

The Doctrine of the Great Confusion or “Just What is Sin, Anyway?”

A Discussion of Unrighteousness, Sin, Trespass and Transgression in the New Testament

by Garland H. Shinn

Introduction

Many people think that every bad thing a person does is a sin. They sincerely believe that every bad thought, deed, and mistake is a sin. Often this view results in feelings of guilt such that these people, attempting to please God, spend much time confessing sins, that in reality are not sins at all. This is probably the result of the misinterpretation of 1 John 5:17, which is translated in the common versions to say, “All unrighteousness is sin.”

Compounding the problem is the fact that the word “sin” is often defined as “missing the mark.” Even some well-known theologians have taken this as the definition, which is probably derived from the fact that the Greek word *hamartia* (sin), at one time actually did carry the idea of an archer missing his target. It is compounded by the fact that many lexicons (Abbott-Smith and Thayer, for instance) define the word as missing the mark.¹ Even R. C. Trench, a lexicographer of great ability, falls into this error.² However, by New Testament times this meaning had dropped out, even in secular use, and no New Testament reader would have attached “missing the mark” to the Greek word. The New Testament writers took an old word with a variety of meanings, going back into the history of the Greek language some hundreds of years, and gave it a distinct definition that can only be understood from their writings. Hence, we look to New Testament usage to determine the meaning of this important word.

The New Testament uses the word “sin” in three distinct ways: 1) acts of sin, 2) the principle of indwelling sin, and 3) sin guilt. This paper will only deal in detail with sin acts.

The Nature of the Problem

As mentioned above in connection with 1 John 5:17, one of the major problems in dealing with this Bible doctrine is the problem of English translation. If one compares various versions of the English Bible one will see that the word normally translated *unrighteousness* (*adikia*) is sometimes translated *sin* (as though it were *hamartia*), and is even translated *trespass* (*paraptoma*). Sometimes the word normally translated *trespass* is translated *sin*, as is the word best translated *transgression*. To the student of the English Bible such a variety of translations is confusing at best, as each of the Greek words is distinct in meaning.

The apostolic authors of the New Testament *never* confused these important doctrinal words. A thorough examination of the words *in the original Greek text* of the New Testament shows a totally consistent use of the terms. This should not surprise the believer who holds that the Bible is the Word of God and is intended to communicate absolute spiritual truth to the individual in a specific and accurate way.

The author has attempted to provide a consistent presentation of these words as used in Scripture. He has examined many sources, lexicons, and word studies of others. Each passage in which each of the words are used in the original text of the Bible has been studied thoroughly in the original languages, and in each place a consideration of the historical, cultural and linguistic context of the passage has been observed.

While the author is grateful to all who have written and spoken on this subject and have influenced his conclusions, the responsibility for any errors or oversights are his alone.

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Overall Term – Unrighteousness – adikia (SN 93).³ See also SN 91, 92, 94.

Something is unrighteous which is considered wrong from the divine point of view, because it does not conform to what is right as compared to God’s actions which arise from His character, whether in thought, word, deed, or nature. Sins and trespasses are *kinds of unrighteousness*.

John 7:18; Romans 1:18;29; 6:13; 9:14; 2 Thessalonians 2:10, 12; 2 Peter 2:13; 1 John 1:9; 5:17.

Adikia, unrighteousness, is the opposite of *dikaios*, righteousness, which in turn is related to *dike*, meaning right, just. *Dike* originally meant *manner* or *tendency*. Gradually it became the designation for the “rightness” established by custom or usage. In ancient secular use, “right” then, was whatever was established by normal custom. This word does not occur in the New Testament.

Dikaios refers to that which is conformable to the right, or which pertains to the right, just. “The fundamental idea is that of a state or condition conformable to order.”⁴ Cremer, page 185.

The distinction between the secular Greek usage of the word *dikaos* and the biblical usage arises from the different standards by which the idea of righteousness, or justice, is estimated. In the secular world, usage and custom formed the basis of right. In the Bible, the standard of right is God, which is expressed by His actions arising out of His righteous character.

