LEGACY CHURCH

Sin

A Position Paper of Legacy Church

Introduction

To speak honestly about sin is one of the most countercultural things the church can do. The category itself has been largely evacuated from public discourse. What previous generations called sin is now more often described as dysfunction, illness, systemic failure, or simply personal preference. Even within the church, sin is frequently softened into mistake, struggle, or weakness, words that carry far less moral weight and far less urgency. The result is a Christianity that offers comfort without conviction, community without accountability, and grace without the honest reckoning that makes grace meaningful.

The Bible does not allow this softening. It speaks about sin with unflinching clarity because it understands what sin actually is and what it actually does. Sin is not a minor imperfection or a regrettable tendency. It is rebellion against the Creator, a fundamental disorder at the heart of human existence, the root of every form of brokenness the world knows. And because Scripture is honest about sin, it is also able to be genuinely good news about grace. The gospel does not minimize sin. It absorbs it.

This paper traces the church's historic understanding of sin, from the fall in Genesis through the theological developments of the early church and the Reformers to the present, and articulates what Legacy Church believes about the nature and consequences of sin and the hope the gospel provides. Our position paper on salvation addresses the full account of how God has answered sin in Christ. Here we focus on what sin is, what it has done, and why it matters that we understand it clearly.

I

Old Testament Foundations

The Origin of Sin

Sin enters the biblical story in Genesis 3, but it is important to understand what exactly happened there. God had placed the man and woman in the garden with every provision they needed and one clear boundary: they were not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:17). The serpent's temptation was not primarily about fruit. It was about authority. "Did God actually say?" (Genesis 3:1) is a question about whether God's word can be trusted, whether His boundary is legitimate, and whether humanity might be better served by deciding for itself what is good and what is evil. The woman sees that the tree is good for food, a delight to the eyes, and desirable to make one wise (Genesis 3:6). She takes. He eats. And in that act, humanity steps outside the authority of God and places itself in the position of ultimate arbiter of its own good.

This is the essence of sin as the Old Testament presents it: not merely the breaking of a rule, but the assertion of human autonomy against divine authority. The Hebrew words used throughout the Old Testament for sin carry this weight. *Chata* means to miss the mark, to fall short of what is right. *Pesha* means transgression, a willful crossing of a boundary, even rebellion. *Avon* means iniquity, a twisting or distortion of what is good. Together these words describe sin as simultaneously a failure, a defiance, and a corruption. It is not one thing but many, and they all flow from the same root: a creature rejecting the authority of its Creator.

The Consequences of the Fall

The consequences of Genesis 3 are immediate and comprehensive. Shame enters the story for the first time, along with the instinct to hide (Genesis 3:7-8). The man and woman, once unashamed before each other and before God, now cover themselves and flee His presence. Blame follows: the man blames the woman, the woman blames the serpent, and the tendency to deflect moral responsibility becomes one of sin's most recognizable features. God pronounces judgment that touches every dimension of human life: pain in childbearing, conflict in marriage, toil in labor, and the return of the body to dust (Genesis 3:16-19). And east of Eden, a barrier now stands between humanity and the tree of life (Genesis 3:24).

The chapters that follow chart the spread of sin like a disease through the human story. By Genesis 4 there is murder. By Genesis 6, "every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5), and God grieves that He made humanity. The tower of Babel in Genesis 11 reveals that sin's ambition is ultimately the replacement of God: "Let us make a name for ourselves" (Genesis 11:4). The pattern is relentless. Sin does not stay contained. It spreads, deepens, and reproduces itself in every generation.

The Law Reveals Sin

When God gives the law to Israel at Sinai, He is not simply providing a moral code. He is doing something more specific: He is revealing to His people the standard of His own holiness so that they can see clearly how far short of it they fall. The prophets make this function of the law explicit. Isaiah surveys the nation and declares that "all we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way" (Isaiah 53:6). Jeremiah diagnoses the problem at its root: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). The corruption is not merely behavioral. It is internal. The problem is not primarily what human beings do but what they are at their core.

