save. This goes against everything the disciples know about God’s revelation to them in Scripture, and yet they follow the leading of the Holy Spirit and, in fact, reinterpret Scripture in light of this new development, using Amos 9:11-12 to understand what God has done. (Acts 15:16-18) Again, it must be emphasized that the Gentiles are not asked to change who they are in any way, they are allowed to continue in their non-circumcised, anti-Scriptural (one might even say sinful)<sup>4</sup> state.

Through the Acts story, we can see within our own religious history that the Holy Spirit can call us to move in a direction that is not condoned by Scripture. As radical as that sounds, and as frightening as it is, it cannot be ignored. Indeed, Jesus himself acted on several occasions against Scripture. He abrogated the requirements of the Sabbath in Mark 2:23-28 and Luke 6:1-5, and he violated almost all of the “thou shalt not touch” laws relating to leprosy, the dead, menstruating women, and Samaritans. While it is true that he came “not to abolish the laws but to fulfill them,” he made it clear that fulfilment does not come from external observances but from within himself.

Thus, the Biblical witness shows us that on at least one occasion God has, through the Holy Spirit, made it clear to us that certain actions once thought to demonstrate our sinful nature do not actually do so. In other words, certain things we once thought sin are not sin anymore.

### ***When Not-Sin Becomes Sin***

In recent history, the opposite has been shown to be true as well, that certain actions we once thought demonstrated our righteous nature now demonstrate our sinful nature. Things we once thought were not sin are now sin. In this case, we turn to the issue of slavery.

For those who read the Bible literally, slavery is condoned and encouraged. In the Old Testament, Leviticus 25:44 says that slaves may be bought from neighbouring countries, and there are many other references to the appropriateness of slaves. In the New Testament, Paul adjures those who are slaves to remain slaves (1 Cor 7:21) and to obey their masters as signs of being good Christians (2 Cor 6:5-8). Nowhere in the Bible is slavery condemned, and in the mid-19th century, that fact was used to support the argument for slavery. The Charleston Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church said that “the holding of slaves, so far from being a sin in the sight of God, is nowhere condemned in his holy word.”<sup>5</sup> A religious tract from the Society of the Advancement of Christianity said, “No man or set of men in our day, unless they can produce a new Revelation from heaven are entitled to pronounce slavery wrong. Slavery, as it exists in the present day, is agreeable to the order of divine providence.”<sup>6</sup> The 1841 Baptist Triennial Convention resolved to extend warm relations to those opposed to abolitionism, and a letter describing the Convention read, “the meeting was truly delightful. The spirit of the gospel prevailed, and gave a tremendous shock to the abolitionists. Let us be thankful to God and give him the glory.” After the 1836 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church resolved that they were “decidedly opposed to modern abolitionism,” pastors from the church said, “Upon the whole, whether we consult the Jewish polity instituted by God himself or the uniform opinion and practice of mankind in all ages of the world, or the injunctions of the New Testament and

moral law, we are brought to the conclusion that slavery is not immoral,” and that slavery is “the Lord’s doing and marvellous in our eyes; and had it not been for the best, God alone, who is able, long since would have overruled it. It is by divine appointment.” And lastly, a pastor in Alabama said, “I draw my warrant from the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, to hold the slave in bondage.”

Obviously, nobody today would attempt to justify slavery as morally acceptable or use the Bible to do so. In this case, we have been shown by the Holy Spirit that slavery is morally reprehensible, unChristian, sinful, and, although in keeping with particular Biblical verses, against the overarching witness of Scripture.

### ***When We Don't Know***

Although the story from Acts and the abolition of slavery show us that there are times when the Holy Spirit clearly moves us to look at demonstrations of sin differently, we do know that it is not an easy process. When the Holy Spirit is working outside of the revelation of Scripture, the process is difficult, painful, and long. The best example of this is the issue of the ordination of women. Although the Bible clearly states that women should not speak in public with an uncovered head (1 Cor 11:5. 14:33-35), the Holy Spirit has moved certain churches (our own included) to a new understanding on the issue. Through Biblical interpretation, historical criticism, and Godly revelation, we have come to the conclusion that the behaviour of women preaching in public, which was once considered sinful, is no longer an action that demonstrates a sinful nature. In short, it is no longer sin. Other churches, however, have not been moved in that direction. Does that mean the Holy Spirit is not with them? Or does that mean that we have misinterpreted the workings of the Holy Spirit in our church? Until God’s kingdom is complete on earth, there is no way to know for sure.

That is not an argument, however, to do nothing. We are, in fact, free to move as we believe the Holy Spirit leads us. I, personally, believe that the Holy Spirit is revealing to the church that homosexual activity is no longer to be perceived as sinful. But I recognize that not everybody believes that, and that is why I am in favour of the “local option” model, which allows each congregation to move as they believe the Holy Spirit is leading them. This is a freedom we have because ultimately we are not justified by how well we preserve or protect the church (in fact, this is God’s job and we should not seek to replace God) but by grace through Christ alone.

### ***Conclusion***

The arguments by those who oppose same-sex blessings of “the Bible says it’s wrong” and “the Bible doesn’t say it’s right” are not incorrect. The Bible does, literally, say that homosexual activity is wrong and nowhere can it be found, literally, that such activity is right. That, however, is not the end of the matter. The Holy Spirit does offer and has offered us revelations that runs counter to the literalness of the Bible. Our New Testament and our history both give witness to that, and I believe it to be true in the case of blessing homosexual relationships, as well.

*So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth,  
called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”  
- a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands -  
remember that you were at that time without Christ,  
being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenant of promise,  
having no hope and without God in the world.  
But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off*

*have been brought near by the blood of Christ.  
For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one  
and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. . .  
for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.  
Ephesians 2:11-18*

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<sup>1</sup>*New Jerome Biblical Commentary, Prentice Hall, 1990.*

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>*The Torah, A Modern Commentary, edited by W. Gunther Plaut, 1981. pg 118.*

<sup>4</sup>Paul, in referring to the matter in Galatians, says, “We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.” He did not ask or expect Gentiles to change their uncircumcised ways.

<sup>5</sup> All quotes from the paragraph, unless otherwise noted, are from *The Brotherhood of Thieves, or, A True Picture of the American Church and Clergy*, - Rev. Stephen S. Foster, 1843. found at <http://www.medicological.tripod.com/thieves.htm>

<sup>6</sup>*Acts of the Anti-Slavery Apostles - Rev. Parker Pillsbury, Concord, 1883* found at <http://www.medicological.tripod.com/pillsburypacts.htm>