1. Unrighteousness and sin share characteristics (1 John 5:17, all unrighteousness is sin). Confusion is caused by the English translation which seems to equate *unrighteousness* and *sin*. However, in the original language this is not the case. The Greek construction is anarthrous, that is, it omits the article before *both* nouns, *unrighteousness* and *sin*. Consequently, one cannot say that every act of unrighteousness is an act of sin. This interpretation would require an articular (with the article) construction for both nouns. The anarthrous construction indicates characteristics are shared between them. The passage is teaching that both are wrong, though the narrower term, sin, has specific meaning and application in the immediate context.
2. Since there are characteristics common to both unrighteousness and sin, the Bible speaks of unrighteousness bringing guilt and penalty (Romans 1:28).
3. Like sin (1 John 1:5) unrighteousness requires cleansing (1 John 1:9). This is because sin is a kind of unrighteousness, and therefore shares the “wrongness” of unrighteousness. Such acts of wrongness cause the doer to be considered dirty (positionally) in the sight of God.

All unrighteous acts cause the perpetrator to be considered dirty in God’s eyes. Therefore the Lord must cleanse the individual before consistent fellowship can be shared between the believer and God.

Specific Terms – Aspects of Unrighteousness

Trespass

The word trespass refers to an offense. The Greek word is *paraptoma* (SN 3900). See also SN 3895.

A personal violation of the of God’s standards of righteousness, either by mistake or on purpose. Consequently, trespass causes irreconcilable differences between the perpetrator and the one offended.

Derived from *para*, alongside, and *pipto*, to fall, the word can have both moral and non-moral connotations. In the LXX⁵ it was used of an act that resulted in a ruined relationship between God and Israel (Ezek. 15:8; 22:4). In the papyri⁶ it is used of a man who mistakenly overstays the time he had intended to spend in his orchard.⁷ Trench refers to its use by Philo where a man who reached a particular level of godliness and virtue fell back into a prior state.⁸

In the New Testament it means to fall away as in being at fault, either through willful activity or by mistake. In several contexts it indicates that which disrupts personal relations. Hebrews 6:6 refers to

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falling away from God. In Romans 11:11 Paul uses it of Israel’s rejection of Christ. And it is trespass which requires reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Trespass is, therefore, either an intentional or unintentional unrighteous act that severs personal relationships, causes an offense, and so produces the need for reconciliation. As such, it can *include sin* in some contexts and *exclude sin* in others. In other words, trespasses and sins are not identical.

Matthew 6:14;15; 18:35. Romans 4:25; 5:16, 16, 17,18,20; 2 Corinthians 5:19; Galatians 6:1; Ephesians 1:7; 2:1,5; Colossians 2:13; James 5:16.

Sin

The Greek word for sin is *hamartia* (SN 266) See also SN 264, 265, 268.

In simplest terms, sin is a willful violation of a known requirement. Technically, sin is acting as if the requirement does not exist - 1 John 3:4, “The sin is the lawlessness.” The word lawlessness is *anomia*. As we shall see, it means to ignore the requirement (see below).

In Homeric Greek, *hamartia* occasionally referred to “missing the mark” in a non-moral sense. However, the biblical meaning carries with it *different parameters* as defined by statements in Scripture. In the Bible, sin does not mean to miss the mark, which is too broad a statement, and is actually the meaning of a different Greek word (see below, *astochēō*). No competent theologian today holds that sin is missing the mark, though, sadly, it is commonly taught. This involves the “etymological fallacy” where meanings of words are taken from previous use that was no longer practiced in New Testament times. (See 4. below under mistakes concerning sin.)

There is a kind, or quality, of sin without law (Romans 2:12; 5:13), but it could not be designated lawlessness (*anomia*), and does not refer to sin acts in the Pauline sense of the word. “Thus the Gentiles, not having a law...might be charged with sin; but they, sinning without law...could not be charged with *anomia*.”⁹ Therefore, when there is no law of any kind, acts which would otherwise be considered sin acts cannot be imputed. In the current age, since we do have a *kind of law* (though we are not *under any kind of law* as to penalty) it is possible for a person to sin in the sense of *anomia* (1 John 3:4).

At this point we must affirm that word translated sin in the Old Testament is not identical to the Greek word for sin in the New Testament. The Hebrew word normally translated sin is *chata*, which is used for both natural and moral acts. It includes the idea of mistakes, which *hamartia* does not.¹⁰ If the action described by *chata* is moral, the nature of the action, whether intentional or not, is indicated by the context, or by some description associated with the act. For example, Leviticus 4:2 indicates sin through ignorance, and therefore unintentional. Only when the word *chata* refers to a willful act of disobedience to a known requirement can it be designated sin in the sense of *hamartia* as used by John and Paul in the New Testament.

