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Introduction—Sin in the Strict Father System

Sin is a power we ignore at our own peril. Ironically, the very prevalence of sin often obscures its clear and present danger. The use of imperial metaphors to discuss sin in the Pauline letters proves instructive here. In the ancient world, empire proved ubiquitous for those living under its reign. One might not encounter empire in the marching Roman legion except on rare occasions, but signs of empire abounded in coins, road signs, tax officials and the names of cities. Citizens of the empire must never delude themselves, because behind these more subtle signs of empire stood the Roman army, intent on quelling rebellion or resistance. In the same way, sin proves itself imperial, not always coming with sword drawn or teeth bared, but often more subtly. In a sense, sin proves omnipresent and we must not delude ourselves: behind the subtleties lie sin's ultimate manifestation—death.

Theologians and cognitive scientists may seem strange bedfellows, but George Lakoff, Professor of Cognitive Science and Linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley, made a startling discovery through observation of politics in the United States, a discovery that reveals a particular vision of sin in American Christianity. In 1994 Lakoff posed probing questions of the Republicans' Contract with America. Asking what held the various positions of the Republican Party together, Lakoff learned that it was their shared vision of family values—the vision of the "strict father" family. Attaining full grasp of this vision came when two of Lakoff's friends, linguists and members of the Christian Coalition, pointed to the writings of James Dobson, specifically his book *Dare to Discipline*.[1] The assumptions of the strict father model became clear.[2]

The strict father model sees the world as dangerous, where good and evil compete and children are born predisposed toward the bad and must be taught to do good. This world requires a strict father who protects the children, supports the family and teaches his children right from wrong through strong discipline (i.e., spanking). Such punishment not only teaches children obedience so that as adults they choose the morally good, it also teaches them the discipline necessary to survive in a competitive world. Reaching adulthood they will be able to overcome the difficulties presented to them and so achieve prosperity and self-reliance. Dobson connects the strict father model and the version of free market capitalism espoused by Adam Smith. Smith's vision is that individuals who pursue their self-interest by nature maximize the self-interest of all.[3] Thus, a good person is a moral person, self-disciplined enough to choose good and not evil, able to pursue self-interest to the degree that they prosper and become self-reliant.

1. The original edition appeared as *Dare to Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1970). Dobson published a revised edition, *The New Dare to Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992), though the publication of the new edition does not mitigate the major "strict father" vision as presented by Lakoff.
2. The following summary is taken from George Lakoff, *Don't Think of An Elephant* (White River Junction: Chelsea Green Publishing Co., 2004), 7–8.
3. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1997 [1776]).

Lakoff intends to assess the values of conservative politics, not to offer commentary on a particular theological vision. Nevertheless, it seems apparent that the strict father model advances a theological vision typified by James Dobson's work, which suggests that Christianity's use of father language to discuss God is in fact the strict father model. This particular conservative theological vision presents two difficulties in regard to understanding sin. First, sin in the strict father model is an individual choice, with the corollary that overcoming sin means making the individual choice to resist temptation. Second, God deals with sin via punishment aimed at self-discipline so that people choose the good because God himself put "the fear of God" in them. As Lakoff writes, "God is the original strict father."[4]

However, in his letter to the Romans, Paul personifies sin as a force in the world, a power enslaving all humanity, with the cunning to pervert even the intention of the law to sin's own ends (Rom 6.5–23; 7.7–12). Sin stops at nothing less than world domination. Sin is systemic, pervasive, more than merely personal choice. Furthermore, in the context of Romans, Paul argues that God's solution to the problem of sin's domination is to deliver human beings from its power—an act of God's justice (Rom 3.21–26; 6.17–18; 7.21–25). In the strict father model, humans must be delivered from none other than God. Certainly, in Romans Paul introduces God's judgment but in quite ironic terms because, though the gospel reveals God's wrath against human ungodliness and injustice (Rom 1.18), this is the same sin that God passed over in divine forbearance to prove his justice by justifying any who put their trust in Jesus (Rom 3.26). In the climactic move of the lengthy opening section in which Paul defends his gospel, he writes one of the most astounding statements within the letter: "For God has consigned all humanity to disobedience in order to have mercy upon them all" (Rom 11.32). In the gospel according to Paul, mercy triumphs over judgment, and God's kindness, not God's discipline, leads to repentance (Rom 2.4).

