

What Evangelicals Have Done to Sin

by Jon Kuhrt (originally published in 2006 on [Fulcrum](#))

Within the evangelical world in which I grew up and came to faith, sin was a really big deal. Frequently referred to, both in sermons at church and in talks on summer camps, sin was presented as the barrier of human selfishness and pride that was blocking our relationship with God. As evangelical Christians, the subtext ran, we know the full importance of acknowledging and repenting of sin before we can really receive the forgiveness held out to us in Jesus Christ. Sin was the “bad news” that we needed to understand and acknowledge if we were going to be able to really receive “the good news” of its solution through Jesus. It was a part of a package that was both clear and understandable.

However looking back some fifteen years on, I can now see that this understanding of the state of our sinfulness was almost entirely personal and individual. Both sin, and repentance from it, largely concentrated upon the personal pitfalls of drinking, smoking, dishonesty and sex. Sin was never related to wider areas such as the nuclear arms race, poverty, homelessness, apartheid and the destruction of the rain forests. While these latter areas were becoming extremely hot topics in the secular world of the 1980's, they appeared to count for very little within the evangelical world when it came to acknowledging and repenting of sin. Moving on to study at Hull University in the early 90's, I found the Christian Union's take on sin and “the gospel” even more personalised. Studying social work, however, and starting to grapple with the deprivation and poverty affecting Hull's vast council estates produced an increasingly tension between my experience of these social problems and the highly individualised faith that I was trying to practice.

The turning point came after I graduated and moved back to London. I began working full time in a large hostel for homeless people and also moved onto the notorious Marquess Estate in Islington. For the first time I started to understand something of the nature of *structural sin*. Although I learnt a lot in the hostel, my steepest learning curve was what I learnt from living on the estate. Many memories stand out from the two and a half years that I spent on the Marquess, particularly of the gang who ‘bossed’ the estate and taunted the Police by brazenly running over their parked patrol cars and the sounds and smells of torched cars exploding in the underground parking. And I will always remember the feelings of hopelessness, fear and deep spiritual poverty that pervaded the entire place. But equally I will never forget the terrible design of the estate that made community impossible and the incompetence and neglect of the ‘powers that be’ to repair and manage the estate or even communicate effectively with those who lived there. The difference between working *for* disadvantaged people and living among them

never came across more strongly than on my first night in my new flat when I attempted to order a pizza only to be told: "Sorry mate, we don't deliver to your address". When the estate was just over twenty-five years old (the same age as me at the time) the decision was taken to knock it down and I had to move. The structural problems of the Marquess estate were considered irredeemable.

It was abundantly clear that there was something profoundly sinful about the estate that went far beyond the individual acts of bad behaviour by its particular residents. The situation had come about as an accumulation of design failure and poverty as well as years of neglect, insecurity, violence and fear which meant that sin was well and truly embedded. I realised that the charismatic Christians in my church were right: Satan truly did have a spiritual stronghold. However this stronghold was deeply social, economic and structural. Within this environment, I found the individualistic theology that only recognised sin in terms of personal behaviour to be profoundly inadequate and judgemental: inadequate in its understanding of the forces at work on the estate and inadequate in its ability to respond to them.

And, despite the encouraging increase in evangelical social involvement over recent years, there remains a damaging individualism that refuses to budge within so much evangelical theology and popular faith, a faith that has chosen to focus exclusively on the personal while ignoring the structures that spoil and disfigure God's world. In his study of Old Testament ethics, Christopher Wright has written of the need for a "reorientation in our habitual pattern of ethical thought" because of our tendency to "begin at the personal level and work outwards" (1). Wright is at pains to stress that the "primary ethical thrust of the Old Testament is necessarily social" and that even the personal ethics within the Bible are "community shaped" (2). In short, we read the Bible completely anachronistically when we read it through the individualistic lenses of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Individualism, however, is so strong within our culture that like fish that don't realise they are wet because they know of nothing else, we really struggle to recognise the effect that it has upon our world-view and our faith. It truly is a hermeneutical lens that effectively neutralises the power of Scripture to speak to our social and economic structures, even though the Bible has so much to say on these matters. Individualism emasculates the socio-economic challenge of prophets such as Amos, Micah and Isaiah, it dilutes Jesus' critique of his contemporary society and ignores the social justice at the heart of the Kingdom of God. It equally distorts the doctrine of St Paul by separating personal faith from social witness and activism and completely de-politicises the powerful critique of economic and military imperialism in the Book of Revelation. In short, the heresy of individualism sucks out of the Bible just about all the resources that it provides for addressing and responding to structural sin. The irony is, of course, that evangelicals claim to be "people of the Bible" who take sin

