



I had some amazing professors during my time at Trinity Seminary, including DA Carson. I have always said that Carson is the smartest man in the world times two. But there one prof that retired two years before I started at Trinity whose name was Gleason Archer. I have been told that Dr. Archer was an intellectual king. He earned two Bachelor's degrees, a Master's degree, a Law degree and a PhD, all from Ivy League schools. He was an expert in Semitic languages and cultures. He used to carry around a pocket full of ancient coins and he would pull them out if you asked him. He was so brilliant in languages that he once learned to speak Icelandic merely because his dentist was from Iceland. Compared to him, I have the intellectual capacity of a slug. Compared to him, my neural synapses fire so slowly you can measure them with a sundial. Truth is not determined by degrees and education but there's no doubt this dude was really smart. Dr. Archer said that "the greatest thing about Christianity is its doctrine of sin."

Isn't that interesting? The greatest thing? Sin? How can that be? Isn't the cross and the resurrection the greatest thing about our faith. Didn't I stand here exactly one week ago on Resurrection Sunday and tell you that Jesus' resurrection is the linchpin of our faith—that without it, we have nothing? Isn't that undeniable? So how is it that this famous professor would say that sin is the greatest thing? This was told to me second hand by another professor so I did not catch the nuance of his statement but he makes an excellent point. It may have been said somewhat tongue-in-cheek or as an intentional overstatement. But either way, he hit on something absolutely vital. Without the resurrection, the cross is useless but without a right understanding of sin, neither the cross nor the resurrection are necessary.

Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism do not hold to original sin. They all have some doctrine of sin in their worldview but none hold to original sin. This is really important because if there is no original sin then there is no need for a Savior. You can see that their beliefs about salvation are all works related. If you do enough good deeds, in the case of Islam, you may be accepted by Allah and in the case of Hinduism and Buddhism, you may eventually be accepted into the state of oneness.

	Islam	Hinduism	Buddhism
Original Sin	-No original sin -Do sinful acts by rebelling against Allah	-No original sin -Held back by ignorance of universal oneness\ -thousands of gods	-No original sin -Held back by ignorance of universal oneness -No gods
Salvation	-Follow 5 pillars of Islam -God judges based on works -God does not need to be merciful	-Bad karma continues reincarnation cycle until ignorance is shed	-Bad karma continues reincarnation cycle until ignorance is shed

It's really amazing how similar Hinduism and Buddhism are to one another. There are some definite differences but fundamentally, they are very much alike. But all of this shows the uniqueness of Christianity.

I appreciate this illustration from Ray Comfort. He writes,

Imagine that you were offered a choice of four gifts:

The original Mona Lisa

The keys to a brand new Lamborghini

A million dollars in cash

A parachute

You can pick only one. Which would you choose? Before you decide, here's some information that will help you to make the wisest choice: You have to jump 10,000 feet out of an airplane.¹

Before you learn that last bit of info, the obvious choice would have been the Mona Lisa. A new Lamborghini is worth about \$200,000, far less than the cash. However, the Mona Lisa is valued at around \$800 million. But her wry smile and high auction value will not save your life when you fall ten thousand feet. The parachute suddenly becomes priceless to you. It's all a matter of perspective.

Muslims, Hindu and Buddhists would take one of the expensive objects. Spiritually speaking, they don't have a need for a parachute, so why would they choose something with relatively little value? But spiritually speaking, you and I understand that we need something to save our lives, to rescue us. Monetary value and good works mean absolutely nothing.

If your understanding of your original sin is correct, then your perceived need for a Savior will be great. Too often we downplay the cross because we downplay original sin. If your sin is small your savior is small. This is why the apostle Paul carefully detailed the significance of original sin.

1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins

2 in which you once walked,

following the course of this world,

following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—

3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind,
and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

1. We were spiritually dead—sinners by nature.

Nekros is the Greek word for dead, like necrotic tissue that sets in when a person gets gangrene. The necrotic tissue must be cut away before it infects the surrounding tissue and spreads. But in our case, it wasn't just part of us that was dead. It was our whole self. Spiritually we were completely dead.

This is confirmed by countless Scripture such as Romans 5:12. "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned."

Sin entered the world through one man—Adam—and death resulted from that sin. Every person who has ever been born since Adam has inherited his sinful nature. We start this life spiritually dead. We do hold the age of accountability, however. For example, we don't believe that infants go to hell when they die. But as some unknow time, we become fully accountable for our sinful nature.

This is laid out clearly in our church's statement of faith

The Human Condition

We believe that God created Adam and Eve in His image, but they sinned when tempted by Satan. In union with Adam, human beings are sinners by nature and by choice, alienated from God, and under His wrath. Only through God's saving work in Jesus Christ can we be rescued, reconciled and renewed.²

We are sinners by nature. We were dead in our trespasses and sins. Spiritually dead. Helpless and hopeless. But it was even worse than that.

