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My Sinful Self: The Self as Enemy

STEVEN D. PAULSON

We all know the Walt Kelly cartoon that gives us our theme. During a walk in the beautiful forest primeval of the Pogofenokee Swamp, Pogo and Porkypine come upon a garbage dump and Pogo blurts out: “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”¹ We call this enemy—this member of the trinity of evil²—our “sinful self,” a description that emerges from a personal, direct confession that disposes of my own best self in favor of a crucified God. If only confession of sin were as simple as noticing a dump in a forest. It is hard enough to come to some kind of reflexive moment in which we glance in a mirror and see that we are not who we wish to be; but how are we our own worst enemy? What exactly is wrong with me, since I also believe I am created good, whether Christian or not?

Sin is the trickiest of the theological themes because we all have so much invested in denying it. The consequence is that we usually remain only in the outer court of sin, with what we call sin’s fruits, and never enter the holy of holies of the thing itself. Only faith in Christ can call sin what it is, because faith does not look at

¹What began with Kelly as an anti-Joseph McCarthy slogan later became an ecological one, as the sinful self has implications both for political life and the oppression of the created things.

²Luther defines the “trinity of evil” in the explanation to the third petition of the Lord’s Prayer in his *Small Catechism*: “God’s will is done when he hinders and defeats every evil scheme and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful self which would prevent us from keeping his name holy and would oppose the coming of his kingdom” (this wording is from the “Contemporary English” version of the *Catechism* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1960, 1968] 18).

“We have met the enemy, and he is us,” said Pogo. The “us” is our sinful self, which can be disposed of only by dying to faith in our own power to believe and rising to faith as the daily gift of Christ. For this, we need a preacher, the bringer of an external word to which we can cling.

itself in a mirror or discover an inner alienation; instead it hears Christ, and only then beholds itself as past and dead—an Old Adam (or Eve).

What gets us stuck is the fact that sin seeks not to be known. It hides, and the best hiding place is in plain sight in the form of our very act of self-knowledge. This is hard for us to grasp, since we have convinced ourselves that sin is an inert or abstract object, like the measurement of the length of a board. It doesn't "do" anything, has no power, and so cannot be considered as the subject of a sentence. It has no personal characteristics, and so doesn't hide or take captives. One of the many results is to unlink sin from the devil and from what Paul calls "the flesh," as a power above us. Sin hides so that we don't address it, chide it, curse it, and spit at it. But the great joy of the Christian is precisely to curse and cajole sin, making jokes at sin's expense, and to speak directly to it, saying things like: "I know what you are up to," and "Shut your mouth, you have no speaking rights here," and "Go to hell since you like the devil so much." Being Christian is no fun without this bold address, but more important, once we lose that conversation with sin we lose Christian care for the soul altogether. Too often we merely mimic therapy by putting a "Christian" spin on the matter, suggesting that once we have examined ourselves thoroughly we can pray to God—if that seems to help. We need to get back our Christian birthright to curse sin by noting what sin does.

“sin obscures its utter simplicity by appearing difficult, complex, and impenetrable in its fruits”

Sin hides in plain sight as the knowledge of a person's own best self that is then projected out as *hope*. We can commiserate for a minute with sin. Sin is embarrassed to be itself, because anyone who is keeping track knows that what sin hopes for never comes. Sin is an imitator of hope that hangs its hat on dressing up Old Adam and presenting him as if our dead self were alive and well. Then sin obscures its utter simplicity by appearing difficult, complex, and impenetrable in its fruits, just like the darkness of a cave seems impenetrable until a light shines. It is true that sin's *fruits* are complicated. It is common to begin a discussion with a friend about a divorce or a problem at work with a sigh or a shrug and then say, "I don't know, it's complicated." I suppose Adam and Eve felt this way when they realized they were naked and hid behind a leaf. How do you explain to your Creator what you have done in the garden? It's complicated! In the garden, I preferred the abstract, theoretical question, "Did God say...?" to God's promise and tangible works like tasty fruit. I did what I did not want to do, and did not do what I would. I guess you could say I was complex.

