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**“They Shall Not Inherit the Kingdom of God”—  
Is the Bible’s Language of Judgment & Sin too  
Condemnatory to Patiently Deal with Human Sins?**

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## Introduction<sup>2</sup>

As evangelical Protestant Christians, we believe that the Bible is authoritative and sufficient for all aspects of the Christian life and Christian ministry.<sup>3</sup> That view includes an understanding that, when dealing with human sins, the Bible is sufficient for addressing and dealing with them.<sup>4</sup>

Sin is a universal reality, and as a result of its gravity and consequences, all people ought to deal with their sins. This is certainly true on a personal level. Additionally, there is great need for ministers of the gospel to deal with the sins of their people. In preaching and counseling alike, there is opportunity to address sin, not because that is pleasant, but because it is necessary. And quite apart from the ministry, many Christian men and women will seek to address the sins of their friends and neighbors, parents and children. What they need, before and above all else, is “judicial and moral cleansing.”<sup>5</sup> They can find it in God’s word. There we can find the way to deal with our sins, whether we are already in fellowship with God or not. And yet many would lament that the language of Scripture is somehow too strong, too critical, and too condemnatory to patiently deal with human sins.

There is no denying that the Bible’s language of judgment and sin is strongly dichotomizing. Paul, for instance, tells us that “the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 6:9).<sup>6</sup> And

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<sup>2</sup> The Introduction and Part A were written by Daniel Funke, with some of the references in the footnotes supplied by Tomas Bokedal.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Robert Kolb, “The Bible in the Reformation and Protestant Orthodoxy,” in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 100–01.

<sup>4</sup> On the clarity and sufficiency of Scripture, see, e.g., Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, Vol 1: A Study of Theological Prolegomena (Concordia Publishing House, 1970), 309–15.

<sup>5</sup> Horatius Bonar, *The Everlasting Righteousness* (1st 1874; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1993), v.

<sup>6</sup> See also Gal 5:19–21, Eph 5:5. Quotations are taken from the English Standard Version.

while those who “wash their robes … have a right to the tree of life and … may enter the city by the gates” (Rev 22:14), those who are “dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood” are outside the gates (v15).<sup>7</sup> Their “portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (Rev 21:8). Jesus himself used strong words throughout his ministry, as exemplified in his explanation of the parable of the weeds: “The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 13:41–42).

This language might make us wonder if there is still room to patiently deal with human sins. In this article, we set out to answer the question that heads this page—whether the Bible’s language of sin and judgment is too condemnatory to patiently deal with human sin. In order to address this question, we propose that it is necessary to apply distinctions to our reading of the Bible. The key distinction is that of the sinner, whose biggest need is justification, and the saint, who, while still a sinner, seeks to grow in holiness. This might be an obvious distinction, but it will serve as the first big step in addressing the question at hand. We will then take a closer look at one relevant passage, 1 Corinthians 6. This will be followed by looking at the relationship of the Bible’s language of sin and judgment with the Bible’s presentation of the gospel, and how we must understand the good news in context. That will conclude the first part of the article. The second part will deal with the Evangelical Lutheran approaches to the issues at hand.

## **A. Biblical Theological Reflections**

### **1. Vital Distinctions**

It is paramount that we make vital distinctions when approaching the Bible’s language of sin and judgment. We need to distinguish between who is in and who is outside of fellowship with God, or, to use Paul’s language, who is “in Christ,” and who is not.<sup>8</sup> In light of

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<sup>7</sup> See also Rev 21:27.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, trans. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: CPH, 1929).

this dualism, we have to distinguish clearly between justification and sanctification. If these distinctions are not upheld (and kept in mind), any discussion of sin and judgment in the Bible will be simplistic and reductionistic.

These distinctions are, of course, found consistently throughout the Bible and are especially clear in the N.T. In the Gospels and Acts, we find those who are disciples and believers, and they are characterized by their abiding in Christ. Others do not believe and are not abiding in Christ. The language of abiding is very similar to that of Paul who prefers the idea of being “in Christ.” And John, likewise, is writing to those who are in the light, and walk in the light, as opposed to those who are and walk in the darkness. The greatest need for sinners who are not “in Christ” is justification, while the great project for those who are “in Christ” is sanctification, which includes mortification of sin. These distinctions are necessary, both in the realm of biblical studies, as well as in the practice of pastoral ministry. How we approach a particular sin, both in our own lives and in the lives of others, depends on whether or not we are in Christ.