seriously. Effective witness against structural sin, however, is simply impossible when Christianity continues to be seen as something that is essentially private and personal. If we can undergo the “reorientation” that Christopher Wright asks for, then evangelicalism can once again become the progressive movement for justice and righteousness that it was in the nineteenth century.

The fact is that no such thing as non-political theology. All of our thinking and teaching about the nature of God and his call on our lives has an effect on our neighbours. As Kenneth Leech has written: “All Christians are political, whether they recognise it or not, particularly when they do not recognise it” (3). In recent history we have seen the worst cases of “the politics of evangelicalism” in its implicit and explicit political support for institutional racism in the South Africa and the southern states of the USA. It is deeply telling when conservative evangelicals critique Desmond Tutu’s “liberal” Christianity or Martin Luther King’s marital infidelities as a way of avoiding the prophetic witness that they gave against structural oppression. And today we are seeing a highly conservative form of evangelicalism having a powerful influence on the right wing administration of George W. Bush.

But it’s probably more important to look closer to home because so few of the large evangelical churches with their strong traditions of “biblical teaching” have anything to say about issues of corporate responsibility and social justice. This is not through a lack of resources or energy but because of a theological and political viewpoint that fails to recognise structural advantage and corporate greed. It produces a kind of teaching that calls for a response in the hearts of businessmen and women while having hardly anything to say about their decisions in the boardroom, exposing the close alignment conservative theology has with social and political conservatism. One of the most telling illustrations of this imbalance is when evangelical churches and organisations are strongly anti-lottery yet will hardly consider switching their banking investments to a more ethical provider. While the connection between sin and personal gambling is strongly demonstrated, the sin that is inherent in unjust financial systems goes unnoticed and is tacitly supported. This has had the effect of producing an evangelical mainstream which is fundamentally a religion of the suburbs, a faith that makes sense in comfortable surroundings and which does not threaten the core interests of the powerful forces that underpin injustice.

Evangelicals have a lot to offer this country but we have to decide what influence we want to have. Do we really want a *Daily Mail* theology focusing on personal morality and recycling fear? Do we want a religion that encourage swathes of middle England to sit comfortably knowing they are “saved” without it having one iota of impact on the cars they drive, the clothes they wear, the jobs they do and the politics they advocate? When we consider how wealthy and powerful we are as a nation, surely the prophets

such as Amos have far more to say to us? As Tom Wright has said “it is not enough to say one’s prayers in private, maintain high personal morality and then go out and rebuild the tower of Babel” (4).

My social engagement has not led me to become a more “liberal” Christian. I believe in sin, both personal and structural, and my daily experience continues to reinforce that belief. So much of the Christianity of my upbringing was right – we need to be convicted to repent and struggle against the power of sin. But it must be a “holistic” sin that we repent of. Christian social and political action will be anaemic and ineffective without a robust doctrine of sin and repentance provides the impetus that we need to change direction and head God’s way: to change the wrong things we have done and the wrong things we have been quiet about. This is the struggle and walk of faith that really excites me. The kingdom of God that Jesus inaugurated, his life, death and resurrection really does have the power to defeat all the sins of this world. If we truly are “gospel people” then we are called to a radically orthodox Christian faith that takes on “the powers and principalities” and powerfully witnesses to the importance of both personal moral righteousness and social justice.

(1) C.J.H. Wright *Living as the People of God* IVP (1983) p. 197

(2) Ibid p. 10

(3) Kenneth Leech *Through Our Long Exile* DLT (2001) p. 214

(4) N.T. Wright *The Challenge of Jesus* SPCK (2000) p. x