THE PILGRIM AND THE CROSS

Though the fruits of sin are indeed complicated, the source of sin is simply the moment of self-reflection, like Pogo's "He is us." The trick here is that the sub-

ject and object of the sentence are the same. The problem with such reflexivity is that there is no room for an object other than myself, and so Christ and his promises are the first to go. This comes as a surprise to people trying to examine themselves, as religion and therapy suggest. People in trouble seek “awareness,” but awareness magnifies their original problem even when it may help with one of sin’s symptoms. When we come to hold ourselves as objects of faith, believing in the signs of our own belief, our self-reflection hides the root sin. Instead of appearing as a problem, sin appears as a solution in the form of a dream or picture of our lives projected ahead of ourselves. The picture is always a form of the same dream, that of a journey or passage from “here” to “there.” In its basic religious form, “here” is below and “there” is above. I learn this dream of a spiritual journey through human custom, certainly, but also by what we call “nature”—that humans are unique creatures on a mission, pilgrims seeking to return home. In other words, I am forced to do this. I have a compulsion from deep within me to justify my existence by saying, “What I am is not me, but what I will be.” Any such journey has a goal that I call my destination, or a destiny called “home”—the place where I really belong. So I cast myself as an orphan or displaced person who doesn’t really belong in this zoological world of copulating and dying hordes of ants and bees. Home is then a target that can be construed ontologically or morally—that the goal is to become what I was meant to be, or that God desires that I do what the law demands in order to fit into his grand scheme.

“the temptation is to consider part of myself as the problem, in which case the solution is to get rid of the bad and retain the good in me”

When I dream this dream, and inevitably fail to meet the goal, I have a problem. My sin is alienation, a distance or falling away from my goal. Sin is then understood as what the old theologians called “actual” (some deed done or not done by will power). Actual sin is quite measurable, since it is put in terms of untrod space. We fall *this* far short. One is always falling into a bad act or a failure to act—backsliding or not pulling one’s weight. The temptation in this dream is to consider *part* of myself as the problem, in which case the solution is to get rid of the bad and retain the good in me. Something on my journey is then perceived as dragging me down, and something in me must overcome this obstacle. My search for my best part is like looking down a putrid drain for a lost diamond ring, ruffling through the dumpster for a lost document, or looking in my backpack for unneeded baggage delaying my progress.

This dream also assumes that whatever problem I have is “beneath” me, and so within some kind of control, but when I confess the depth of sin I realize that the problem is above, not beneath, and so literally out of my control. Yet the very language that follows makes us all uncomfortable: sin is bondage; I am captive to sin;

I am by nature sinful and unclean. The language of bondage does not fit with taking a journey to a goal, because it would mean that before I start I can't get there. Who wants to go on that pointless voyage?

So when considering sin, a parting of the ways comes quickly. One can take up an analysis of sin according to the law alone, but then it is hard to keep hope alive, because no one in recorded history has ever made it home. But who knows—perhaps you or I, like E.T., may be the one! Or, one can do what I intend to do in this essay: take up sin from the viewpoint of the cross of Christ. There sin's enormous, pustulated investment in concupiscence (the animal pull of bodily desires) is shrunk down to the narrow matter of trust in Christ crucified as the one who has taken our sin. In that case, sin is seen from the very strange perspective of already being over and done with. This latter is not just one "point of view" among many; it is given only when sin is taken from me, or better, when I am taken from it, in which case sin is dead and gone, defeated in Christ bodily.