2. We actively sinned—sinners by choice.

Notice the very active language in regard to our sin.

1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins

2 in which you once **walked,**

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following the prince of the power of the air,

the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—

3 among whom we all once **lived in** the passions of our flesh,

carrying out the desires of the body and the mind,

and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

One might ask how is that we can be so “alive,” so active when we are dead? Well we aren’t physically dead, right? We were spiritually dead, which means our relationship with God was dead. But we were very much alive to sin. This shows that we are sinners by choice. We were sinners by nature when we inherited Adam’s sinful nature but we are also sinners by choice when we actively pursue sin. Too often we use the phrase, “he fell into sin.” But “falling” is not the right word to use here.

I just saw that there is now approved plans to build a type of net on both sides of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. Since the bridge was built, about 1700 people have committed suicide by jumping 220 feet to the frigid waters below. None of these people fell from the bridge. They all jumped. In the same way, no one falls into sin—we all jump into it. This is why Paul used such active words like walking, following, living in and carrying out. Our sin is a very active endeavor. There’s nothing passive about it.

3. We were controlled by the axis of evil.

But one of the reasons we are so active is due to the axis of evil. Did any Table Talkers find this axis of evil? By the way, that is Dave Hart’s name for it. And he stole the phrase from President Bush to describe the threat from Iran, Iraq and North Korea. But the axis of evil Ephesians 2 is much worse than it is in the Middle East—the world, the flesh and the devil.

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carrying out the desires of the body and the mind,
and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

The order is the world, the devil and the flesh, but it’s the same axis of evil. This week men’s study was in Mark chapter one, Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. Mark greatly abbreviates the events but there is a lot happening in this one verse. “And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him” (Mark 1:13). The devil tempted him and the angels ministered to him.

These are two invisible realities that we often lose sight of. How often are we really aware of this invisible realm where untold angels³ and demons dwell continually? According to pollster George Barns, 67% of Americans believe in demons but most of them do not believe Satan is a living person but just a symbol of evil.⁴

Here’s an interesting and scary statistic. 89% of teens believe in angels but 73% of them engage in occultic activity of some kind. Barns writes,

“Teenagers relish experiences and the supernatural world provides fertile ground for their explorations. In fact, three-quarters of America’s youth have engaged in at least one type of psychic or witchcraft-related activity, beyond mere media exposure or horoscope usage.

More than a third of the surveyed teens have communicated with entities using Ouija boards, another third have studied witchcraft rituals, and 25 percent enjoy role-playing games about sorcery and demonology.⁵

Why? Young people, if anyone ever invites you to take part in something like this, run away as fast as you can. This is extremely dangerous stuff. I observed this at a youth group sleepover when I was in high school. You'll be shocked at this. Guys and girls all slept in the same room and I don't recall any adults being around the entire night. At one point, one of the teens suggested some weird activities that I won't even repeat here. Even as a 15 year old unbeliever, I knew better than to engage in that stuff. For some reason, teens are especially intrigued by this. Stay away. At all costs, stay away.

But we were also controlled by our flesh and the world. But it's not that you can separate this axis of evil, right? Satan is the prince of the power of the air. Jesus called Satan "the ruler of this world" (John 12:31). Satan rules the world, so he has two of the three axes right there. But he also is the one who tempts our flesh. Satan is the conductor of the orchestra of evil in the world and in our lives. That doesn't mean we don't take personal responsibility for our choices but we do need to understand what is at stake.

The prince of the power of the air no longer controls believers but he still impacts us. Otherwise, there would have been no reason for Paul to have written about the armor of God in Ephesians chapter six.

We were spiritually dead. We were very active in our sinning. We were sinners by nature and by choice. And we were controlled by the axis of evil. But unfortunately, it was even worse than this, because...

4. We were children of wrath.

Other than being a son of disobedience, this is about the worst description of an unsaved person that you can get. We "were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." And it is an awful description, yet it is wholly true.

And it also answers the question, Saved from What? I took the title from a book by RC Sproul. While he was teaching theology at Temple University over fifty years ago, a complete stranger approached him on campus and asked, "Are you saved?" The first thing that popped into his mind was the return question, "Saved from what?" Many believers would say that we are saved from sin, or that we are saved from the devil or from hell. All of these are true of course but ultimately, we are not saved from Satan, we are saved from God, from his wrath. The devil doesn't punish sin, God does. Therefore, we need to be saved from God and his wrath.

Romans 5:9 is crystal clear. "Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!" There it is—we are saved from God's wrath through the justifying work of Christ. This completes our statement of faith position on sin.

