SIN IN SECULAR EARS: A THEO-BIBLICAL & SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLORATION FOR COMMUNICATING THE DOCTRINE OF SIN IN *AOTEAROA* NEW ZEALAND

DALE CAMPBELL

Associate Pastor

Northcote Baptist Church

Auckland, New Zealand

(dale@nbc.org.nz)

ABSTRACT

Sin, and forgiveness of it, is an essential component of the Gospel of Grace. This essay seeks to discern how well the doctrine of sin is being communicated in *Aotearoa* New Zealand. To this end, the first section offers a brief summary of the doctrine in Scripture and its significance within contemporary theology. The next section listens to responses to the doctrine outside the Church, first those seen generally in the language, legislation and psychology within secular culture, and then more specifically in a recent small study surveying Non-Religious New Zealanders (NRNZs). The final section offers suggestions for improved communication of the doctrine under the headings: Resonance, Rejection, Restatement, and Relationship.

INTRODUCTION

"Know the Gospel. Know Culture. Translate."[1]

"…let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger." (Epistle of James)[2]

What do non-religious people in *Aotearoa* New Zealand think about sin? Do they hear what we think we're saying when we talk about sin? According to Shannon & Weaver's well-established theory, communication is incomplete without a feedback loop.[3] Therefore, this piece of research is fundamentally a listening exercise which aims to complete this communicative loop: to simply discover what non-religious people in general, and Non-Religious New Zealanders (NRNZs) in particular, think about both the topic of sin and human nature, and about what they've heard from Christians about sin. It is hoped that the collection of perspectives represented, the data gleaned, the observations gathered and the suggestions proposed will combine to aid Christians in the task of communicating the Gospel in general, and the doctrine of sin in particular, within *Aotearoa* New Zealand. If we are to communicate well, we must listen well.

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[1] Compass Foundation, n.p. [cited 19 November 2013]. Online: http://www.compass.org.nz/nz.
[2] Jas 1:19b, NRSV.
[3] Claude Elwood Shannon, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois, 1949).

The Compass Foundation (Australia/New Zealand) has developed the useful slogan quoted above, which, in addition to suiting our theme of communication, will be borrowed for the three major sections of this essay. Section one, "Know the Gospel," will consist of a brief tour through the doctrine of sin in modern theology. Section two, "Know Culture," will listen to voices both from a global literary perspective, and also from a local mixed-methods study of NRNZs. Section three, "Translate," will offer considerations for better communication of sin under four headings: Resonance, Rejection, Restatement & Relationship.

KNOW THE GOSPEL

"For the Christian church…to ignore, euphemize, or otherwise mute the lethal reality of sin is to cut the nerve of the Gospel." (Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.)[4]

"Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned." (The Epistle of Paul to the Romans)[5]

Sin in Biblical and Theological Perspective

Sin language both implicitly and explicitly permeates Scripture. The imagery that biblical writers use for sin is diverse. It is a weight or burden to be carried, and a debt to be repaid.[6] In the Old Testament it is described as deviation, rebellion, and burden of guilt; in the New Testament as deviation, sinners, debt and absence of righteousness.[7] It is idolatry.[8] It is the "culpable" attacking (actively) or abandoning (passively) of "shalom."[9] Fundamentally, to sin is to try to be more than or less than simply human: "Authentic human existence involves living in and for the image of God while fully aware that one comes from the dust. When this polarity becomes imbalanced in either direction, one falls into sin."[10] James Dunn locates precisely this theme of missed humanness in Paul's use of the term *hamartia* in Romans 5:12-8:3, where sin is "that power which makes human beings forget their creatureliness and dependence on God, that power which prevents humankind from recognizing its true nature, which deceives the *adam* into thinking he is godlike and makes him unable to grasp that he is but *adamah*."[11]

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[4] Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 199.
[5] Rom 5:12 NRSV.
[6] Gary A. Anderson, *Sin: A History* (London: YALE University Press, 2010), 15-42.
[7] Derek R. Nelson, *Sin: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London/New York: Continuum, 2011), 18–31.
[8] Alistair McFadyen, *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 125.
[9] Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, 197.
[10] Mark E. Biddle, *Missing the Mark: Sin And Its Consequences in Biblical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 75.
[11] James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006), 112.