Sin does not like my approach. It prefers that we consider it alive and possessed, so it hides itself from us. As Philip Melanchthon knew full well, "[N]ature cannot hate sin."³ Hate? It can barely recognize it, since to recognize it would be mortification, and mortification must be denied if one is embarking on a long journey—unless the goal has already been accomplished and one already lives beyond it. A person taking a journey to return home can face up to most any challenge except death. Death ruins journeys. So, in order to prop up our old sinful self, we must teach ourselves not to blush in the face of death and trudge along (see Jer 6:15: "They did not know how to blush").

The real parting of the ways in theology as in life is this: Does true confession of sin come from self-examination, or does it come from preaching Christ crucified? The first way looks inward; the second is addressed to us from outside. The first seeks truth in "the navel," but the second receives truth in the form of a preacher's declaration of Christ's death and our place in it.⁴ Sin takes its own "journey" so seriously that it cannot recognize Christ's journey to the cross. Consequently, news about Christ and his cross must be ignored or muted by turning to inward examination rather than receiving the external word. All people develop what philosophers like to call a "metanarrative," with themselves as central actor. The upshot is to refuse God's words when they come and to replace them with words of our own making. Sin kills the external word of the preacher in order to live by its own inner conversation. There you have my conclusion. Sin is the process of killing preachers and worshiping the "god-within" (called in theology *enthusiasm*—God within-ism), where I whisper reassuring words to myself while racing to death. When the conflict comes, who will win, the preacher or me? Who holds the future?

³Philip Melanchthon, *Loci Communes Theologici*, in *Melanchthon and Bucer*, ed. Wilhelm Pauck, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 19 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 140.

⁴See Steven Paulson, *Luther for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004) especially chap. 7.

THE TYRANT: LIVING WITHOUT FEAR AND WITHOUT TRUST IN GOD

The evangelical contribution to the church's teaching on sin is to take us to the root of the rebellion against the Creator by means of the preaching of the cross. Therefore, in the famous definition of sin in the second article of the *Augsburg Confession*, the confessors radicalized the standard definition of concupiscence by stating my original problem: we are "without fear of God, without trust in God." They recognized that creation was never our problem, as those who have tried to deal with sin apart from the cross of Christ always conclude. Our problem is not what is below us, but what is above us. Creator, not creation, is our oppressor, and what a fine mess it is for a creature to find herself in a struggle with her own Creator. Our Creator is our personal preacher, who speaks the words that make us what we are. Viewed in one way, sin is simply *hatred for the preacher*; viewed in another it is *hatred for the Creator*. Apart from this, though, there is nothing really wrong with us. If only this problem of hatred could be solved, we would be scot-free.

"it usually comes as a surprise to people to know that Christians don't think there is much wrong with them—except that they don't have a preacher"

It usually comes as a surprise to people to know that Christians don't think there is much wrong with them—except that they don't have a preacher. But who could be blamed for that? Who would even want a preacher when we are going on a long journey? My real problem is not myself as creature, or how far away I am spiritually from heaven and the Creator; my problem is my drive to be preacherless. My self is sinful as it *defeats my preacher*, so I am left all alone in justifying myself (since I can't seem to get anyone else interested in doing this for me).

It is frightening to learn how easy it is to defeat our preacher; all I need to do is to deny God's words, and the best way to do that is just to turn off the outer ear, then to turn on the "inner ear" and listen to myself. "Did God say...?" Thus the sinner becomes her own preacher. God wants to be justified in God's words (Rom 3:4; John 5:24; Ps 51). But who knows what I need more than myself? I can be a regular factory of my own personal happiness.

However, when I become my own preacher, unbelief (bad faith) slips something between the loved and the lover, between God and his word/deed—in the form of a fiction that has dire consequences for the relationship. The fictional intermediate is I—*myself* in the form of my free will taking a trip. This ends in that oddest of circumstances—making love while looking at oneself in the mirror. Self-reflection displaces hearing the lover. Once the process is under way there is no way out. So Paul was quite correct when he said, "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..." (Rom 5:12).