## **2. The Unbeliever’s Need: Justification<sup>9</sup>**

The Bible constantly reminds the reader of the reality of personal judgment. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that “it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” (Heb 9:27). This judgment is universal and personal: “We will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.’ So then each of us will give an account of himself to God” (Rom 14:10–12, cf. 2 Cor 5:10).<sup>10</sup> This fact of judgment, in light of the universality of sin and guilt, forces the reader to seek salvation, and this salvation is offered, throughout the Christian Bible, in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The traditional Protestant idea of salvation is that of justification by faith. The sinner is freely justified by grace through faith, on the

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<sup>9</sup> On justification by faith see, e.g., Article IV of the *Augsburg Confession* and chapter 11 of the *Second London Baptist Confession of 1689*.

<sup>10</sup> N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God, Christian Origins and the Question of God*, Vol. 2. (London: SPCK, 1996), 1089, “There ought ... to be no question about Paul holding firmly to a Jewish-style notion of a coming day of judgment.”

ground of the work of Christ alone. His righteousness is imputed to the sinner, while the sinner's punishment is imputed to Christ on the cross. This double imputation is at the heart of salvation in the Bible: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21).<sup>11</sup>

This is the great hope that the Bible offers to the sinner. It is an offer made to all people, in line with God's desire for all people to be saved (1 Tim 2:4, Ezek. 18:23, 32). And, so, men and women from all places can enter fellowship with God. This does not, of course, mean that the sinner ceases to sin. 1 John quite strongly argues against any suggestion that a Christian does not sin. The person making such a claim is a liar, and the truth is not in them (1 John 1:8, 10). The truth is that a Christian is, to borrow Luther's language, *simul justus et peccator*, or "at once justified and sinner."

### **3. The Believer's Project: Sanctification**

A justified sinner is never merely justified. He is changed. He receives the Holy Spirit and is given a new heart, and therefore we can affirm, with James, that faith without works is dead (Jas 2:26). While Protestants have always affirmed that justification is by grace through faith, this faith is accompanied by a changed life. Robert Traill powerfully encapsulates this when he writes that "There is no difference between a justified and a sanctified man, for he is always the same person that partakes of these privileges."<sup>12</sup> A justified woman, in other words, is a woman being sanctified. And if she is sanctified, she has been justified. The two are a package deal and cannot be obtained separately (cf. Rom 8:30; 1 Cor 1:30, 6:11).<sup>13</sup>

This becomes an important foundation for our understanding of approaching the sins of the believer. A significant aspect of growing

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<sup>11</sup> For treatment of a classic Protestant understanding of justification, see, e.g., Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2004); idem, *Justification Reconsidered: Rethinking a Pauline Theme* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, 2013); D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, 2 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001 and 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Robert Traill (1642–1716), *Justification Vindicated* (1st 1692; Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 8.

<sup>13</sup> For a Lutheran reading, see, e.g., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 565 and 660.

in holiness is taken up with limiting and killing personal sins. John is telling his readers that he is writing to them, in part, that they may not sin (1 John 2:1). Paul, likewise, exhorts us to put to death the deeds of the body: “For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Rom 8:13). This mortification was central to the holiness movements of Lutheran Pietism and of Puritanism and has been a significant aspect of sanctification throughout church history.<sup>14</sup> Success, however, will not be absolute in this body, and there is, therefore, need for confession and repentance.<sup>15</sup>

That the life of the Christian should be marked by continual repentance was so important to Martin Luther, that he made that explicit in the first of his 95 theses: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”<sup>16</sup> Confession is an important element of ongoing repentance, and should therefore be part of every Christian’s dealing with past sins. One of the great promises made to Christians is that we are assured forgiveness if we confess our sins: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Mortification and confession, then, are the major ways in which a believer can prevent future sins and account for past sins.<sup>17</sup>

The distinctions made in this section will be helpful in understanding how we can patiently deal with sin, even with an eye to the strong language of sin and judgment throughout the Bible. An example will highlight that point.

#### **4. 1 Corinthians 6**

The title that heads this chapter is a title taken from a few instances throughout the N.T. that portray salvation in exclusive

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<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., John Owen (1616–1683), *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, in *Works of John Owen*, Volume 6 (ed. William Goold; 1827; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967).