David's great psalm of confession, Psalm 51, captures this: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Psalm 51:5). David is not blaming his mother. He is acknowledging that his sinfulness is not an external imposition but an internal condition, something he was born into. The fall did not merely set a bad example. It produced a corrupted nature that every subsequent human being inherits.

The Old Testament establishes that sin is rebellion against God's authority, that it entered through the free choice of the first human beings, that its consequences are comprehensive and devastating, and that it is not merely a behavioral pattern but a condition of the heart that each person is born into.

II

New Testament Understanding

The Universality of Sin

The New Testament inherits the Old Testament's diagnosis and sharpens it. Paul's extended argument in Romans 1-3 builds methodically to one of the most decisive statements in all of Scripture: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). This is not a generalization. It is a categorical claim. There are no exceptions, no moral outliers, no group of human beings who have managed to escape the condition. Jews and Gentiles alike, religious and irreligious, moral and immoral: all have sinned. The playing field is completely level at the point of need.

Paul's catalogue of human sinfulness in Romans 1:18-32 is sobering not because it describes only the worst of humanity but because it describes the trajectory of any humanity that suppresses the truth about God. When the knowledge of God is rejected, the mind becomes darkened, the heart becomes futile, and behavior degenerates through a series of steps that culminate in the full expression of human depravity. This is not an external punishment imposed from outside. It is the internal logic of what happens when a creature made for God tries to function without Him.

Original Sin and the Sinful Nature

Paul draws a direct line from Adam to every human being in Romans 5:12: "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned." This verse has been interpreted in various ways, but the basic point is clear: Adam's sin set in motion a condition that every human being inherits. We do not sin merely because we learn it from our environment or because we make consistently bad choices over time. We sin because we are born sinners, with a nature already oriented away from God and toward self. Paul calls this the "flesh" in his letters, the disposition of the natural human person apart from grace, which he describes as hostile to God and incapable of submitting to His law (Romans 8:7).

This is why sin is not primarily a behavioral problem with a behavioral solution. It is a nature problem. External reformation, moral effort, and social improvement can modify behavior, but they cannot change the heart. And it is the heart that is the problem. Jesus says the same thing in Matthew 15:19: "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander." The source of the pollution is inside, not outside. Clean the outside all you like. The spring itself is corrupted.

Sin as Alienation

One of the New Testament's most consistent descriptions of what sin does is that it alienates. It creates distance and hostility where there should be fellowship and peace. Paul describes the unredeemed person as "alienated from the life of God" (Ephesians 4:18), as "enemies of God" (Romans 5:10), as "dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). These are not mild descriptions of spiritual deficiency. They are pictures of a relationship fundamentally broken, of a creature at war with its Creator, of a life cut off from the very source of life itself.

The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23), and this death is not merely physical. It is spiritual, the severance of the soul from God that begins now and, apart from grace, extends beyond the grave. Sin does not merely inconvenience human life. It terminates it in every sense that ultimately matters.

Sin, Rebellion, and Unbelief

The New Testament is also clear about the moral quality of sin. It is not simply a mistake or a miscalculation. It is a rebellion. John says that "sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4), a willful disregard for God's authority. And at the root of every sin, as Jesus teaches repeatedly, is unbelief. Every time a person sins, they are functionally saying in the moment: God may exist, but His warnings are not real, His goodness is not sufficient, and my own judgment about what I need is more reliable than His. All sin, at its core, is a failure to trust God. It is a small-scale reenactment of Eden, choosing self-governance over divine authority because we do not fully believe that God's way is good.

The Hope That Frames It All

The New Testament does not leave sin as the final word. It sets sin within a story that is moving toward redemption. The same verse that declares the wages of sin is death also declares that "the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). The passage that describes humanity as dead in sin immediately follows with "but God, who is rich in mercy" (Ephesians 2:4). The honest account of sin is never the end of the story. It is what makes grace astonishing. A gospel that does not reckon seriously with sin produces a grace that no one particularly needs. But when the depth of sin is honestly faced, the grace that answers it becomes the most beautiful thing in the world.