Racism, Sin and Atonement

So, if racism were a sin, what kind of sin would it be? In the strict father model the sin of racism involves a personal choice to exercise individual power to discriminate against, suppress and dominate persons of another race. The strong hand of God's discipline resolves racism, causing people to recognize the error of their ways so that they cease to do wrong and do good instead. In this model I may conclude that racism is not a problem because I have never burned a cross or used the "N" word and meet the minimal government standards for diverse hiring practices.

The strict father model helps explain why many conservative Christians in the United States feel that racism is not a big deal and that, if racism exists, only a small group of people perpetuate racism. We should, in fact, be glad that many white Christians do not burn crosses or use the "N word" and meet minimal standards for diverse hiring practices. But to come to grips with why people believe racism is not a problem anymore is not thereby to conclude that racism is resolved. Rather, we simply recognize how the strict father model casts a vision of sin for a number of conservative Christians.

If we take a more Pauline approach to the nature of sin, and see racism as a power that dominates human beings, as pervasive and systemic, then much work remains to resolve the problem of racism. From this perspective, racism is more than a personal choice but a subtle force like empire, not necessarily baring its teeth, sword drawn, in the form of burning crosses or lynching mobs or acerbic epithets. We must not delude ourselves: under the subtle signs of racism, life itself diminishes and many pray for deliverance from its tyranny.

The economic divide between whites and blacks and the subsequent effects on black communities points up the power of the systemic sin of racism. According to the 2008 United States Census figures, 10.5 percent of the white population lived below the poverty level, decreasing to around 8.2 percent if one defines the category as "White/Non-Hispanic." Compare this to the over 24 percent of the black population living below the poverty line. These figures reflect a persistent disparity indicated, for example, by the fact that these percentages have remained essentially unchanged since 2000.[5]

4. Lakoff, *Don't Think of An Elephant*, 82.
5. Historic Poverty Tables, http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/pubs-natlpov.html (accessed January 27, 2010).

Though it is controversial to argue that segregation contributes to increased levels of black poverty, one cannot deny that racial segregation signals black poverty, especially in large urban contexts. Such segregation into ghettos has concomitant effects on the life of those living in these ghettos. One needs only to reflect on images of the floods in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, the death tolls and the struggle to reestablish these neighborhoods, to see the power of systemic racism—of sin—to diminish life and even lead to death. Other signs surface on the American landscape. For example, racial segregation that manifests itself in inequitable income contributes to limited access to health care. In the Washington, DC area, a mostly urban white neighborhood in Bethesda, Maryland, has one pediatrician for every 400 children, while a local poor black community has one for every 3700 children.[6] Such segregation also affects the quality of local school systems. The state of California admitted that public schools with the worst record of students (mostly black or brown) failing the high school exit exam lacked the books, qualified teachers and health care necessary for a good education.[7] The fact that people today are more likely than people born thirty years ago to end up in the same socioeconomic class at the end of their life as the one into which they were born portends more of the same for blacks in the United States. The persistent plight of African Americans in poverty reflects more than personal choice on the part of some to act racist. Such structural racism signals a more pernicious force in the world that distorts, enslaves and leads to death. This force is Sin.

We must pause now to raise an important question: What then is the meaning of atonement? Now that we have a sense of Sin as something more than personal sin, as power, as tyrant, as pervasive, what then of atonement? And what difference does it make to see the macabre mask of Sin in the face of systemic racism in persistent poverty, segregation, and limited opportunity?