Sin, then, is not a minor theme in Scripture, but is "the crucial inner-worldly reality" shaping the tone and trajectory of the whole Bible.[12]

Sin is just as essential for all Christian theology as it is to Christian Scripture. While it is both possible and common for sin to be communicated poorly, to fail to communicate it *at all* is to fail to communicate the Gospel. Cornelius Plantinga Jr. says it well: "without full disclosure on sin, the gospel of grace becomes impertinent, unnecessary, and finally uninteresting."[13] One of the challenges of Christian theology is to hold in tension the external and internal factors behind human sin. Extremes in either direction end up shifting the blame for sin onto others, whether those who comprise the culture we inhabit, or those who supply the genes we inherit. On the one hand, sin is not entirely a matter of our *nature*. However vulnerable human nature is, sin is not so inevitable that we are "hard-wired" toward it.[14] However transient, our ability not to sin (*posse non peccare* in Augustine) is why Plantinga Jr., for example, distinguishes between *evil* (both in nature in general, and human nature in particular) and *sin*, for which we are "culpable."[15] On the other hand, neither is the fault entirely on the *nurture* side. Yes, social pressures shape our behaviour, but we also participate with and form habits that align with these pressures.[16] Theologically speaking, therefore, human nature is a mixed bag. Stated one way, though we are glorious bearers of God's image, we are just as gloriously ruined by sin. Stated in reverse, though we are thoroughly "ruined," we still at least partially bear the divine image.[17] No sector of humanity, even the worst sinner, is entirely devoid of Common Grace, which, whilst not regenerating us, "preserves and enhances" human nature.[18] Again, the other side of this coin is that sin also reaches to all sectors of humanity. D.A. Carson summarises, "every expression of human culture simultaneously discloses that we are made in God's image and shows itself to be mis-shaped and corroded by human rebellion against God."[19]

In this whistle-stop tour of the modern doctrine, we have seen how significant sin is, both to the Christian Scriptures and to modern theology, which seeks to retain appropriate tension and balance in its accounts of it. But how theologians formulate the doctrine is one thing, and how it actually gets communicated to everyday people is quite another. So then, how is the doctrine of sin *actually* being communicated? And, just as crucially, *how is it being heard and received*? We turn now to listen to culture.

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[12] R.R. Reno, "The Doctrine of Sin," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 748–49.
[13] Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, 199.
[14] Terry D. Cooper, *Sin, Pride & Self-Acceptance: The Problem of Identity in Theology & Psychology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 38, 158.
[15] Cornelius Plantinga, *Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 51; See also Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, 18-27.
[16] Cooper, *Sin, Pride & Self-Acceptance*, 84–85; James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom (Cultural Liturgies): How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 140–41.
[17] Mark R. Talbot, "Learning from the Ruined Image: Moral Anthropology after the Fall," in *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective* (eds. Richard Lints, Michael S. Horton, and Mark R. Talbot; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006), 176–77.
[18] Plantinga, *Engaging God's World*, 58.
[19] D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 49.

KNOW CULTURE

"The Christian focus is overwhelmingly on sin sin sin sin sin sin sin. What a nasty little preoccupation to have dominating your life." (Richard Dawkins)[20]

"The process of secularization… has produced a growing deterioration of ethics, a weakening of the sense of personal and collective sin, and a steady increase in relativism." (Pope Francis)[21]

The first half of this section will briefly observe how the doctrine of sin fares in secular culture. This will be followed by listening to the responses from a local study of NRNZs who were asked about human nature, behaviour, and responsibility, and to restate and evaluate what they had heard from Christians about sin.