In the New Testament *hamartia* (sin) is for the first time always associated with guilt and is thus always originates in willful intention. It never refers to mistaken action in general or sinning in ignorance. It never refers to a missing the mark, or a failure to reach a goal because of weakness or ignorance. It is a determined effort to resist the goal, even to ignoring it. It is an active opposition to the divinely revealed requirement, and acting as though that requirement does not exist.

Mistakes concerning the definition of sin:

- 1) The mistaken idea that every wrong act is sin. Scripture is clear that sin must be a willful and knowledgeable act, and cannot be performed by mistake. An act of sin is a very specific kind of unrighteous behavior, which is what makes it so terrible.

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- 2) The mistaken idea that unrighteous thoughts are acts of sin. James makes it clear that the lust that comes out of the heart (mind) precedes the act of sin, and is therefore not the act of sin itself. Scripture knows nothing of “mental attitude sins.”¹¹ Nor are feelings sin.

¹⁴ But each person is tempted by being lured out and being enticed¹² by his own lusts. ¹⁵ Then the lust, having conceived, gives birth to sin, and the sin, having come to fullness, gives birth to death. (James 1:14, 15. My translation.)

The distinction between the mental attitude of lust and the act of sin is clear. Lust precedes sin, and gives birth to sin, but it is not sin. Lusts do come under the heading of temptation, but the temptation can be biblically overcome by applying the grace solution. Note Galatians 5:16:

But I say: Walk by the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.

The “not” here is emphatic. If one is walking by the Spirit, he cannot fulfill (commit) the lust of the flesh. For further information on this topic, see the author’s work, *Grace and the Enemies of the Believer*.

- 3) Associated with the above error is the mistaken idea that a person’s unrighteous dreams should be confessed (1 John 1:9) because they are acts of sins. The author heard a preacher present the idea that if a person’s dreams were of a sexual nature that that person should confess that dream because he was guilty of sin. Such a view is based on both errors 1 and 2 above. A person has no control over his dreams (number 1 above) and a sin is an act (or violation of a requirement, sometimes by failing to perform it) not a thought. While unrighteous dreams certainly have their origin in the fallen sinful nature, they are not acts of sin, and are best forgotten.
- 4) The mistaken idea that sin is simply “missing the mark” has caused much confusion.¹³ Some give the illustration of an archer aiming at a target and missing the mark, which was used some hundreds of years before the writing of the New Testament as one of the meanings of *hamartia*. This is an example of an anachronistic use of a word that had changed meanings from its ancient use. Furthermore, such an idea is misleading. It assumes that the individual who sins is aiming, but simply missed. Therefore, the idea of “missing the mark” sometimes is understood to mean that a person can be attempting to do right, and simply make a mistake and miss the mark. Such an act is not an act of sin, as a sin is knowing what the mark is, and acting as if it does not exist. Yes, a person who sins “misses the mark” in some sense, but he does so willfully and knowingly. Furthermore, such a definition confuses the word *hamartia*, sin, with *astocheo*, missing a mark (see letter “N” below).

John 16:8,9; Romans 3:9; 3:20; 5:12,20; 6:1,2; 7:5,7,8,9; 14:23; 1 Corinthians 15:3; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Ephesians 2:1; James 1:15; 4:17; 1 John 1:9; 2:2; 12; 3:4; 5:17.

Transgression

The Greek word for transgression is *parabasis* (SN 3847) See also SN 3848.

A transgression is a violation of a law *under which* an individual operates.¹⁴ Transgression is specifically a legal term, and can only occur when a person is *under law*, and the law carries with it a specific stated penalty for violation. “There must be something to transgress, before there can be a transgression.... With law came for the first time the possibility of the transgression of law (Romans iv. 15).”¹⁵

In a spatial sense, *parabasis* means to step over a boundary. It was always used with reference to divine or human statutes or ordinances. The word is rare in the New Testament because it is related to being under a forensic requirement, and the believer is expressly said not to be under law (Romans 6:14).

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By definition, *parabasis* is an unrighteous act that crosses over a divinely appointed restriction that is legally binding and strictly enforced with penalty. Therefore, the following may be said to be true:

1. There is no transgression without forensic law (Romans 4:15).¹⁶
2. Sin is only transgression when there is a forensic law being violated (Galatians 3:19).
3. Transgression can occur without sin in the New Testament sense of *hamartia* (1 Timothy 2:14). This is possible because it is possible to violate an unknown law. One has transgressed in doing so, but since it is unknown to the transgressor, the person has not sinned. Transgression carries penalty, whether a person knows the law or not. In modern terms, people are under civil law with reference to the political entities which govern them. In biblical terms, God is applying no forensic law today, because the Lord Jesus paid the penalty for violations of God’s forensic law. Therefore:
4. The believer cannot transgress today because he is not under a forensic law (Romans 6:14; 8:1).

