

Sin is rebellion against God and his law (Romans 1:21; Ephesians 2:1–3; 1 John 3:4). It expresses itself in acts of disobedience by doing what he prohibits and failing to do what he requires (Ephesians 2:1).

(Sola 5 Confession 3.5)

The five solas of the Protestant Reformation remind us of the gospel truth that the Reformers recaptured: that salvation is by grace alone (*sola gratia*) through faith alone (*sola fide*) in Christ alone (*solus Christus*) according to Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) for the glory of God alone (*solus Deo gloria*). The Reformers believed that this gospel had been lost to the Catholic Church and returned it front and centre in their churches.

Protestants sometimes draw a simplistic distinction between the Catholic gospel and the Protestant gospel. While Protestants teach salvation by grace, they say, Catholics teach salvation by works. While there is some truth to this distinction, the reality is far more complex than this formula suggests. Catholics would have little problem affirming that salvation is by grace alone, but they do object to the MEANS by which this grace is conferred: through faith alone. In Catholic thought, grace is conferred through faith AND works. At its root, this disagreement comes down to one basic truth: the doctrine of total depravity. The Reformers understood that humans are totally depraved—incapable of performing any good deed to merit God’s favour, or to add to the merit that God gives by his grace. Catholic doctrine objects that humans, even in their lost state, are indeed, by virtue of common grace, capable of meritorious works.

When it comes to a proper understanding of sin, which is the subject of Confession 3.5, it is imperative that we understand total depravity, for total depravity is really the root cause of actual sin.

The Confession begins with a simple definition of sin: **Sin is rebellion against God and his law.** Perhaps the most direct definition in the Bible of sin comes from 1 John 3:4, which says simply, “Sin is lawlessness.” Taking this as your starting point, how would you expand a definition of sin? *Sin is any word, thought, deed, or motive that runs contrary to God’s law. We sin when we say, think, or do, or motivate anything that God forbids, or fail to say, think, do, or motivate anything that God commands. Sin is committed by commission and by omission.*

The Confession cites Romans 1:21, which speaks of sin as failure to honour God as God or to give thanks to him. Why is it sinful to fail to honour God as God? Why is it sinful to not give thanks to him? *Honour and thanksgiving intrinsically belong to the Lord (Revelation 5:12–13; 7:12). To fail to give honour and thanksgiving to God is to take from him what he rightly deserves. It is to give him less than what it is due. It is to rob him of what rightly belongs to him.*

Ephesians 2:1–3 speaks of us being “dead in the trespasses and sins in which [we] once walked.” It adds that we “were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” When it comes to sin being part of our “nature,” there are three basic understandings of this. Consider the three positions below and state which one you think correctly aligns with Scripture.

Pelagianism says that the only effect that Adam’s sin had on his descendants was to set a sinful EXAMPLE, which influences us to sin. Humans have the ability to stop sinning if they simply choose to.

Arminianism teaches that Adam’s sin has resulted in the rest of mankind inheriting a PROPENSITY to sin, commonly referred to as having a “sin nature.” This sin nature means that sin comes naturally to us. It also means that God’s grace is necessary for us to stop sinning. God has provided this grace universally to humankind, so that anyone can choose (or refuse) to resist sin and obey God. Even though we inherited a sin nature, we are not accountable in any way for Adam’s sin, only our own.

Calvinism teaches that Adam’s sin has resulted not ONLY in our having a sin nature, but ALSO in our incurring guilt before God for which we deserve punishment. We sinned in Adam, which means that our sin nature is so utterly wicked that we are entirely incapable of resisting sin and choosing righteousness apart from God’s specific, intervening grace in Jesus Christ.

Which of these three understandings aligns most closely with what the Bible teaches? When we take the full scriptural evidence into account—that we are conceived in sin (Psalm 51:5); that our heart is sinfully incurable (Jeremiah 17:9); that we sinned in, and therefore die in, Adam (Romans 5:12, 19), and that we are dead in our trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1–3)—the Calvinistic interpretation is most consistent with Scripture.

There is an interpretation of original sin that says we assume responsibility for original sin when we accept and act according to our sinful nature. According to this view, those who die in infancy or with some mental incapacitation that renders them incapable of understanding and embracing their sin nature will not be judged by God for their sin. They will, in effect, inherit eternal life. Do you think that this theology is consistent with what the Bible teaches? This is one of the areas in which we do not have direct biblical light. The texts that speak of final judgement certainly seem to highlight judgement based on direct, personal sin—sins committed “in the body” (2 Corinthians 5:10; cf. Revelation 20:11–12)—which may lend some credence to this theory. Regardless of your personal persuasion in this regard, we affirm that God is a righteous judge who will always do what is right (Genesis 18:25; Isaiah 30:18) and leave those matters in his righteous hands.

The Confession recognises sin both in acts of commission and acts of omission: **It expresses itself in acts of disobedience by doing what he prohibits and failing to do what he requires.** Why is it important to recognise sin in both forms? Do you think that we often elevate one form above another? It is probably accurate to say that many Christians think of sin more in terms of acts of commission (doing what God prohibits) than in terms of acts of omission (failing to do what he requires) (see James 4:7). This is dangerous, because it means that we can blind ourselves to sin and harden our conscience.

The juxtaposition of sins of commission with sins of omission can be seen in Romans 7:14–20, where Paul speaks of his tendency to do what is not right, while at the same time failing to do what is right. As you think about these two categories of sin, consult the following texts and note whether they are emphasising sins of commission or sins of omissions.

Genesis 2:16–17: This was a sin of commission, in which Adam and Eve deliberately disobeyed God by doing what he forbade them from doing.

2 Samuel 11: In the account of David and Bathsheba, David committed a series of sins of commission, doing what God had expressly forbidden: lust, adultery, murder, etc.

Matthew 25:31–46 (especially vv. 41–46): These verses highlight sins of omission, in which the “cursed” failed to do the right thing.

Luke 10:30–37: The parable of the Good Samaritan highlights sins of omission, in which the priest and the Levite failed to do the right thing.

We so easily fall into the trap of sins of omission—of failing to do what God requires of us. How can we avoid this trap? Practically, we should deliberately practice doing what is right at all time. As Paul said, “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:9). It is when we “give up” deliberately doing what is right that we fall into sins of omission.

Biblically, are sins of commission always sins of which we are aware? That is, does ignorance excuse sin? God specifically prescribed sacrifices in the Old Testament for sins committed in ignorance. We must therefore conclude that doing what is wrong is always wrong and we cannot plead ignorance. The Bible holds God’s people accountable for their sins of ignorance (Acts 3:17; 1 Peter 1:14; etc.).

What is the correct way to deal with sin—whether a sin of commission or a sin of omission? Sin should be dealt with by confession and repentance. David modelled this in Psalm 51 after his sin with Bathsheba.

Does forgiveness, upon repentance, mean that the consequences of sin are removed? Not necessarily. Though God is gracious and willing to forgive, we must often live with the consequences of our sin. Second Samuel 12:14–15 is an example of the consequences that David faced despite the fact that God forgave.