<sup>15</sup> Contra movements that advocate for perfectionism.

<sup>16</sup> Translation of Thesis 1 found in Graham Tomlin, *Luther and His World* (Lion Hudson, 2012), 59.

<sup>17</sup> As for the balance between justification and sanctification in the believer in Lutheran thinking, see Harold L. Sankbeil, *Sanctification: Christ in Action: Evangelical Challenge and Lutheran Response* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1989), 113.

terms. Some will inherit the kingdom of God, while others will not. One such instance is found in 1 Corinthians:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor 6:9–10)

Paul is exhorting Christians to live at peace with one another, and a grievous practice among the Corinthian Christians is that they do not mind settling quarrels with one another in court. Following that discussion, Paul is writing the words already quoted. Paul is clear in his language. Those who are marked by a continual pattern of unforgiven sin will not inherit the kingdom of God.

It is important to remember the distinctions we have already made when approaching a text like that. Many men and women are marked by these patterns of sin. We can think of the businessman, who, because of his greed, is a workaholic, while neglecting his family. We can think of the woman, who is a con-artist, relieving all sorts of people of their money. And we can think of the man who outwardly is a great husband and father, and yet cheats on his wife every week with his co-worker. Paul assures us that men and women like that will not inherit the kingdom. Their patterns of being unrepentant sinners excludes them from this blessing. But they are not beyond the offer of salvation, and that becomes clear in the verse that follows those we have quoted above.

Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians that some of his readers fit the categories of sin he has mentioned: “And such were some of you.” And the reason that they have now become heirs is that they “were washed … sanctified … justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (v11). The Corinthian Christians have been justified and sanctified—and we may add that they are also in the process of being sanctified—and, as a result, their lives are changed.<sup>18</sup> While some of them have been marked by the patterns of sin, which Paul mentions in 6:9–10, they no longer are. The Spirit has been at work in their lives, and they have been fundamentally changed.

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<sup>18</sup> The verbs in v11 are aorist verbs, and we should prefer to translate ἤγιασθητε as being set apart.

This leaves us with an important question: What happens when I sin, after I have been justified? We should expect that those who have been marked by a particular sin continue to struggle and wrestle with that sin after becoming Christians. But herein lies an important distinction. Those who are marked by sin are significantly different from those who struggle with it. We can draw a distinction, for instance, between the alcoholic who enjoys drinking, and who continues to drink even though knowing the possible consequences of such a behavior. The former alcoholic turned Christian, however, who relapses after struggling and fighting against his addiction is in a different category.<sup>19</sup> Sin is not evidence that someone is not right with God; however, an unrepentant lifestyle of sin is.<sup>20</sup>

1 Corinthians 6:9–10 is not a unique passage in Scripture. Galatians 5:21 and Ephesians 5:5 make similar points, and so do the last two chapters of the Apocalypse. Justification is not based on our works, but those who are justified live a life bearing fruit for God. It is in bringing together these concepts and the distinctions mentioned above that we can see how good works and justification by faith are perfectly harmonious.

## **5. The Good News and the Bad**

One final argument is significant. The language of judgment and sin in the Bible is descriptive. We affirm that there *is* a final judgment, and that sin is exceedingly evil, because we read about their condemnation in the Bible. The language used might be harsh, but we affirm its necessity, because unless we know about sin and judgment, the gospel makes little sense.

The gospel, the good news, can only be fully understood in light of the bad news. In order to patiently deal with the sin of the unbeliever, therefore, we need to establish the condition in which the unbeliever finds himself. It should not surprise us that the major confessional documents of the Lutheran and Reformed traditions generally place a discussion of sin and judgment before a discussion of the remedy presented in Jesus Christ. This is beautifully done in the *Sum of Saving Knowledge*, a document often published alongside the

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. also 2 Pet 2:20–22; and Walther, *Proper Distinction*, Thesis XVIII.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Thesis X; and Rom 8:13.

Westminster Standards.<sup>21</sup> Heading I of that document is entitled, “Our woeful condition by nature, through breaking the Covenant of Works.” Heading II is entitled, “The remedy provided in Jesus Christ for the elect by the Covenant of Grace.” The second heading only makes sense in the light of the first. The good news as presented throughout the Bible, likewise, only makes sense in the light of an understanding of judgment and sin. Paul’s masterful articulation of the doctrine of justification of faith in Romans (Rom 3:21–26) is preceded by a discussion of sin and judgment. The contrast could not be any clearer, and the height of Paul’s argument only makes sense in the light of what has preceded it in Romans 1:18–3:20; what is true for Paul’s argument is certainly true for the Bible as a whole.