We believe that God created Adam and Eve in His image, but they sinned when tempted by Satan. In union with Adam, human beings are sinners by nature and by choice,

alienated from God, and under His wrath. Only through God's saving work in Jesus Christ can we be rescued, reconciled and renewed.⁶

Our statement does not explicitly say that we are saved from God's wrath but it is certainly implied. But this is a belief that has always been rejected by many so-called Christians. Charles Finney was a famous revivalist during the Second Great Awakening. Finney had "success" in his revival campaigns but for all the wrong reasons. He wrote:

"Moral depravity, as I use the term, does not consist in, nor imply a sinful nature, in the sense that the substance of the human soul is sinful in itself. It is not a constitutional sinfulness. It is not an involuntary sinfulness. Moral depravity, as I use the term, consists in selfishness; in a state of voluntary committal of the will to self-gratification."⁷

Finney denied the doctrine of original sin. As a result, he ended up with a very distorted view of salvation—a moral perfectionism based on good works that completely ruins justification by faith.

"The Christian, therefore, is justified no longer than he obeys, and must be condemned when he disobeys or Antinomianism is true ... In these respects, then, the sinning Christian and the unconverted sinner are upon precisely the same ground."⁸

This is not good news. This is horrible news. If sin is merely defined as disobedience then salvation is a matter of obedience. But you are saved only as long as you obey perfectly.

You might think, "What's the big deal if we have a different view of sin as long as all believe in Jesus? There are actually a lot of things that are a big deal.

1. You'll be discouraged by your battle with sin.

God's justifying work is best seen against a backdrop of our utter sinfulness. I will be gone next Sunday but in two weeks we will get to verse four. 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. Verse four and following become more glorious when compared against the darkness of our former sin. Did you know there is a light illuminating our church sign by the road? It was on when you pulled into the parking lot but no one noticed it because of the bright sunshine. But if you drove in at 9 pm you couldn't miss it. In the same way, the darker the backdrop of our sin—and Paul's description is as dark as you can get—the brighter your salvation appears. Please understand that I am not trying to make this into a dark backdrop but instead showing you that it already is dark.

Most believers don't expect themselves to attain to sinless perfection, but if you can't clearly see Christ's justifying work on your behalf, you will still want to work for it. When you continue to sin, you will be frustrated with yourself. You won't depend on Christ's finished work on the cross and you will depend more on your own strength and determination.

2. You won't share the gospel clearly.

We all want to get to the good news of salvation. Unbelievers don't like to hear the bad news that Paul presents here and we don't exactly like telling them. There will always be pressure to water down the bad news, to soften it a bit, but if we do, you run the danger of completely distorting the gospel.

In his book, *Saved from What?*, R.C. Sproul wrote:

"I'm afraid that in the United States of America today the prevailing doctrine of justification is not justification by faith alone. It is not even justification by good works or by a combination of faith and works. The prevailing notion of justification in our culture today is justification by death. All one has to do to be received into the everlasting arms of God is to die."⁹

This is the uphill battle we face when sharing the gospel. Most people we

3. You will be less humble.

You were spiritually dead, hopeless and helpless. But if you have any boast in your salvation whatsoever, then your gratitude for the cross diminishes somewhat. Gratitude leads to humility. An absence of gratitude leads to pride.

4. You will be shocked when unbelievers behave badly.

We all have friends and relatives who are in bondage to one sin or another. It can be shocking and discouraging to observe their behavior, especially when it affects you personally. But if you just remind yourself that they are acting according to their nature, you will be less shocked. You may be able to have more compassion on them.

5. You won't give God the praise that is due Him.

God's blessings are intended to inspire worship in us and there's no greater blessing than Christ's justifying work for our utter sinfulness.

Yesterday I was talking to a friend about his family. His sister and three brothers have endless struggles in life and all of them were light years away from being saved. This man told me that if even one of his brothers ever got saved it would have to be equivalent to the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea. He held out little hope. But not only did one of his brothers get saved but in the past year all three brothers got saved. And they are growing in the Lord and there has been a powerful reconciliation among his brothers who have been basically estranged for over a decade. But not one of these three brothers took any credit for their salvation. They all know that it was a miraculous work of God. The wonderful stories of this family and of our own salvation is meant to drive us to worship of our Lord.

Rich Maurer
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¹ Kirk Cameron, *Still Growing: An Autobiography*, Regal Books: Ventura, CA, © 2008, p. 281.

² <https://go.efca.org/resources/document/efca-statement-faith>

³ Hebrews 1:14 reminds us that angels are "all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?"

⁴ <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/angels-and-demons-go-pop-culture/>

⁵ <http://technocult.net/archives/2006/01/28/73-of-american-teens-are-actively-exploring-the-occult/>

⁶ <https://go.efca.org/resources/document/efca-statement-faith>

⁷ Charles G. Finney, *Finney's Systematic Theology: The Complete and Newly Expanded 1878 Edition*, eds. Dennis Carroll, Bill Nicely, and L. G. Parkhurst, Jr. (1878; Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1994), 245.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 46.

⁹ R.C. Sproul, *Saved From What?*, Crossway Publishers, © 2010, p. 46.