For thousands of years Christians have mistakenly looked for a bestial, sexual, material, physical passage by which intercourse itself was to blame for the universal inheritance of sin. They learned that from the pagans, not from the Bible. Instead, sin is the abstraction away from such creaturely intercourse in what could only be called “spirituality.” In this sense, to be “spiritual” came to mean my own transcendence of creaturely life that otherwise is bound to receive its Lord in the form of specific words and created works (like apples from trees). Humanity’s great power was then considered its ability to “critique” or examine itself: “know thyself,” said the oracle to Plato. My ability to reflect back upon myself became my essence, in order to master myself by an inner choosing mechanism that is not restricted to our animal life, which merely receives whatever the Creator provides. Each of us is born into life under this tyrant, who takes a word from our beloved Lord and turns it into a possibility for self-knowledge, self-mastery, and self-transcendence. Thus I enter the dream of autonomy—becoming a law to myself. The cost is that instead of *receiving* faith, I now must *make* it.

In this way Slavoj Žižek is right: “[T]he true aim of a drive is not to reach its goal, but to circulate endlessly around it.” What a human drive does, then, is to turn “failure into triumph.”⁵ A law is not a person. It cannot forgive, it can only stand outside and accuse. When a person obsessively washes his hands, the therapy is to tell him to stop it, since it doesn’t do him any good in the end, or to advise him to go backward into his past to seek what binds him. However, what he is actually doing is seeing *ahead*, and trying to head off the inevitable judgment that finally declares that you are not righteous in yourself. We simply don’t have life “inside.” God does, the Father and Son do, but I don’t (John 5:25–29). A person is perhaps a thing *in* himself, but not *for* himself. What the hand-washer is doing is judging himself, and becoming satisfied by turning failure into triumph. He recognizes that it is not reaching the goal that counts, but endlessly circling around it. This is what a theologian of glory always does.

Sin like this is being stuck. Stuck is not being able to go forward to the goal since therein lies death, nor can one go backward to correct the past. So a person tries to levitate, as it were, to go straight up in the air and transcend actual life. But here lies a great miscalculation in the form of a drive—or a death wish, as Freud called it. The problem is identified with the *externality* of the judging law, and so the solution seems to be to make law *internal*. Freedom is to become autonomous, a law to myself, which is to relate to myself by circling around myself or becoming self-conscious. In this quest my very creaturely humanity becomes the problem, and its solution is to become the pure spirit of the law. A gap opens between object and subject, and the devil, death, and my own sinful self all seek to exploit that gap by twisting the law until it exonerates rather than accuses. I make defeat into vic-

⁵Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006) 63.

tory, praising myself for how clean I have made my hands, and meanwhile refuse to hear my preacher.

FALSE AND TRUE PREACHERS: LAW ALONE AND FAITH ALONE

The serpent has nothing original to say, so when he spoke in the garden he disguised himself as a preacher who merely asks a cunning question: “Did God really say...?” Once the ear is tuned to this sound, it is not listening to God’s word. Eve listened to herself. Instead of trusting God’s words, she occupied herself with answering the snake’s question and thereby developed the first pilgrimage—the first search for God behind the words and things of creation. In order to search for this hidden God, Eve had to set out markers indicating progress by which to test her faith as something “valid” and growing, so she was locked into measuring her trust. Am I able to distinguish the good and the evil now? She mistook faith for the effort to determine whether or not she *had* this faith. The external word of God, by which God creates, drops out in favor of self-examination. The apple is traded for pure thought.

“Eve mistook faith for the effort to determine whether or not she had this faith. The external word of God, by which God creates, drops out in favor of self-examination.”