That Christ has secured an eternal redemption by entering the holy places by his own blood (Heb 9:12) only makes sense if we see a need of redemption. Atonement as a concept only makes sense in the light of our condition. Salvation as a central theme of the Bible can only be communicated if we know from what we are saved and rescued. It is the good news that allows us to patiently deal with sin, both for those outside, and for those within covenant boundaries. And if that is true, it is only through the Bible’s language of judgment and sin that we find a way to patiently deal with human sins.

### **Conclusion on Biblical-Theological Reflections**

Answering the question that heads this article is a twofold task. First, in order to deal with human sins, we make a vital distinction between the believer and the unbeliever. The greatest need of those who are not in fellowship with God is being right with God, and therefore having peace with God. Men and women in that situation need to be called to believe and repent. Those who are in fellowship with God are commanded to grow in holiness, and to confess and repent of their sins. If we do not keep this distinction in mind, we fail to see that the Bible’s language of sin and judgment must be understood in context.

Second, we must remember that the good news throughout Scripture only makes sense in the light of judgment and sin. The Bible’s language of judgment and sin, therefore, gives context to the

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<sup>21</sup> David Dickson (1583–1663), and James Durham (1622–1658), *Sum of Saving Knowledge: or, A Brief Sum of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh: Jonstone, Hunter, and Co., 1872; 1st 1650).

proclamation of the good news of Christ crucified and risen. Rather than obstructing a patient approach to dealing with human sins, this language allows us to fully understand, and therefore fully apply, the remedy for sin. The answer is, therefore, a clear “No.” The Bible’s language of judgment and sin is not too condemnatory to patiently deal with human sin.

So far, we have considered two arguments from the Bible. In the second part we will add voices from church history and specifically from Lutheran church history to show how our answer lines up with the answers given by Lutheran theologians and pastors.

## **B. Lutheran Approaches to the Bible’s Language of Sin and Judgment<sup>22</sup>**

### **1. God Does Not Want Any to Perish**

In the N.T., the stance on the themes of judgment and salvation is rather positive. We learn from the Gospel that “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:17). The apostle Paul concurs. Having previously pointed the Galatian believers towards the curse Christ became in our place (Gal 3:13; 2 Cor 5:21), he ensures the readers of Romans that *there is no condemnation*—due to our shortcomings vis-à-vis God’s law—for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1). Paul asks: Who shall condemn, or bring any charge against, those who belong to Christ? He who loves us, who gave his own Son up for us, will he not patiently give us everything with him? Indeed, will anything in all creation be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:31–39)?

On a basic level, God, who is a loving God (Rom 8:39, 2 Cor 13:11, 1 John 4:16), does not want condemnation at all, as expressed in the Lutheran *Formula of Concord*: God “does not want any to perish but wants all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). As it is written in Ezekiel (33:11 and 18:23), ‘As I live, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live.’”<sup>23</sup> Again, however, we recognize the dual sinner-saint pattern,

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<sup>22</sup> Part B and most of Concluding Remarks are authored by Tomas Bokedal.

<sup>23</sup> *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 653.

or unbeliever-believer distinction, discussed in Part A: Either a life characterized by sin, judgment, and wrath (Rom 2:8f, 8:6–8), or a life lived in light of forgiveness, salvation, the good, and the noble (Rom 2:7 and 10, 3:20–26, 4:7, 5:1, 8:3f).<sup>24</sup> Regarding the former, for Lutherans it is important to underscore that God does not instigate sin and that

All preparation for condemnation stems from the devil and human beings, through sin, and in absolutely no way from God. Since God does not want a single human being to be condemned, how then could he himself prepare a person for condemnation? For as God is not the cause of sins, so he is also not the cause of punishment or condemnation. The only cause of condemnation is sin, for ‘the wages of sin is death’ [Rom 6:23].<sup>25</sup>

Consequently, outside of Christ all sins are mortal, separating human beings from the living God.<sup>26</sup> A personal relationship with God, on the other hand, is only possible by means of forgiveness of our sins through faith in Christ.