III

Early Church (First 300 Years)

The early church wrestled deeply with the nature and consequences of sin, particularly as it faced heretical movements that either minimized sin or located it in the wrong place. The church's developed doctrine of sin emerged largely through these encounters, pressed to greater precision by the questions opponents raised.

Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130-202 AD)

was among the first to develop a coherent account of original sin in response to the Gnostics, who located the problem of evil not in human moral failure but in matter itself. For the Gnostics, the physical world was inherently corrupt, and salvation meant escape from it. Irenaeus rejected this decisively. The material world is God's good creation. The problem is not matter but sin, the moral failure of a creature made good who chose badly. Irenaeus developed his doctrine of recapitulation to address this: Christ as the new Adam undoes what Adam did, not by escaping humanity but by living it rightly from within. This required Irenaeus to take Adam's fall with great seriousness, because the scope of Christ's redemption corresponds to the scope of what was lost.

Tertullian (c. 155-220 AD)

was one of the first to articulate a doctrine of inherited sin with theological precision. He argued that the soul is transmitted from parent to child alongside the body, and that with it comes the corruption introduced by Adam. Sin is therefore not merely imitated but inherited, not merely a pattern of behavior learned from the environment but a condition of the self passed down through human generation. While his precise formulation of the transmission of sin was later debated, his insistence on the universality of inherited sinfulness became a cornerstone of Western Christian anthropology.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD)

gave the most comprehensive and influential account of original sin in the history of the church, developed largely in his prolonged controversy with Pelagius. Pelagius, a lay theologian and ascetic believed to have come from the Roman province of Britannia, who had settled in Rome, argued that human beings possess by nature the full capacity to choose good, that the fall of Adam was a bad example rather than a transmission of corruption, and that salvation is ultimately a matter of human will cooperating with divine assistance. Augustine responded with a devastating critique. If Pelagius were right, Paul's extended argument in Romans makes no sense, prayer for God to change the heart would be unnecessary, and grace would be merely external assistance to a will that is already capable. Augustine argued instead that the fall so thoroughly corrupted the human will that it is incapable of turning toward God apart from grace. This is not an external constraint imposed on freedom but the tragic fruit of the original choice: in seeking freedom from God, humanity enslaved itself to sin.

Augustine's account of original sin shaped the Western Christian tradition profoundly and continues to do so. His insistence that the human will is bound by sin until liberated by grace, and that grace is therefore not merely helpful but necessary, preserved the gospel from a moralism that would ultimately make salvation a human achievement. The Council of Carthage (AD 418) formally condemned Pelagianism, affirming that sin is inherited, not merely imitated, and that grace is not merely an aid to human effort but the source of the will's ability to choose good at all.

The early church developed its doctrine of sin under pressure from two directions: Gnostics who mislocated the problem in matter rather than in moral failure, and Pelagians who minimized the extent of the damage. The church's response established what remains the orthodox position: that sin is a real moral failure, inherited by all humanity from Adam, that corrupts the will at its root and makes divine grace not merely helpful but necessary.

IV

The Reformers

The Protestant Reformers inherited Augustine's doctrine of sin and, in their judgment, medieval Catholicism had drifted from its most important implications. The sacramental system of the medieval church could easily function as a mechanism for managing sin through ritual and penance rather than confronting it at the level of the heart. The Reformers insisted on returning to the radical diagnosis of Scripture and Augustine: that sin is not merely a series of offenses to be atoned by acts of satisfaction but a condition of the whole person that requires the regenerating work of God.