Romans 2:23; 4:15; 5:14; Galatians 3:19; 1Timothy 2:14.

Lawlessness

Lawlessness the Greek word *anomia* (SN 458). See also SN 459.

Anomia is derived from the Greek word *nomos*, law, with the alpha privative attached as a prefix. Alpha privative (*a*) simply changes a positive to a negative, such as un- in words like unworthy. So the root meaning is “no law.” In use, however, it goes beyond the simple “no law” idea. It came to mean “acting as if there were no law.” The person who is lawless is not free from law, which requirements he has, but performs his acts without regard to the law, and therefore violates it at his own convenience.

Sadly, the KJV translates 1 John 3:4, “*Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law.*” However, as presented above, the word transgression is a technical term in the Bible that can be applied only to *forensic law*, that is, law with penalty attached. It is not used in 1 John 3:4, where it is a mistranslation of *anomia*, lawlessness. It would be correct to say that when a person knowingly and willfully transgresses a forensic law, he is sinning. **However, there are other kinds of law besides forensic law which cannot be transgressed.**

Today, a Christian is not under law. One of the parameters of not being under law, but under grace, is that there is no application of penalty for the one who violates God’s righteous requirements today. That penalty was paid by Christ on the cross, which payment includes all the sins that a person did before he became a Christian, as well as any sin he might commit after he has believed and become saved. The Christian still has requirements today. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:21, he is not without law, but he is “in law”¹⁷ to Christ.

Anomia in 1 John 3:4, then, is not transgression of the law, but is disregard for any law or restraints which God has placed on the believer under grace, acting as if the restraints do not exist, although they do. Trench rightly states, “...*Anomia* is never...the condition of living without law, but always the condition or deed of one who acts contrary to law...”¹⁸ A sin act is defined by John as lawlessness, that is, acting as if the requirement does not exist when it actually does. The person who knows the requirement exists, whether it is forensic (having penalty) or not, but who acts with disregard for that requirement and thereby violates it, is sinning.

Sin is a particularly pernicious type of unrighteousness for this reason. It is what sent Christ to the cross. It is important to remember that Christ died for our sins (1 Corinthians 15:3). In this case, the plural form “sins” emphasizes that Christ died for our acts of sin,¹⁹ that is, for our lawless deeds.

Beyond its use by John in defining the word sin, we find *anomia* in various places indicating the serious nature of any violation of God’s requirement, whether under law or under grace. In the kingdom program, for instance, lawlessness is particularly emphasized. For instance, Jesus uses the word in a

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famous passage concerning the reason some will not enter the earthly kingdom at His second coming. Matthew 7:21-24 states:

Not every one who says to Me, Lord, Lord, will enter into the kingdom of the heavens, but the one who does the will of My Father in heaven. ²² Many will say to Me in that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles? ²³ And then I will confess to them, I never knew you. You go away from Me, the ones who work lawlessness!²⁰

Unfortunately, again in the KJV we have a mistaken translation. Regularly the word lawless is translated iniquity, which is not its true meaning. That translation should be reserved for the next word in our list. But please note that all four times the word *anomia* occurs in Matthew in the KJV it is translated *iniquity*. Indeed, not one time of its 15 occurrences in the New Testament does the KJV correctly translate the word! Except for 1 John 3:4, where the KJV wrongly translates it “transgression of the law,” its translation is always *iniquity* rather than *lawlessness*. Confusion abounds!

Matthew 7:23, 24:12; Romans 4:7; 2 Corinthians 6:14; 2 Thessalonians 2:7; Titus 2:14; Hebrews 1:9, 8:12; 1 John 3:4.

Iniquity

E. Iniquity – *paranomia* (SN 3892) See also SN 3891.

To go beyond the law in the sense of breaking any law or code of ethics or profession. The noun and verb forms only occur once each.

