

Have you ever met someone who sees sin in every thing and every one? I was in Columbus last week giving a talk, and was speaking with a friend who'd grown up in the Nazarene tradition. **His grandparents and parents are religiously rigid, which has been somewhat awkward, because he's become more open as he's aged.** But he's a very amiable man and can laugh about it. He told me about growing up never being able to do anything or go anywhere because his parents thought everything was a sin that Satan was lurking just outside their door ready to lead them away from Jesus and send them to hell. **When he was a teenager, the movie theater in his little town showed an R-rated movie, which he wanted to go see with his friends.** He asked his parents if he could go, and they said certainly not. Then he told them R stood for "religious" and they let him go.

When we were last together, I spoke about the two Christianities in our midst. One Christianity sees sin in every direction it looks. Even the most innocent newborn child is tainted by sin. **Augustine called it *original sin*.** He believed that as a consequence of Adam's sin, we were born with a hereditary stain and deserving of hell. **Not because of any evil we might have committed, but simply because we were descendants of Adam, the original sinner.**

Of course, if you believe the story of Adam and Eve isn't literally true, then you might ask, "How can something that never happened, done by two people who never lived, have an effect on us today?"

But if you ask that question, be careful where you ask it. The doctrine of original sin has been a core principle of the Christian tradition for centuries. People have grown attached to it. If you grew up Catholic like me, you heard the term *original sin* often. **That term isn't used as much in Protestant circles, but the concept is very much a part of our theological history.** Have you ever been told that "all have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God?" (Romans 3:23) Have you ever been told "there is no one righteous, no, not one?" (Romans 3:10) Or that "sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned?" (Romans 5:12) **Out of all the verses in the Bible, isn't it interesting the Church focused on those when describing human nature?** If a parent fed that spiritual diet to their children, drumming it into their heads day after day, we could call that parent unfit. With the doctrine of original sin, the Church created one of the most pessimistic and warped view of human nature ever devised. **Original sin is such an**

absurd notion I wouldn't bother to talk about it, except it continues to exert a powerful and harmful influence on many, many people.

This contemptible doctrine does not tell us we are loved. It does not tell us we are capable of great good. **It does not tell us we are co-workers with God.** It does not tell us we are created in the Divine Image, that God looked at us and said, "Behold, it is good." Rather, it tells us we are sinners, just because we are human. **It tells us we deserve eternal torment, just because we are human.** It tells us we are guilty, just for being born. It tells us God is a tyrant, punishing us for the sins of someone else. **Most of all, it tells us that our very humanity, our very essence, this precious gift of life we hold and cherish, is an affront to God.** This is the doctrine of original sin.

Now let's say a stranger knocked on your front door. **You invited him into your home, seated him on your couch, and your child came in the room and sat beside you.** Then the man said, "Your child's existence is an affront to God. Your child was born a sinner and deserves hell. When God looks at your child, he sees wickedness." **What would you do?** Well, of course, you would stand up, open your front door, and ask that man to leave. But millions of Christians go to church every Sunday and listen to a preacher say just that. **When it is said in church, they believe it is true, and will leave church full of guilt and self-hatred, believing what they've heard is the gospel truth, that it accurately reflects the mind and spirit of God.**

I have a friend who has a four-year-old son, just the neatest little kid, who wanted to play in a basketball league sponsored by a local church. **Because it was sponsored by a church, the parents hoped to avoid some of the more unsavory aspects of youth sports.** On the first day of practice, the coach gathered the four-year-olds around him and said, "Before I teach you about basketball, I want to teach you a great truth about yourselves." The coach paused. My friend was excited. **He thought the coach was going to impart some profound truth that would inspire the children.** Then the coach said, "That great truth is this—you are all sinners. But Jesus came to save you from hell. And we want your mommy and daddy to love Jesus so they won't be in hell."

That is the doctrine of original sin laid bare, and that is where it always leads. That is where it always leads. Not to our wholeness and well-being. Not to our growth and maturity. Not to an increase in love. **It leads only to self-hate, to seeing sin in every thing and every one, including four-year-old children who just wanted to play basketball with their little friends.**

How can that not have a profound effect on us? I tell you, it is nothing short of spiritual molestation. **It is as if an internal tape recorder has been placed inside our heads, playing over and over again.** “I am a sinner. I have disappointed God. I am no good. God rejects me. I am unworthy. I am unacceptable. I am unable to do the right thing. I am a failure.”

For too long the Church has come right along beside us and said, “That is right. You are a sinner. You have fallen short of God’s hope and glory. You need forgiveness.”

For too long the Church hasn’t asked us to believe something beautiful about God and lovely about the world, as much as it has demanded we believe something terrible about ourselves.

That is one Christianity. It’s stated goal was to honor God, but that always happened at the expense of humanity. **And because it degraded an important aspect of God’s creation, it inevitably dishonored God.** It turns out original sin not only didn’t have a good word to say about us. In the end, it had nothing good to say about God. It was beating down the child to elevate the parent. **But what loving parent ever wants to see their children diminished?**

Now I want to talk about another Christianity.

I’m not quite sure what to call this Christianity. John Spong calls it “a new Christianity for a new world.” Brian McClaren calls it “Emergent Christianity.” Matthew Fox calls it a “New Renaissance.” **I would call it “The Religion Jesus Would Have Started If Jesus Had Been Wanting To Start a New Religion.”** That title is a bit long, but you get the idea. All of those titles hold in common the conviction that orthodox Christianity has lost its way, that it has cared more about power, privilege, and control than anything else, that as we have grown and evolved, our understanding of God and the world has changed and religion hasn’t kept up. **Indeed, religion has been one of the things holding us back.**

This new Christianity isn’t really new. In fact, it reclaims a great and ancient truth to which the writer of Hebrews pointed—“God has made us a little lower than the angels, and has crowned us with glory and honor.” (Hebrews 2:7)

This new Christianity believes the basis of faith is wonder, gratefulness and love, not fear, guilt and judgment. **It does not believe people are lost or damned, but incomplete and evolving, not in need of condemnation, but patience and loving-kindness.**

I saw this beautifully illustrated last week. I was driving through Danville in the afternoon, just as the school busses were taking the children home. A bus stopped in front of me to let a child off. **The stop sign arm swung out and I began tapping my fingers on the steering wheel, muttering under my breath, “Hurry, hurry, hurry! Come on, kid, move, move, move!”** But no one got off the bus. After a few minutes, I noticed a little girl come out of a house and walk across the ice and snow toward the bus. Just a little slip of a girl. She stood by the door, not getting on the bus. **By then I was going nearly ballistic.** Not outwardly, of course, but inwardly. I was ready to pop an aorta! Then a little handicapped girl got off the bus. Her sister had come out from the house to help her. **They put their arms around one another and half-lifted each other across the street, up the stairs, onto the porch and into their home.** You could tell they were used to doing it, that they really enjoyed one another. They were laughing and smiling.

That simple gesture spoke volumes. For centuries, religion has come along beside us as we’re limping along and said, “You’re a sinner. You are lost. You’re a failure. You need to get right with God.” **When we should have been saying, “God gave us one another. Let’s lift each other up and ease the way.”**