Sin in Secular Culture

Sin-language has shifted incredibly. Sin is seen as a shame—not to *commit* a sin, but to obsess over, or more shameful, to miss out on! In the above quote, retired zoologist and global spokesperson for anti-religious sentiment, Richard Dawkins, calls sin a "nasty little preoccupation to have dominating your life." Locally, a *NZ Herald* column teases readers to "Thank God for Deadly Sins."[22] "Sin-sational" experiences and consumer products are "deliciously and enticingly 'naughty.'"[23] Western culture, including *Aotearoa* New Zealand, increasingly sees itself as religion-free, "secular" and yet still "spiritual."[24] In New Zealand, "poets, artists and writers have become our 'theologians' as they express and articulate our identity and spirituality."[25] As another *NZ Herald* opinion columnist skilfully observes, the new cultural "spirituality" is "practical and personal. It's more about stress reduction than salvation, more therapeutic than theological. It's about feeling good, not being good."[26] Sin is seen less as an important matter to debate and more as a divisive topic to avoid. Sin-talk is seen as pessimistic, arbitrary, inapplicable and judgemental.[27] Sin-language has been replaced by "ethical concern." In the workplace, for example, instead of using the

[20] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008), 285.
[21] Pope Francis*, Apostolic Exhortation,* Evangelii Gaudium *Of The Holy Father* (Vatican: Vatican Press, 2013), 54.
[22] Noelle McCarthy, "Thank God for Deadly Sins," *New Zealand Herald* (15 March 2008). Cited 30 May 2013. Online: http://www.nzherald.co.nz/opinion/news/article.cfm?c_id=466&objectid=10498270.
[23] Chris J. Duthie-Jung, "Sin in a Secular World," in *A Thinker's Guide to Sin: Talking About Wrongdoing Today* (ed. Neil Darragh; Auckland, NZ: Accent Publications, 2010), 20.
[24] Lloyd George Geering, *In Praise of the Secular* (St. Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion & Society, 2007), 45–54.
[25] Paul Morris, "Who Are We? New Zealand Identities and Spirituality," in *New Zealand Identities: Departures And Destinations* (ed. James Hou-fu Liu; Wellington, NZ: Victoria University Press, 2005), 251.
[26]Cathrin Schaer, "The Modern Search for Spirituality," *New Zealand Herald* (29 July 2000). Cited 21 May 2013. Online: http://www.nzherald.co.nz/cathrin-schaer/news/article.cfm?a_id=48&objectid=145956.
[27] Nelson, *Sin*, 3-9.

language of "sin," people are corrected for, and expected to correct, their "misconduct" or behaviour that is deemed "abusive," "inappropriate," or "unfair."[28]

This popular secularisation of language is accompanied by the political secularisation of legislation. Increasingly non-religious societies treated wrongdoing not as religious "sin" needing increased repentance and righteousness, but as moral "crime" needing better laws and enforcement of them.[29] Sin is only "addressed as crime and its existence is very much in doubt in the secular society."[30] Globally and locally in New Zealand, secularising trends have been accompanied by privatising trends, making religion into an entirely personal matter.[31] Voters thus increasingly rejected "previous constrictions on their personal behaviour" and insisted on law-makers "giving them the secular legislation they wanted."[32]

As if the displacement of sin from language and legislation didn't make the connotations of the word negative enough, some psychotherapeutic voices have been critical of sin. The complaint is that "organised religion" has created "clients who feel depressed, guilty, inferior, or jealous," and see themselves as "sinful or wicked persons rather than imperfect persons."[33] Although this fear of self-esteem-shattering religious sin-talk reflects the modern "belief in the innate goodness of the self," some (not all) forms of modern psychotherapy seem to take quasi-"religious" forms where the "therapist-priest" gives salvific revelations of the "true person" cloaked in the unconscious.[34]

Listening to Non-Religious Voices

In the rest of this section, we will listen to non-religious voices from a small, local, mixed-methods study of NRNZs, including university level neurologists who were asked an additional question specific to their field.[35] The questionnaire was divided into two parts, the first on human nature, behaviour, and responsibility, and the second on recollections of and responses to the Christian doctrine of sin. We will review the responses to these parts in the same order.