2 Peter 2:16 noun; Acts 23:3 verb.

Ungodly

F. Ungodly – *asebeia* (SN 763) See also SN 764, 765.

Withholding that which is due to God because of disrespect to His person. Notice Romans 1:18-20 where ungodliness is identified with man’s refusal to acknowledge God in the things that are made. “. . . a deliberate withholding from God of his dues of prayer and of service, a standing, so to speak, in battle array against him.”²¹

Romans 11:26; 2 Timothy 2:16; Titus 2:12; Jude 15,18.

Disobedience

G. Disobedience – *apeitheia* (SN 543) See also SN 544.

Apeitheia is obstinate refusal to believe and operate according to what God has revealed. The unbelief is self-imposed, and willful, and therefore causes an individual to be guilty. *Apeitheia* is better translated *disobedience* than *unbelief*.

Hebrews 3:18; 4:11. Ephesians 2:2; 5:6; Colossians 3:6. Verb form = Acts 14:2; 17:5; 19:9; 1 Peter 2:7,8; 3:1,20.

Evil

H. Evil – *ponēros* (SN 4190, 4191)

This adjective refers to an active malignancy which seeks conformity by others to a lack of character possessed by one’s self, that is, a conscious effort of seeking others to share in one’s own lack of character and deficiency. With the article, the adjective refers to the devil, who is *the evil one*. “...aptness to do shrewd turns, to delight in mischiefs (sic) and tragedies; a loving to trouble our neighbor and to do him ill offices....”²² R. C. Trench states, “In *ponēros* the positive activity of evil comes far more decidedly out than in *kakos*...”²³ Zodiates correctly states concerning the word, “In an act(ive) sense, evil which corrupts

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others, evil-disposed, malevolent, malignant, wicked.”²⁴ An individual may be *kakos* (see below) without attempting to influence others, but *ponēros* carries the idea of attempting to spread one’s evil.

Matthew 13:19,38; 15:19; John 3:19; 7:7; 17:15; Romans 12:9; Ephesians 5:16; 6:13, 16; Colossians 1:21; 1 Thessalonians 5:22; 2 Timothy 3:13; 4:18; 1 John 2:13,14; 3:12; 5:18,19; Revelation 16:2.

Evil (bad)

I. Evil – *kakos* (SN 2556) See also SN 2557, 2559, 2560, 2561.

A passive malignancy, lack of worth or that which produces harm. Absence of good in the sense of something not measuring up to what it should be, though not inducing others to share in its worthless character. Used in Homeric Greek of tattered garments and of a physician “wanting in the skill which physicians should possess.... [But by the New Testament era] the word had taken on a stronger meaning. The *kakos* may be content to perish in his own corruption, but the *ponēros* is not content unless he is corrupting others as well, and drawing them into the same destruction with himself.”²⁵ Most commonly, *kakos* is the opposite of *agathos*, meaning good in the sense of beneficial. Occasionally, it is the opposite of *kalos* meaning good in the sense of beautiful or attractive.

Matthew 24:48; Mark 7:21; Acts 16:28; Romans 7:19,21; 9:11; 13:3,4,10; 1 Corinthians 15:33; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Hebrews 5:14; James 1:13.

Worthless

J. Bad, worthless – *phaulos* (SN 5337)

That which does not contribute, such as ground that does not bring forth fruit, useless. “But there are words in most languages, and *phaulos* is one of them, which contemplate evil under another aspect, not so much that either of active or passive malignity, but rather of its good-for-nothingness, the impossibility of any true gain ever coming forth from it”.²⁶

John 3:20; 5:29; Titus 2:8; James 3:16.

Blasphemy

K. Blasphemy – *blasphēmia* (SN 988) See also SN 987, 989.

A statement or accusation concerning God and His word that attributes to Him things He has not done, or attributing to others what is true of God alone.

Matthew 12:31; Mark 2:7; John 10:33; Ephesians 4:31; Colossians 3:8; Jude 9.

Insubordinate

L. Insubordinate – *anupotaktos* (SN 506) See also SN 5293, from which this adjective is derived.

Refusal to comply with arrangements made by an authority. Derived from the idea of being in rank beneath, or subordinate to, someone in authority, but acting contrary to that subordinate position.

1 Timothy 1:9; Titus 1:6; 10; Hebrews 2:8.

Unclean (Common)

M. Unclean, common – *koinos* (SN 2839) See also SN 2840, 2841, 2842, 2843, 2844.

Refers to ceremonial uncleanness, and therefore to being unusable by God. “The ceremonially unclean was in fact more and more breaking down the barrier which divided it from that which was morally unclean...”²⁷ By the New Testament era the moral rather than ceremonial force was taking over.