Thus, an initial Lutheran response to our question—whether the biblical language about judgment and sin is too condemnatory to patiently deal with human sins—is a note of clarification:

1. God does not want anyone to be condemned,
2. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, rather God wants to give them everything with him,
3. Human sins (by deviating from the norms set by a holy and righteous God) are themselves the very reason for the biblical language about judgment and sin, and
4. In order to patiently deal with the human dilemma of sin, God, in an act of divine love towards humanity, sent his Son, who himself is without sin (1 John 4:10, 2 Pet 3:7–9, Heb 4:15), to atone for human sin (2 Cor 5:18f., Rom 5:10f., 1 Joh. 2:2) and be executed and condemned on a cross.

In the following I shall briefly discuss some aspects of this essay’s topic as they appear in the works of five Lutheran theologians, namely Philip Melanchthon (defining sin, justifying condemnation),

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<sup>24</sup> On the relation between Rom 2:13 and 3:20, see Westerholm, *Justification Reconsidered*, 83f.

<sup>25</sup> *The Book of Concord*, 653.

<sup>26</sup> Philip Melanchthon, *Loci Communes rerum theologicarum*, trans. J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1992 (1543)), 53. On the distinction between non-forgiven mortal sins in the unregenerate and forgiven venial sins in the regenerate (of which the latter do not drive out the Holy Spirit and faith); compare 126ff.

Johann Gerhard (condemnatory effects of actual sins), Carl Fredrik Wisløff (the necessary distinction between law and gospel), Søren Kierkegaard (consciousness of sin, the essential condition for understanding Christianity), and Robert Kolb (on enjoying less than the fulness of human life).

## **2. Defining Sin, Justifying Condemnation: Philip Melanchthon**

In his theological treatise *Loci Communes*, Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560) defines the scriptural sense of the term *sin* as follows: “*sin* properly means something culpable and condemned by God unless there is forgiveness. This general description fits original sin and actual sin.”<sup>27</sup> Melanchthon takes this as a compressed definition focusing exclusively on the relational dimension, namely the human guilt before God. In order to broaden the description to include as well the reason behind guilt, he widens the definition as follows:

Sin is a defect or an inclination or an action in conflict with the law of God, offending God, condemned by God, and making us worthy of eternal wrath and eternal punishments, unless there be forgiveness. In this definition there are elements, namely defect and inclination, which refer to original sin. The action includes all actual sins, inner and external.<sup>28</sup>

In this definition, which was previously approved by Luther,<sup>29</sup> the common element is understood to be “the conflict with the law of God,” including not only actions (as the early Lutheran adversaries argued), but it also “condemns the darkness, defects and depraved inclinations in the nature of man” (cf. Rom 7).<sup>30</sup> According to Melanchthon, human reason understands that “wicked actions are against the law of God,” but it ignores the ensuing wrath of God. Thus particular emphasis needs to be placed on the descriptive terms: “condemned by God,” “offending God,” and “making us worthy of wrath and punishment, etc.” Melanchthon draws this definition from Gal 3:10: “Cursed is he that does not continue in all things which are written in the Law.” We conclude from this that the biblical language about sin and judgment is properly condemnatory since God is

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<sup>27</sup> Melanchthon, *Loci Communes*, 47.

<sup>28</sup> Melanchthon, 48.

<sup>29</sup> Johann Gerhard, *On Sin and Free Choice: Theological Commonplaces* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014).

<sup>30</sup> Gerhard, *On Sin and Free Choice*.

offended and since he, in line with his divine will and nature, must condemn sin.

Melanchthon stresses that “sin is a far greater evil than human reason thinks.”<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, the church reproaches not only external actions conflicting with the law of God, or with reason (“as philosophy does”); “but it reprobates the root and the fruit, the inner darkness of the mind, the doubts concerning the will of God, the turning away of the human will from God and stubbornness of the heart against the law of God. It also reproves ignoring and despising the Son of God. These are grievous and atrocious evils, the enormity of which cannot be told. Therefore, Christ says, ‘The Holy Spirit will reprove the world of sin.’”<sup>32</sup>

On a related epistemological note, Paul underscores the severity of sin triggered by God’s law: “Through the law sin becomes exceedingly sinful” (Rom 7:13). This means that the law,

shows the wrath of God, and when this is recognized, then we understand that our uncleanness is not a small evil but is something culpable, condemned, and cursed by God because terrible punishments follow. Since all this is the case, therefore as often as sin is mentioned, let this designation be discerned in the church; it speaks of judgment and of the wrath of God.<sup>33</sup>

With these definitions and considerations in mind, the God of the Bible—and the N.T. in particular (John 3:16–19)—is a God of patience and love towards human beings and their many shortcomings.