Romans 3.21–26, the premier atonement passage within Paul's letters, is tightly packed with interlocking images of God's justice, grace, redemption, atonement, forbearance and justification. One of the strong claims of this passage is that all humans must admit to sin, that none attain God's glory (Rom 3.23). In fact, though some might justifiably assert innocence with regard to individual racism, white Christians must admit to participating in a system that promotes the status quo, and that status quo is in part white privilege. But this passage makes the equally strong claim that God demonstrates justice to everyone who puts trust in Christ Jesus. The word used in Romans 3.25 and often translated "atoning sacrifice" is the same word translated almost exclusively in the Old Testament as "mercy seat," referring to the cover of the Ark of the Covenant (*hilasterion*; see Lev 16). One amazing aspect of this reference is that Paul pulls back the veil and takes us right into the Holy of Holies, right up to the Ark of the Covenant, where persons other than Aaron or the high priest were forbidden to go. We turn from the macabre mask of Sin in the face of systemic racism to encounter the very presence of God in overwhelming mercy, entering into the very life of God and finding God's justice, mercy, grace and redemption. Such an encounter frees us from slavery to Sin and calls us to justice that imitates the justice of God, a liberative justice (Rom 6.13, 18) so that we give ourselves up for the sake of others (Rom 12.1–2; 13.8–10). Atonement in this case is more than individual cleansing from sin that assuages my own conscience and assures me of escape from God's wrath. Atonement is liberation from the power of Sin over all humanity that empowers the people of God to work for justice in the world.

REFRAMING SIN IN THE FACE OF SYSTEMIC RACISM

The fact that racism persists within the system, that many blacks find themselves disproportionally poor—or in prison, to use another example—requires that we reframe the issue of racism in terms of the power, Sin. This reframing involves a network of related ideas we must reconsider in order to confront this power. I admit that I believe this reframing primarily addresses white congregations who do not recognize systemic

6. Gregory D. Squires and Charis E. Kubrin, "Privileged Places," *Shelterforce* 147 (Fall 2006): 12–15, 44.
7. Julie Quiroz-Martinez, "Youth Organizing Tackles the 'Racism You Can't Name,'" *Poverty and Race* 15/6 (2006), 9–11.

racism because, in fact, whiteness defines many of the cultural webs in the United States. For the church to become a potent force in the war against racism requires white congregations to enter into the world with different expectations based on a new theological vision.

1. God

Basic to this reframing is a new assessment of God as Father. Janet Soskice observes that scripture and early Christian writings used the father metaphor because it conveys the reality of kinship with God because God is of a kind with those made in God's image.[8] God's preferential option for relationship means that God does not have to be persuaded to overcome God's self in order to be in relationship with humanity. No, God desires and pursues relationship with humanity, bears patiently with sin, overcomes the power of Sin, all for the sake of relationship. Human struggle with racism is not a contest against both the power of Sin and a pertinacious God. Rather, God is fully on the side of humanity to deliver them from Sin for freedom to experience the full blessings of kinship to God.

2. Humanity

We have highlighted consistently one major problem with the strict father system: its vision of the lone individual resisting sin and choosing good. Tied to Adam Smith's version of capitalism, this individual makes singular choices toward self-interest that magically promotes the self-interest of all. Thus, the command to love one's neighbor as oneself becomes an appeal to love all humans rather than real flesh and blood neighbors—loving a neighbor becomes a vast void rather than a real hope. Another vision of the love command offers hope in the form of Soskice's description of friendship. Soskice recognizes that friendship demands that, precisely because my friends are not me, I become myself in relationship to them, "through who I am for others and who they are for me."[9] To recognize Sin as systemic is in part to recognize its alienating force; we cannot overcome such systemic Sin through love generic. Rather, in friendship with others unlike myself, I may find that, in fact, I do not esteem them or care for them or serve them, indeed love them, as I do myself. This recognition demands that I change; it is the essence of repentance. We would fail in our struggle against structural racism if suddenly white Christians recognized the pervasive problem but then sought to resolve it by simply helping the Other. White Christians must recognize an implicit incompleteness, because of the need for repentance that requires that we live in friendship and love with black Christians. Attempting to resolve structural racism by addressing racism alone is short-sighted. The solution is not simply disrupting racist structures but an act of becoming. White Christians must not presume that the aim of confronting structural racism is to end racism, but instead the goal is to enter into community, to become friends and so to experience transformation.