Mark 7:2; Acts 2:44; 4:32; 10:14,28; 11:8; Romans 14:14; Hebrews 10:29. See also *Matthew 15:11,18,20; Acts 10:15; 11:9; 21:28* for use of the verb form *koinoo*.

Err (Miss the Mark)

N. Err, swerve – *astochēō* (795)

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To miss the mark. Related to *stoichos*, a word not used in the New Testament. *Stoichos* means “aim.” This word must not be confused with the word *hamartia*, sin. They do not mean the same thing, and sin should never be defined as missing the mark.

1 Timothy 1:6; 6:21; 2 Timothy 2:18

Lead Astray, Error

O. Lead astray – *planaō* (SN 4105); Error – *planē* (SN 4106) See also SN 4107, 4108.

The verb form *planaō* means to lead astray, cause to wander. The English word “planet,” meaning wanderer, comes from this Greek verb.

Matthew 18:12,13; 24:4,5,11,24; 1 Corinthians 6:9; Galatians 6:7; 2 Timothy 3:13; Titus 3:3; Hebrews 3:10; James 1:16; 5:19; 1 Peter 2:25; 1 John 1:8; 2:26; 3:7; Revelation 12:9.

The noun form *planē* means an error, that which is done as the result of being lead astray or deceived, believing a lie, or wandering from the correct path.

Matthew 27:64; Romans 1:27; Ephesians 4:14; 1 Thessalonians 2:3; 2 Thessalonians 2:11; 2 Peter 2:18; Jude 11.

Deception

P. Deception – *apatē* (SN 539) See also SN 538.

To be fooled into making incorrect decisions based on wrong information.

Matthew 13:22; Mark 4:19; Ephesians 4:22; Colossians 2:8; 2 Thessalonians 2:10; Hebrews 3:13; 2 Peter 2:13.

Idolatry

Q. Idolatry – *eidolatria* (SN 1495) See also SN 1496, 1497, 1494, 1493.

Putting something before God in the sense of making sacrificial worship to or for it. Originally it referred to bowing down and/or sacrificing to man-made gods, but in the New Testament it has broadened its meaning to include sacrificing in order to gain that which desirable. Such sacrifice takes the believer away from the correct spiritual sacrifices he should be making to God.

1 Corinthians 10:14; Galatians 3:20; Colossians 3:5; 1 Peter 4:3.

See also Acts 7:41; 1 Corinthians 8:4; 10:19 where the word *eidolon* (SN 1497) is used.

Summary Presentations

The following charts are a presentation of the various words for unrighteousness, trespass, sin, and transgression. The definitions are necessarily brief and it is not the purpose to present here a complete doctrine of unrighteousness. The serious student would do well to study carefully the passages cited.

The Four Major Words Relating to Wrong Doing – A Summary & Comparison

Unrighteousness – Any act or attitude that is not consistent with the righteous attribute of God, including both ethical and non-ethical considerations, whether known by the offender or not.

Trespass – Any act or attitude that violates a standard set and expressed by God, whether known by the offender or not – Romans 5:20.

Sin – Any supposed act of iniquity (lawlessness) entered into knowingly and willfully by an individual – 1 John 3:4.

Transgression – A forensic violation of a specific law, whether known or not – Romans 4:15, 1 Timothy 2:14.

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Sin and Unrighteousness

Psalm 111:3 – God is eternally righteous. *Unrighteousness* is an absolute, and is the direct opposite of God’s attribute of righteousness.

Romans 14:23 – Sin is not an absolute because it is based on what a person believes to be right, whether it is a violation of God’s absolute righteousness or not. Some Christians have shied away from this meaning because they associate it with moral relativism, a view promoted by confusing sin and unrighteousness. However, Scripture is clear. An act which is morally unrighteous is only imputed as sin when the individual knows that the act is unrighteous and decides to ignore the standard God has set. Sin, therefore, is acting if there is no requirement, when one knows that there is, which makes sin willful.

James 4:17 – Sin is not an absolute because it requires that one know what is good, and does not do it. This is not to be taken as a “sin of omission,” but as knowledgeably doing what is the opposite of good.

1 John 5:17 – Not every act of unrighteousness is an act of sin. This verse teaches that *every kind* of unrighteousness characterizes sin. (Both nouns are without the Greek article, therefore sin and unrighteousness cannot be identified. They are distinct, but share a quality of wrongness.)