NRNZs on human nature, behaviour, and responsibility

Participants in the local study were asked if human nature is good, bad, both, or neither. Just under half (the largest category) of these "non-religious" participants responded by saying "both," quite likely

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[28] Neil Darragh, "The Problem with Talking About Sin Today," in *A Thinker's Guide to Sin: Talking About Wrongdoing Today* (ed. Neil Darragh; Auckland, NZ: Accent Publications, 2010), 16–17.
[29] "Sin," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (ed. F.L. Cross and Elizabeth Livingstone; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1515.
[30] Mark Jones and Peter Johnstone, *History of Criminal Justice* (Philadelphia, PA: Elsevier, 2011), 138; Man Kei Ho, *Suffering, Obedience and the Origin of Sin* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2010), 18.
[31] Rex J. Ahdar and John Stenhouse, eds., *God and Government: The New Zealand Experience* (Otago, NZ: University of Otago Press, 2000).
[32] Kay Carmichael, *Sin and Forgiveness: New Responses in a Changing World* (Surrey, U.K.: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2003), 55.
[33] Paul A. Hauck, "RET and the Assertive Process," in *Using Rational-Emotive Therapy Effectively: A Practitioner's Guide* (ed. Michael E. Bernard; New York: Springer, 1991), 216.
[34] Cooper, *Sin, Pride & Self-Acceptance*, 14, 23.
[35] For methodological notes on this study, the entire study with full response data and interview transcripts (excluding all person-specific data) can be accessed online at http://www.fruitfulfaith.net/essays.

unaware of their agreement with theologians like Carson (quoted above). A significant number gave responses to the effect that we are "neither" good nor bad, at times explicitly or implicitly negating that a qualitative valuation could, or even should, be placed upon human nature. This makes sense in a modern scientifically enamored context where mechanistic accounts of human behaviour, from neurology, biochemistry and evolutionary sociology, are increasingly seen as providing a *full* account of human nature.[36] In order to know what humans are, quantitative "facts" are all we need; qualitative "values" are a matter of taste.

Another question asked whether the causes of "bad" behaviour were internal ("nature"), external ("nurture"), both, or neither. The overwhelming majority, (72%) recognized both external causes (culture, "nurture") and internal causes (choice, "nature"), also likely unaware of their agreement with theologians like Cooper (quoted above). A few respondents gave the "neither" response to this question, also signaling a hesitance for qualitative valuation. For these NRNZs, just as human *nature* can or ought not be valued qualitatively, so also for human *behaviour*. If the quantitative methodologies of the hard sciences are the only or best tools for studying human behaviour, then explaining guilty feelings will be restricted to showing that we *can* feel guilty, rather than whether or not we *are* guilty. Human capacities for awareness, mind and metacognition "give rise to the human capacities for shame," which are then "open to social construction" (or in practice, a matter of opinion).[37] Very few respondents viewed bad behaviour as caused exclusively externally ("nurture"). This reflects a movement away from John Locke's famous Enlightenment proposal in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that the human mind was a *tabula rasa* (blank slate).[38] For Locke, sin was possible, but as a result of "social and especially economic conditions," and not due to being "born in original sin and into a fallen world."[39] Following this, it was assumed that "any tendency toward evil within us can be eliminated," thus making the doctrine of original sin appear unnecessary.[40] Locke's notion of the *tabula rasa,* however, now finds itself up against modern evidence that an "identifiable portion of our behavior is genetically influenced."[41] Likewise, only one respondent credited internal causes ("nature") for bad behaviour. In light of this mix of responses, most respondents might agree with John Barry's conclusion that the phrase "It's only human nature isn't it," "serves to both explain and close any discussion," assuming that human nature "just *is,*" and that nothing can be done to alter it.[42]

One question was designed specifically for the interviews with neurologists: Do mechanistic accounts of behaviour make the concept of moral responsibility unnecessary? Neurological studies

