

AlbertMohler.com

Has the Notion of Sin Disappeared?

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Cathy Lynn Grossman of *USA Today* asked the question, “Is sin dead?” The headline of her article in the paper was: “Has the ‘Notion of Sin’ Been Lost?”

Early in the article, Grossman answers her own question — “No, not by a long shot.” Still, her report raises some important issues about just what many people — and preachers — believe about sin. She also points to a question that should trouble the Christian conscience: “How can Christians celebrate Jesus’ atonement for their sins and the promise of eternal life in his resurrection if they don’t recognize themselves as sinners?” That question demands an answer.

Some observations from the article are worthy of note. The report reveals a great divide over the question of sin.

David Kinnaman of Barna Research suggested: “*People are quick to toe the line on traditional thinking*” that there is sin “*but interpret that reality in a very personal and self-congratulatory manner*” — *I have to do what’s best for me; I am not as sinful as most.*

There is something to this analysis. There is indeed something self-congratulatory about the way most people seem to think about sin and its consequences. Spend a few minutes watching the news and see if you are not tempted to feel better about yourself.

A key section of the *USA Today* article is this:

Popular evangelist Joel Osteen, pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, never mentions sin in his TV sermons or best sellers such as Your Best Life Now.

“I never thought about (using the word ‘sinners’), but I probably don’t,” Osteen told Larry King in an interview. “Most people already know what they’re doing wrong. When I get them to church, I want to tell them that you can change.”

A preacher who never even *thought* of using the word *sinner*? If people “already know what they are doing is wrong,” why do we need the Law of God? What, we should ask, are the consequences of sin? Furthermore, does he really believe that the Gospel is about how we can change ourselves? That is the not the Gospel of Christ, but the false Gospel of the self-help movement. Then again, if you do not believe that we are sinners facing the just judgment of a holy God, maybe the self-help message seems just fine.

Michael Horton, professor of theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Escondito, California, offered a thorough and perceptive response to Osteen’s “moral therapy:”

“It’s changing your lifestyle to receive God’s favor,” Horton says. “It’s not heaven in the hereafter but happiness here and now. But it is still up to you to make it happen.”

He finds sad truth in an old newspaper headline he once saw: “‘To hell with sin when being good is enough.’ That’s

the drift of American preaching today in a lot of churches. People know what sin is; they just don't believe in it anymore. We mix up happiness and holiness, and God is no longer the reference point."

In other words, he asks, if you can solve your problems or sins yourself, what difference does it make that Christ was crucified?

I was quoted in the article, and in this section I pointed to the loss of biblical authority and the secularization of our cultural understanding of sin:

Even some people who say sin is real still steer by a compass of "moral pragmatics," not a bright line of absolute truth, Mohler says. "People say, 'I have high moral expectations of myself and others, but I know we are all human so I'm looking for a batting average.'

"We find a comfort zone of morality, a kind of middle-class middle level where we think we are doing well. We cut the grass. We don't double-park. But we ignore the larger issues of sin.

"Instead of violating the law of the Creator, it becomes more a matter of etiquette. ... We want our kids to play well in the sandbox and know their place in line. We want people to do things decently and in order. But it's etiquette of morality without the ethics. The end result is that when we do things we wish people wouldn't do, there's no sense of guilt or shame."

As a matter of fact, the eradication of guilt and shame is one of the primary goals of the therapeutic culture, and the movement has been hugely successful. Sin is now celebrated in so many cases, not scandalized.

The article offers much more. Perhaps the most interesting angle on the story is the fact that the secular world seems to understand that something has changed when it comes to the preaching of many churches and the beliefs of many who call themselves Christians.

We are reminded yet again that an understanding of sin is preliminary to understanding the Gospel. The magnitude of our sin explains the necessary magnitude of Christ's atonement.

As John Bunyan observed: "No sin against God can be little, because it is against the great God of heaven and earth; but if the sinner can find out a little God, it may be easy to find out little sins."