The original sin of Adam and Eve is not to have chosen badly between the options provided by God to enable free will. Sin is to turn inward, away from God’s words and things, to be curved in upon the self, to look in the mirror while making love, or to believe in our own power to believe. The object of faith becomes our own faith. It is then without content, purely methodological, the fiction of what we call “awareness.” Luther called this *enthusiasm*—the search for God within. Faith actually belongs outside itself in God’s word, where it clings to Christ, not itself. When it turns inside it loses God’s word, and so displaces Christ with its own fictional free will. The dream of free will is catchy. No wonder we admire the spiritualists. They develop formulas for the rest of us to determine whether we, like they, have the faith or not. These formulas often pass as “preaching,” but they are mere meditations on what the wise of this world consider the best way to speak to your own self and take your own spiritual temperature. So these so-called preachers stand before others and offer “thoughts.”

The great consequence of this turn to the subject is what we call the prison of having a “self,” which is, as Kierkegaard observed, nothing but a relation of the self with itself. What happens is that the world of power—mastery of one person over the other—is internalized: one must become part master and part slave to one’s own self, dividing oneself into good and bad parts and so eternally alienating the

self from the self in order to make room for progress. Before this intrusion of sin there was no goal in Eden except God's own end and purpose in the form of love for the creatures. God was on a pilgrimage, we could say, to give faith, just as God gave the many trees in the garden from which Adam and Eve should eat. The consequence of the turn inward is that judgment and mercy (God's traits) must be used *by myself for myself*. I must condemn and forgive myself. Nowhere is this a greater dilemma or alienation of myself than when I come to judge my own faith. Do I have it or do I not? Once I ask this question of myself hell's gate opens wide and consumes me. For such is the "goal" of free will. I must moment by moment assure myself of my own faith. What a mess that is!

Shortly after Melanchthon was taught the gospel he noticed the problem: "Most people seek in the Scriptures only topics of virtues and vices, but this practice is more philosophical than Christian...[instead] we commend Christ to you."⁶ The search for virtues rather than Christ is not an oversight of the moral life, but is the very purpose of the system that intends to deny that Christ is everything: "For from him and through him and to him are all things" (Rom 11:36). Sin wants us to consider it as something only in relation to the law, not as the opposition to God that was revealed in the cross by its being conquered. The way of virtue is the way of free will, and free will is designed to keep us from knowing Christ and his benefits. It denies God's incarnate words by denying the preacher, so we can take our own journey. Christ died because sinners want to be rid of their preachers.

A tyrant needs decisions to make, and the decisions must be made *accidentally* in order to prove to the tyrant that he, and no one else, is in control. He could have chosen differently, and thereby he remains the tyrant. But when we open Scripture a terrible thing happens. Scripture says that all things happen by divine necessity: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will" (Matt 10:29 RSV). Or again, "I know, O LORD, that the way of human beings is not in their control, that mortals as they walk cannot direct their steps" (Jer 10:23).

Our revolt at this catches us up and we cannot free ourselves, but our revolt can be conquered by one greater than it, one who loves the sinner—none other than Jesus Christ himself. Christ takes our sin upon himself and possesses it. He became sin for our sake in order to defeat it—not in ourselves, but in himself. This cost Christ much, and the cost of this discipleship to us is to give up the pursuit of vice and virtue itself. My tyrant and its kingdom must go. Scripture does not produce what sinners want—the distinction of vice and virtue—but it does yield the difference between law and gospel, which is the judgment of the all-working God and the promises given by means of the preacher. The preacher destines you by making you the location of Christ's arrival. This is the difference between following *my* path, which pretends to move from life to death, and *Christ's*, which comes

⁶Philip Melanchthon, *Loci Communes Theologici*, 22.

down from heaven and goes from death to life. Christ died by free will's choice to be rid of the preacher. Christ was raised to defeat the murderers so that the preacher prevails in all those chosen by the living word. There is nothing wrong with us that a good preacher can't put right, though it means dying to faith as our own power to believe and rising to faith as Christ's gift day by day.

Once he discovered the dump by self-examination, all Pogo needed was a preacher of Christ's cross to absolve him. The same goes for you. Then when sin comes hiding inside, you can "out" him and say, "Go to hell, I don't listen to you anymore. My conversation is with Christ and my neighbor." ⊕

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