3. Atonement

In addition to re-imagining God and humanity, we need an encounter with God's mercy. Paul leads the reader of the letter to the Romans to the mercy seat, Christ, pulling back the curtain that forbids entrance into the Holy of Holies, inviting them to awesome encounter. God put Christ forward perpetually as the new mercy seat, not simply in a one-time encounter. Here Paul's further reflections about the ministry of Christ prove instructive. In Romans chapter 8 Paul reminds the early Jesus-community that condemnation is out of the question because Christ continually intercedes for them (Rom 8.34). In Christ then we have perpetual encounter with the mercy of God, perpetual intercession and perpetual offer of freedom from the power of sin. Atonement is not simply personal cleansing from sin's guilt but freedom from the power of Sin, so that we might be free to exist for the Other.

8. Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God* (Oxford: Oxford University 2007), 4–5.
9. Ibid., 176.

4. Justice

I have persisted in this paper to use the word "justice" instead of the term normally used in the English translations, "righteousness." I do this for two reasons: (1) the Septuagint translates one of the key Hebrew words for justice in an overwhelming majority of cases with the Greek word *dikaiosune*, the key word (and related roots) in Romans; and (2) historically the use of the term "righteousness" instead of "justice" emerged in the translation of the King James Version when it proved politically expedient to avoid calling the king "unjust."[10] The import of this for our discussion is to recognize that "righteousness" reinforces the individualistic morality of the strict father model. A righteous person makes personal moral choices for the good and against evil. Justice, on the other hand, emphasizes the communal dimension of Sin and racism and is concerned about whether justice comes into the earth for all humanity. In fact, Paul claims that the work of God in Christ Jesus enables humans to obey the *just* requirements of the law (Rom 8.4), laws like "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Rom 13.8–10), which in its original context expresses itself in communal justice (see Lev 19). We do well in reading and proclaiming the biblical text to practice exchanging the appropriate form of the term "justice" for the term "righteousness" and its cognates, and to see what impact this has on our imagination of overcoming the power of Sin, the power of racism.

5. Resistance

Let us reconsider Romans 13.1–7 in light of the preceding discussion of Sin as power, God's commitments to humanity and the call to justice. It seems that discussions of the relationship of Christians to government often lift Romans 13.1–7, treating these verses as context-less. Consequently, conservatives sometimes use this text to reinforce the idea of vesting basic trust in the government (the surrogate strict father) because Paul instructs the Romans to submit themselves to the governing authorities as God's agents. However, as post-colonial criticism teaches us, resistance to imperial powers is not always bloody rebellion but often, responding in kind to Sin, much more subtle. And though Paul instructs submission to ruling authorities, in the immediately preceding verses he also offers guidance for dealing with those who persecute (Rom 12.14–21), which in light of Romans 13.1–7 likely refers to imperial authorities. Paul essentially advises a type of resistance by giving enemies food and drink, trying to overcome evil with good (Rom 12.20–21). Christian resistance does not look like violence but instead much like the kindness of God, whose kindness leads to repentance (Rom 2.4). White Christians must learn to resist the violence of structural racism by means of nonviolence, imaginative acts of kindness and heaping burning coals on the heads of all who participate in these structures, exposing the shame of the inherent inhumanity of racism and leading to change.

CONCLUSION

Christians have the inherent gifts and strength to contribute to alleviating systemic racism but this requires a reframing of conversation and preaching and teaching and writing. We will engage more readily in the actions required to confront the realities of racism when our imaginations are reformed to see racism as the power of Sin pervasive in the world. But we need not fear because we have God on our side, the great mercy continuously poured out to us in Christ, and the means of resistance found in our ability to be transformed in friendship with others and in our vision of justice for all.

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10. Steven Voth, "Justice and/or Righteousness: A Contextualized Analysis of Sedeq in the KJV (English) and RVR (Spanish)," in *The Challenge of Bible Translation*, ed. Glen G. Scorgie, Mark L. Strauss and Steven M. Voth (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 321–346.