### **3. Condemnatory Effects of Actual Sins: Johann Gerhard**

Johann Gerhard (1582–1637), one of the foremost Lutheran dogmaticians, spends several chapters on matters relating to sin and judgment. I shall here briefly bring to the fore only one point, namely his list of the condemnatory effects of actual sins.

Gerhard catalogues the negative effects of actual sins that help us understand why sins cannot be easily tolerated, and why, as a consequence, Scripture’s language of sin is condemnatory:

- I. The grief of conscience;

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<sup>31</sup> Melanchthon, *Loci Communes*, 47.

<sup>32</sup> Melanchthon, 47.

<sup>33</sup> Melanchthon, 48.

- II. The wrath of God (“the wrath which You threaten over sinners is intolerable,” Manasseh, v. 5);
- III. A curvature, obliquity, and filthiness of the soul;
- IV. Guilt (“No more remember my iniquities; erase my sins,” Ps 25:7, 51:1);
- V. Vicious habits inclining toward other sins (“whoever sins becomes a slave to sin,” John 8:34), and
- VI. Temporal and eternal punishments of all kinds.<sup>34</sup>

According to our primary distinction in Part A, God’s wrath and punishments of all kinds are revealed against all sin and ungodliness (Rom 1:18ff.), whereas the righteousness of God is given patiently, sacrificially and freely to all who believe in the Son (John 3:16–19, Rom 4:25, 2 Pet 3:8–9, 1 John 2:2)—in the phrasing of *The Book of Concord*—to those who know “that he is the atoning sacrifice for our sin. Isaiah says [Isa 53:6], ‘The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.’”<sup>35</sup> Again, the heart of the gospel is portrayed against the backdrop of accumulating human sins, God’s wrath and judgment, all necessary for understanding and appropriating the good news.

#### **4. Necessary Distinction between Law and Gospel: Carl Fredrik Wisløff**

Carl Fredrik Wisløff (1908–2004), an influential Norwegian Lutheran pastor and theologian, airs matters pertaining to our discussion in his 1946 book on Christian faith *Jeg vet på hvem jeg tror* (“I Know in Whom I Believe”). Salvation, Wisløff begins, is to receive forgiveness for one’s sins (Ps 32, Luke 1:77, Rom 8:1).<sup>36</sup> The one who has not received forgiveness for their sin is lost since they are still under God’s wrath. He then proceeds to the important Lutheran distinction between law and gospel.

From the time of Melanchthon and the *Book of Concord* in the 16th century, Lutherans discussed three uses of the law (God’s requirement on human beings through his commandments), even though Luther at times tended to embrace only the first two of these: (1) *the civil use of the law*, promoting good order in society, and punishing evil; (2) *the pedagogical use of the law*, referring to the law’s function in repentance (cf. Gal 3:24, in order for human beings

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<sup>34</sup> Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces*, 112.

<sup>35</sup> *The Book of Concord*, 236.

<sup>36</sup> Carl Fredrik Wisløff, *Jag vet på vem jag tror: Orientering i kristen tro* (Göteborg: Kyrkliga förbundets bokförlag, 1992, frist 1946), 85f.

to receive the gospel it is necessary that they first attain knowledge of their sin and need for forgiveness; and Rom 3:20, the law makes us aware of the accusation of our own consciousness, which then may lead to repentance and faith in the gospel); and (3) *the didactic use of the law*, teaching and reminding believers how they should live as Christians, promoting sanctification.<sup>37</sup> As Wisløff focuses mainly on the second of these, *the pedagogical use of the law*, its important accusatory function in repentance is presented through which God (patiently) deals with human sinfulness.