Martin Luther's doctrine of sin was shaped by his own agonized experience of moral failure. He had tried everything the medieval system offered and found no peace. His breakthrough came when he understood that the righteousness God demands is not achieved but given, not the product of human effort but the gift of divine grace. This required him to be completely honest about the depth of sin. If human beings were capable of contributing anything to their own righteousness, the gospel of grace alone would be unnecessary. Luther described the sinner as curved in on himself, *homo incurvatus in se*, a creature so thoroughly bent toward self that even its ostensibly virtuous acts are finally motivated by self-interest. Sin is not merely what we do. It is what we are apart from grace.

Luther's treatise *On the Bondage of the Will*, written in direct response to Erasmus's defense of human free will, is perhaps the most thorough Protestant account of sin's effects on human nature. Luther argues that the will apart from grace is not free in any meaningful sense. It is bound by sin, incapable of choosing God, and in need of liberation from outside itself. This is not a denial of human agency but an honest assessment of its condition after the fall. A person is free to choose in accordance with their nature. The problem is that their nature is sinful.

John Calvin systematized the doctrine of total depravity, insisting that sin has touched every dimension of human existence: the mind, the will, the affections, and the conscience. This does not mean that every human being is as sinful as they possibly could be. It means that there is no part of human nature that is unaffected by sin, no faculty that has remained pristine and untouched, no ground within the natural person from which the ascent toward God can begin. Calvin was careful to maintain that even fallen human beings retain a measure of what he called common grace, a capacity for civic virtue, genuine affection, and relative goodness in relation to other human beings. But in relation to God, the natural person is spiritually dead and in need of resurrection, not renovation.

V

Mainstream Western Christianity

Few doctrines have suffered more in the modern West than the doctrine of sin. The pressures have come from multiple directions, and the church has often accommodated them more than it has resisted them.

The rise of therapeutic culture in the twentieth century reframed the fundamental human problem. Where the biblical tradition said the problem was moral, a broken relationship with a holy God requiring forgiveness and transformation, therapy said the problem was psychological, a deficit of self-esteem, unmet emotional needs, or the wounds of a difficult past. These are real dimensions of human experience, and the church does not dismiss them. But when the therapeutic framework becomes the primary lens through which the church understands human need, sin tends to be reinterpreted as dysfunction and guilt as merely a feeling to be managed rather than a response to genuine moral failure. Grace becomes therapy, preaching becomes coaching, and the cross is subtly reduced from the answer to sin's penalty to the demonstration of God's affirming love.

Secular progressivism has offered another revision. In this framework, the fundamental human problem is not individual moral failure but structural injustice. Systems, not souls, are the primary sinners. Human beings are understood as essentially good but corrupted by unjust social arrangements. The solution is therefore social transformation, not personal repentance. There are genuine insights here: systemic injustice is real, and the church has at times used a narrow focus on personal sin to ignore structural evil. But a framework that cannot account for the individual sinner's need for forgiveness and transformation has not understood sin in the full biblical sense.

Even within traditions that formally affirm the doctrine of original sin, there has been steady pressure to soften its pastoral implications. Preaching that honestly names sin and calls for repentance is increasingly rare, replaced by messages that major on God's love, human potential, and practical life improvement. The result is congregations who know they are loved but are not quite sure why they need saving, who appreciate Jesus as a guide and example but have not reckoned with the depth of the debt He paid.

The church's task in this moment is not to be harsh or to make sin the center of the message. The gospel is the center. But the gospel is only good news to those who understand the problem it answers. A church that refuses to speak honestly about sin is not being kind. It is withholding the very diagnosis that makes the remedy meaningful.

VI

Key Scriptures on Sin

> Genesis 3:6-7
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> *"So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked."*

> Genesis 6:5
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> *"The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."*

> Psalm 51:5
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> *"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me."*

> Jeremiah 17:9
>
> *"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"*

> Romans 3:23
>
> *"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*

> Romans 5:12
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> *"Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned."*

> Romans 6:23
>
> *"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

> Ephesians 2:1-4
>
> *"And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked... But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ."*

> 1 John 1:8-9
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> *"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*

VII

Legacy Church Position

At Legacy Church, we believe that an honest account of sin is not pessimism about humanity. It is realism about the human condition, and it is the necessary context for the most hopeful message the world has ever heard. We do not preach sin to condemn people. We name it clearly because the gospel that answers it is worth everything, and it can only be received by those who understand what it is answering.