1 John 1:9 – Every believer should confess sin (a willful known violation). Not only is sin forgiven, but every kind of unrighteousness is cleansed. Confessing (*homologeō*) consists of agreeing with God that a specific unrighteous act committed knowingly and willfully is an act of sin.

Sin and Trespass

Romans 5:12, James 1:15 – Sin produces physical death.

Romans 5:17 – Trespass produces physical death. A trespass is a sin when the violation is an act of known lawlessness.

Ephesians 2:1 – Both trespasses and sins are the basis for spiritual death (true of both the elect in the unsaved state as well as the non-elect.)

Ephesians 1:7 – Redemption consists, in part, of the forgiveness of trespasses. That is to say that the consequences for committing trespasses, physical death, has been removed.

Colossians 1:14 – Redemption consists, in part, of the forgiveness of sins. That is, the consequences of committing sins, physical death, has been removed.

Galatians 6:1 – The correct response to a trespass (an error) on the part of another is restoration.

1 John 1:9 – The correct response to an act of sin is confession.

Romans 4:25 – Jesus was delivered up because of our trespasses (note passive voice, and causal relationship).

1 Corinthians 15:3 – Jesus died for our sins.

Conclusions:

1. Trespasses and sins are both wrong. Trespasses includes faults not known, while sins do not. All sins are trespasses, but not all trespasses are sins. In other words, a person may not know when he trespasses, but he will always know when he sins.
2. Both trespasses and sins are the basis for physical death.
3. The believer’s response to trespass as mistake or error is different than his response to sin.
4. Christ’s work in redemption dealt with both trespasses and sins.

Sin and Transgression

Romans 4:15 – Transgression occurs only where law is in force with penalty attached. Therefore, an individual must be “under law” in order to commit a transgression. Transgression is a technical term that

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is limited to certain conditions. While an individual may commit transgression against the laws of the country in which he is living (or against the laws of the state, county, or city in which he lives) the believer cannot transgress God’s law today, since he is forensically freed from that law. The New Testament requirements, or laws, are non-forensic, and carry no penalty.

1 John 3:4 – Sin occurs when an individual acts as if there is no requirement when the person knows and understands the requirement.

Conclusions:

1. There can be no transgression today, because the believer is under grace and not under law, and, therefore, no forensic penalty is attached to wrong doing. The term “under law” means that the individual uses law in order to gain the acceptance of the law giver. If the individual violates the law, the law giver finds the individual guilty and applies a penalty. The quality of law in an “under law” program is forensic, i.e. it has a penalty attached.
2. The term “under grace” does not mean that the individual has no law. It means that he is not under law as a means to please the law giver. Under grace the individual’s ability to keep the requirement is provided for him by the Holy Spirit. The believer must learn to apply grace procedures (Romans 6; Colossians 3; Galatians 5) in order to not violate the requirement. The quality of law under grace is *non-forensic*, i. e. it has no punishment attached (Romans 8:1ff).
3. While believers today are not *under* any quality of law, they have non-forensic requirement (requirements that, when violated, produce no condemnation), and therefore it is possible to commit acts of sin.
4. An act of sin is not a transgression of the law (an error based on the mistaken translation of 1 John 3:4) which carries forensic penalty, but a willful violation of a known requirement placed upon an individual either by God or by himself.

Three Uses of the Word Sin in the New Testament

As a quick summary, we provide the following:

Sin acts – 1 Corinthians 15:3; 1 John 1:9; Romans 5:20; Romans 6:14, 15; James 1:14, 15 – An act of sin is a willful violation of a known requirement, produced by the individual’s strong desire (lust). Sin acts ultimately are the cause of physical death.

Sin guilt – Romans 5:12-19 – All mankind is counted guilty of the sin of Adam. While there can be no sin where there is no law, a kind of sin, Adamic sin guilt, is passed on to all men. As a result, all die physically, including those who have not sinned personally, such as infants.

Sin principle – Romans 5:21-6:13, 16; Galatians 5:16-21 – The sin principal, also called the sin nature, is the human nature in its depraved state. Also called *the flesh*, the sin principle produces specific kinds of unrighteous activity known as *the works of the flesh*.

Conclusion

Unrighteousness, trespass, sin and transgression are to be distinguished in order to understand the New Testament truths concerning the doctrine of wrong-doing. Today the individual believer is under a grace system to avoid acts of sin. However, when an act of sin occurs the believer must confess that act before the road to the restoration of fellowship can be entered.