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[36] Ron Vannelli, *Evolutionary Theory And Human Nature* (New York: Springer, 2001), 91–93; See also Janet R. Richards, *Human Nature after Darwin: a Philosophical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2000).
[37] Paul Gilbert, "Evolution, Social Roles, and the Differences in Shame and Guilt," *Social Research* 70, no. 4 (2003): 1226.
[38] Kenneth L. Campbell, *Western Civilization: A Global and Comparative Approach, Since 1600* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2012), 70.
[39] Charlotte Dormandy, "The Flowering of the Romantic Spirit," in *Spirituality and the Secular Quest* (ed. Peter Higbie Van Ness; New York: Crossroad, 1996), 171, 193–4.
[40] Cooper, *Sin, Pride & Self-Acceptance*, 45.
[41] Harald E. L. Prins, Bunny McBride, and Dana Walrath, *Cultural Anthropology: The Human Challenge* (Belmont, California: Cengage Learning, 2010), 132.
[42] John Barry, *Environment and Social Theory.* (London: Routledge, 1999), 193.

showing causal correlation between brain damage (specifically to frontal lobe) and decreased moral ability have raised questions about moral responsibility.[43] Some even question whether or not with "more and more compelling mechanistic accounts of behavior, societies will come to view wrongdoers as mere 'victims of neuronal circumstances.'"[44] Both neurologists answered this question with a negative response. One qualified the "no," by distinguishing explanation of and responsibility for behaviour, saying they are "two different things," but they are "not completely separate." Being "mentally delayed" may indeed affect "concepts of what's good [and] what's wrong," but this would not be the case for "a normal person capable of thinking… capable of putting things together." For the other neurologist, "a sense of moral responsibility to yourself and to the people around you" is essential to being "a worthwhile human being." Mechanistic understanding does not take away "the sense of wonder… chance… free will and control… certainly not the sense of responsibility." In these views, both of these non-religious neurologists are unconsciously in accord with believing scholars, like Richard J. Coleman, who argue against the philosophical assumptions of an "empirical reductionism" that would claim a full account of human nature and behaviour simply because "neurological signals can be detected" in subjects feeling guilt or shame.[45]

NRNZs on statements from Christians about sin

After the above questions concerning their own views on human nature, behaviour, and responsibility, the study participants were then asked to reproduce, in their own words, what they have heard from Christians about sin. They were then asked to say what they found the most and the least agreeable, and from whom or from where they heard these statements.

Attempting to recall and restate the Christian view of sin, many referenced the Bible, the "will of God," what "God says" or what is immoral or wrong, for example, "Doing what the bible [*sic*] tells you not to do…" Respondents made consistent reference to notions of being "born" a sinner, for example "some intrinsic, inescapable state of 'dirtiness' inherited at birth." There were several references to understandings about how sin relates to what is necessary (belief in or forgiveness by Christ) to be saved or to go to heaven instead of hell. Others took the opportunity to supply evaluative (negative) comments; for example, "Fear-mongering," and another: "Flawed. It fails on so many levels." Several made complaints about inconsistency of interpretation, and hypocrisy. There were a few quite specific "sins" that were listed, for example: "being gay," and "sex outside of marriage." There were a few comments about how sin is a heuristic tool or axiom, which is shaped by societal influences, and in turn plays out within society, for example that sin is "Influenced by culture, a useful way of founding society and creating a community."

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[43] Warren S. Brown, "Neurobiological Embodiment of Spirituality and Soul," in *From Cells to Souls - And Beyond: Changing Portraits of Human Nature* (ed. Malcolm A. Jeeves; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 60.

[44] Nita A. Farahany, "Law and Behavioral Morality," in *Evolution and Morality* (ed. James E. Fleming and Sanford Levinson; New York: NYU Press, 2012), 130.

[45] Richard J. Coleman, *Eden's Garden: Rethinking Sin and Evil in an Era of Scientific Promise* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 218, emphasis original.