A Sinful Nature We Are Born With

All people are born with a sinful nature, a condition inherited from Adam that orients the heart away from God and toward self from the very beginning of life (Psalm 51:5, Romans 5:12). This is not a theological technicality. It is the explanation for every pattern of pride, self-deception, and moral failure that every human being discovers in themselves on honest examination. We are not sinners because we sin. We sin because we are sinners.

A Choice We Make

We are also born into a sinful nature and we choose to sin, alienating ourselves from God (Romans 3:23). The sinful nature does not remove moral responsibility. Every act of sin is a real choice, a genuine turning away from what is good and true and toward what is disordered and self-serving. To be a sinner is both a condition we inherit and a decision we make, and the Bible holds both together without collapsing one into the other.

Rooted in Unbelief and Rebellion

At the core of every sin is unbelief. When we sin, we are functionally asserting that God's word is not trustworthy, His goodness is not sufficient, and our own judgment about what we need is more reliable than His. Every sin is a small reenactment of Eden, a creature reaching past the boundary of divine authority because it does not fully trust the God who set it. This is why sin is not merely a failure of behavior but a failure of faith.

Manifesting in Brokenness, Pain, and Rebellion

Sin does not stay contained. It radiates outward into every dimension of human experience. It breaks relationships, distorts the mind, corrupts desire, produces shame, creates conflict, and generates pain in the lives of the sinner and everyone around them. The brokenness of the world, the suffering of the innocent, the fractures in every family and community and nation, are not random misfortunes. They are the fruit of sin at work in a world that has rejected its Creator.

Destroying, Corrupting, and Perverting

Sin destroys, corrupts, and perverts God's creation and the people He so loves. It does not leave things neutral. It actively degrades what it touches, turning the good toward harm, the beautiful toward ugliness, the true toward deception. Nothing in human experience is untouched by it, and no human effort can fully reverse its effects. This is why the gospel is not a self-improvement program. It is a new creation.

Justly Punished by God

God rightly and justly punishes all sin (Romans 6:23). This is not a failing of God's love. It is an expression of His holiness and His justice. A God who ignored sin would not be good. He would be complicit. The wages of sin is death, and that verdict is not arbitrary. It is the exact and righteous consequence of a creature rejecting the source of its life. We do not apologize for this truth. We hold it alongside the grace that answers it.

Answered Fully in Christ

Through Christ, our punishment is taken, our judgment is rendered, and our redemption and restoration are secured (Romans 5:8-9, 1 John 1:9). The cross is where God's justice and God's love meet without contradiction. Jesus absorbs the full penalty of sin so that those who trust in Him receive the full gift of His righteousness. This is the gospel. It does not minimize sin. It takes sin with absolute seriousness and provides an answer of equal seriousness. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. All of it. Every last trace.

What This Means for How We Live

We believe that every person who walks through our doors is a sinner, including every person on our staff and leadership team. This is not a pessimistic starting point. It is a leveling one. There are no spiritual elites here, no one who has outgrown their need for grace, no one whose confession is unnecessary. We are all, equally and without exception, people who have sinned and who continue to need the mercy of God.

We also believe that sin must be named, not managed. A church that speaks about dysfunction but never about sin, that offers coping strategies but never calls for repentance, has confused therapy with the gospel. Repentance is not a one-time threshold crossed at conversion. It is the ongoing posture of a person who takes God's holiness seriously and takes their own sinfulness seriously and who keeps returning to the grace that never runs out.

We will speak honestly about sin because we believe in the gospel honestly. The depth of the problem determines the wonder of the answer, and the answer is very, very good.

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