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End Notes

- 1 This may be in part because the well received German lexicographer Philip Karl Buttmann supposed *hamartia* to be derived from the word *meiromai*, meaning to miss. This was pure conjecture, and cannot be proven. This conjecture can be found in Buttmann's monumental work entitled *Lexilogus: Or, A Critical Examination of the Meaning and Etymology of Numerous Greek Works and Passages Intended Principally for Homer and Hesiod*. Even if it could be proven, it does not speak to the meaning of the word used in the New Testament. To insist on this etymological approach is fallacy. Word meanings are determined by use, and while their etymology may give some insight to the mind of the user, it cannot be used to determine such meanings.
- 2 R. C. Trench. *Synonyms of the New Testament*. (Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Mass.) 1989, pg. 256.
- 3 The numbers associated with each word are Strong's numbers (SN), regularly used to identify the Greek and Hebrew words to the student who has not studied those languages. See *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*.
- 4 H. Cremer. *Biblio-Theological Lexicon of the N. T.* Third English Edition, T. & T. Clark, page 185.
- 5 The LXX is the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures.
- 6 The papyri are documents written on papyrus, an ancient writing material made from a reed that grows along rivers and streams. "The papyri" as used in word studies refers mainly to secular documents that were produced in ancient times. The vocabulary of these documents written in Greek overlaps greatly the New Testament vocabulary. Often, the NT writers used secular terms, but raised their meaning to conform to the doctrines God wanted presented. Thus the word "righteous" means in secular Greek a somewhat different thing than in the New Testament Scriptures.
- 7 James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament, Illustrated from the Papyri and other Non-literary Sources*, (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publish Company, Grand Rapids) 1930, 489.
- 8 Trench, pg. 260.
- 9 Trench, 228.
- 10 The fact that *hamartia* did historically include errors and mistakes does not mean that the New Testament writers used it that way. Ancient use in no way proves current use, and since the New Testament writers were in agreement with what *hamartia* actually meant, we are limited to their use to understand its definition.
- 11 Even Dr. Ryrie falls into this error on page 215 of his *Basic Theology*. He gives Luke 12:13-15 and Matthew 20:20-22 as proof texts for mental attitude sins. However, neither of these passages uses the word sin to describe the spiritual condition of the context. Dr. Ryrie has fallen into the error that all unrighteous *attitudes* and *thoughts* are acts of sin.
- 12 *Lured out* and *enticed* are both words taken from hunting and fishing. The word enticed is derived from the word for bait. Both are passive participles.
- 13 See opening comments under "Introduction."
- 14 To be "under law" in the Romans 6 and Galatians 5 sense means to be in a situation where one can be held accountable for violating the law by paying the penalty. While all human beings are under law in a political sense, God has eliminated the "under law" situation for believers in the spiritual sense. Also, to be under law means that a person must keep the law through their own effort. Today the believer is under grace, which means that God provides the means of keeping the requirement God places on Christians apart from any effort on their part. A correct understanding of Romans 6 and Colossians 3 will lead a believer to apply grace techniques to avoid sinning.
- 15 Trench, pages 228, 229.

End Notes

- 16 Forensic law is law with penalty attached. Other *kinds* of law do not have penalty attached, and cannot therefore be considered in the same category as forensic law.
- 17 Many English versions have “under law to Christ,” which is an horrendous translation. The Greek does not use the preposition “under,” but the preposition “in.” This is a locative of sphere, and refers to the relationship of the believer today to God’s requirements. He is “in law” because he is within the New Testament sphere of authority. The New Testament epistles have many unrighteous acts that are forbidden, but with grace provision attached which enables a believer under the power of the indwelling Spirit to overcome those unrighteous acts. It is not the believer who works, but the Spirit who works in him.
- 18 Trench, 228.
- 19 This is not to say that the singular word “sin” cannot refer to an act of sin, but that the plural always refers to acts of sin. The singular form of the word can also refer to either the principle of indwelling sin (Romans 7:17), or sin guilt (Romans 5:12).
- 20 Translation mine.
- 21 Trench, page 227.
- 22 Jeremy Taylor, quoted by Trench, pg. 330.
- 23 Trench, pg. 330.
- 24 Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*. (AMG Publishers, Chattanooga) 1992, pg. 1198.
- 25 Trench, pg. 329.
- 26 Trench, pg. 331.
- 27 Trench, page 352.