The way in which a human being is saved receives two answers from Scripture, Wisløff proceeds. On the one hand, by means of the law: If you want to be saved, keep the commandments—then you will live! (Lev. 18:5, Luke 10:28, Gal 3:12). On the other hand, by means of the gospel: We are saved without any good works whatsoever: “By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph 2:8f.).<sup>38</sup> Wisløff stresses that the law corresponds to our own human way of thinking, whereas the gospel comes to us as something new and foreign to human reasoning. The law refers to our own works; the gospel, on the other hand, “does not refer to myself but to Jesus. It says: He, Jesus, is your salvation. Jesus is your peace. He died for you, he loves you.”<sup>39</sup>

By accusing us, the law makes us aware of the accusation in our own consciousness and our own sinfulness; its effect is thus first and foremost knowledge of sin (Rom 3:20, 4:15; Gal 2:19f, 3:24). Over against this accusatory effect of the law, the effect of the gospel is righteousness and faith apart from the law, of which the law and the prophets have testified (Rom 3:21). The gospel portrays Christ “as crucified” (Gal 3:1) to the one who is terrified over their sins; by hearing and receiving the gospel, salvific faith is graciously and patiently kindled in their heart.

A typical Lutheran response to our main question is thus: the biblical language about sin and judgment indeed is too condemnatory

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<sup>37</sup> An interesting exercise in reflecting further around these three uses of the law may be to seek to apply them to some of the examples offered in Part A above.

<sup>38</sup> Wisløff, *Jag vet på vem jag tror*, 88f.

<sup>39</sup> Wisløff, 90f.

when our attention is one-sidedly directed to the law and its requirements, since the law accuses us and does not bring salvation, although it prepares the way for salvation (*the pedagogical use of the law*). Now, the alternative way of salvation through the gospel does not result in condemnation; instead, God here mercifully and patiently deals with human sins by the righteousness of Christ (Rom 3:21–31, 10:4; 2 Cor 5:21), the gifts of faith (Acts 10:43, Eph 2:8, Rom 6:23), and the Spirit (John 20:22; Acts 2; Rom 7:6, 8:9–11; 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 3:2), and by the means of grace—the believer’s continuous use of word and sacrament.<sup>40</sup>

The proper distinction between law and gospel is key to Lutheran soteriology.<sup>41</sup> However, both law and gospel need to be proclaimed. In the law God confronts me, as one who is my opposite, with difficult, convicting questions: “Adam! Eve! Where are you (Gen 3:9)? Where is your brother (Gen 4:9)? Such questions convict me; what I am not conscious of comes into the light.” God speaks in two different ways to human beings, through the law in which he speaks words of conviction against me, in the gospel in which he speaks for me. “The gospel is thus a ‘different Word,’ a second Word of God, which cannot be merged with the word of the law.”<sup>42</sup>

According to Lutheran teaching, God’s law, in its pedagogical function, thus deals with our sins by accusing us, whereas the gospel, grounded in Christ’s righteousness, patiently and forgivingly embraces all believers, despite their many defects and struggles with sin.

In sum, scriptural language of sin and judgment used in relation to God’s law has a natural place in Lutheran theological discourse, whether with regard to the law’s civil–punishing, pedagogic–accusatory (emphasized above), or didactic function. It expresses divine truth and the truth of sinful human beings, and it begins telling us who God is—righteous, patient and loving. The gospel, as a second Word of God, depends on it.

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<sup>40</sup> Wisløff, 92f.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Walther, *Proper Distinction*.

<sup>42</sup> Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 61.

## **5. Consciousness of Sin—The Essential Condition for Understanding Christianity: Søren Kierkegaard**

The Danish Evangelical-Lutheran thinker Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) occupies himself much with the notion of sin, not the least as an epistemological category, echoing Luther on the noetic effects of the fall. For Kierkegaard, a true description of the divine-human relationship thus always needs accounting for regarding this present human predicament—that we are sinners. According to Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Climacus, a human being is “in the state of, or is, untruth,”<sup>43</sup> and so radically in that state that she is incapable of acquiring the truth, unless the possibility is given her by Christ, “the God-in-time.”<sup>44</sup> Again, as in Part A above, a necessary distinction between ignorant, unforgiven sinners and forgiven believers emerges at the heart of this discussion.

Human beings who are not yet in a personal relationship with God through faith in Christ—the God-in-time—are still in untruth and hence do not have the capacity to judge in matters relating to God, truth, and salvation (John 3:19, Rom 3:11). Since it is not clear to human beings what sin or divine judgment is, as they are in untruth, this needs to be revealed (cf. John 16:8). Whatever God chooses to reveal that pertains to judgment and sin is thus made known the way God, in his supreme freedom, chooses to reveal it, mainly through the God-man, Jesus Christ, as the center of scriptural revelation.

Furthermore, as Kierkegaard highlights the terrifying individual experience of encountering God’s judgment over human sinfulness there is only one way out of the dilemma, from the human point of view, namely, total honesty on the part of the individual who encounters God: “to confess honestly before God where he is, so that he still might worthily accept the grace that is offered to every imperfect person—that is, to everyone.”<sup>45</sup>

Kierkegaard (through his pseudonym Anti-Climacus) now makes a very interesting observation that directly relates to this essay’s topic:

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<sup>43</sup> N. H. Søe, “Anthropology,” in *Kierkegaard and Human Values, Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana*, vol. 7, ed. George E. Arbaugh, Niels Thulstrup, Marie Mikulová Thulstrup (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels Boghandel, 1980), 27.

<sup>44</sup> Søe, “Anthropology,” in *Kierkegaard*.

<sup>45</sup> Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University, 1991), 67.

The consciousness of sin is the essential condition for understanding Christianity. This is the very proof of Christianity's being the highest religion. No other religion has given such a profound and lofty expression of our significance—that we are sinners.<sup>46</sup>

So, to come back to our question, the Christian biblical language about sin and judgment is essential to Christian faith and rightly condemnatory, since ignorant, unforgiven human beings are not only in untruth, but are there by their own fault, having imprisoned themselves, and brought upon themselves unfreedom and guilt before God, thus having deserved God's wrath.<sup>47</sup> For believers, too, as we have seen, the law has an accusatory function, mainly in a pedagogical sense, in accordance with the Lutheran reading of Galatians 3:24, "the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith," thus pointing us and leading us to Christ, "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rom 10:4).

## **6. On Enjoying Less Than the Fullness of Human Life: Robert Kolb**

A quotation from the American Lutheran theologian Robert Kolb will round off our discussion:

God is, according to the portion of the text of the Decalogue that Luther excerpts for his "close of the commandments" a "jealous" God. That is, God's love for his human creatures is so intense that he will not tolerate anything that harms or damages the human creature's enjoyment of the humanity God created for us. For God wants his people to turn their hearts and thus the orientation of their entire life, to him alone. Such is his love for us because only in him can we find the ultimate peace and joy that typifies Eden, the Shalom that is the perfect ordering of our lives for the fullness of the peace and joy that gives us every blessing and benefit.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, Kolb concludes, anything that trashes any part of our being human arouses God's wrath. God makes that clear throughout the Scriptures in order to recall people to him, to the

loving and trusting relationship that is the good human life. This is evidence of God's deepest love for those whom he created for conversation and community

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<sup>46</sup> Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 68.

<sup>47</sup> Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University, 1985), 15 and 17.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Kolb, private email conversation, May 26th, 2017.

with himself. A picture of God that suggests that he is indifferent to us when we are enjoying less than the fullness of human life is an ugly picture of him.<sup>49</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks**

We began this article by making a vital distinction in Part A: There is a difference between the believer and the unbeliever, and this difference is vital in dealing with human sin and sins. The Bible has much to say to both and is therefore relevant to both groups of people. Rather than being too condemnatory to patiently deal with human sins, it is the only medium through which the remedy for human sins is communicated. According to Lutheran teaching, that medium is the scriptural word of God either alone or as effective in the sacraments. The Bible’s language of sin and judgment is, therefore, not too condemnatory to patiently deal with human sins, as it is set in the context of the revelation of the gospel.

In Part B, the following Lutheran emphases were unpacked as we further explored our question:

1. God does not want any condemnation, or anyone to perish, but wants all to come to repentance (2 Pet 3:9);
2. *Sin* properly means something culpable and condemned by God unless there is forgiveness;
3. The heart of the gospel is portrayed against the backdrop of accumulating human sins, God’s wrath and judgment—all necessary for understanding and appropriating the good news;
4. God’s law in its pedagogical function deals with our sins by accusing us, whereas the gospel, grounded in God’s righteousness, patiently and forgivingly embraces all believers, despite their many defects and struggles with sin;
5. The consciousness of sin is the essential condition for understanding Christianity.

The way out of the dilemma of encountering God’s judgment over human sinfulness is total honesty and confession before God on the part of the individual, in order that they might worthily accept the grace that is offered to every imperfect person—that is to everyone.

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<sup>49</sup> Kolb, private email conversation, May 26th, 2017.

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