It is impossible to know how hard they tried, but when it came to recalling statements that they found *most agreeable*, the largest category of respondents stated that they couldn't think of any examples, thus implying that everything they've ever heard from a Christian about sin was bad. Several recalled statements that broadly reflected that not sinning is better for society, with one saying "If sins as put forward by god [*sic*] were abided by, the world would be a better place." Others agreed with sentiments such as "love the sinner, hate the sin," the "golden rule," that "Sin can be forgiven and forgotton [*sic*]," and the notion that "We all sin." Three responses agreed with liberal statements by Christians who apparently said that sin "doesn't exist."

As for statements that were the *least agreeable*, there were no less than fifteen references to "hell," with nearly half (seven) of these accompanied by the word "fire" or "burn"; for example, "Frankly there is nothing more ridiculous than eternal hell. …God will forgive a pedophile but he will send to eternal hell the local doctor who is not Christian!!!" Given the controversy this year in New Zealand over same-sex marriage legislation, it is no shock that there were several references to views on sexuality and marriage, in particular homosexuality, with some specifically referring to gay marriage. Quite a number objected to statements that they thought reflected unfair or illogical standards; for example "The vicarious redemption offered by the Christian faith gives individuals a loop hole to act in the most indefensible manner and then have their obligations and accountability removed from them." Four lamented the notion of being born sinful, and three disliked the need to accept, believe in, or be forgiven by Jesus. A few focused not on the doctrine, but on the behaviour of Christians, such as unforgiveness, judgementalism and hypocrisy.

The *sources* for both the agreeable and the disagreeable statements neatly divided into three groups: "Personal" (family, friends, co-workers, etc.), "Pulpit" (preachers or church services), and "Public" (internet, books, etc.) and the disagreeable statements included one additional category, "Proselytizers" (street preachers). "Personal" sources were the top category for both agreeable and disagreeable statements.

"Jabs": An Observation of Respondent Tone

An unexpected finding from the study that is especially relevant for our theme of communication was the number of significantly sarcastic or dismissive comments that respondents made, which were called "jabs." A corresponding scan for significantly generous or affectionate comments ("compliments") yielded only one in the entire study. When the jabs were categorised according to the stated worldview of the respondents, and corresponding "jab-rates" for each calculated, those who identified as "atheists" had the highest jab-rate, followed by "agnostics." "Spiritual" and "non-religious" gave no jabs at all.

TRANSLATE

"To be honest, as a humanist I don't much like the idea of sin. But given the choice of being powerless in the face of God or an impotent client of a therapist, I side with the Church." (Frank Furedi)[46]

"…the really important thing in the communication process is not what is said, but what the listener hears." (Charles H. Kraft)[47]

If we are going to better communicate the Gospel, in particular the doctrine of sin, we have our work cut out for us. Here we will consider various points of relevance between the findings outlined above and the Christian task of communication of the Doctrine of Sin. They will be framed in four categories: Resonance, Rejection, Restatement, and Relationship.

Resonance

As we saw, there are several areas where NRNZs hear and *resonate* with what Christians say about sin. Firstly, it is not insignificant that such a strong majority had a personal view that wrongdoing was caused by both internal and external factors, meaning that most do *not* simply push wrongdoing onto external causes. In this we can see a willingness to admit (in Plantinga's terms) our "culpability" for the wrong they have done, even if it will be difficult to find agreement on what is right or wrong, and why.

Likewise, few NRNZs believe that human nature is either wholly "good" or wholly "bad," meaning there is openness, at least in some, that we are not simply good victims of bad circumstances, nor will they continue to use the blame-shifting line "it's only human nature." All of our means of communicating the Gospel, whether art, billboard, print, tract, sermon, conversation, or otherwise, must avoid extremes here. We are not so "good" that sin is a cultural accident, and not so "bad" that sin can be simply blamed on our genes.

A third point of resonance would be that basic societal no-nos, the Golden Rule, and even the ten commandments (no doubt in most cases holding the overtly theological first commandment lightly) are seen in a positive light by at least some NRNZs. This no doubt is coloured by a secular conviction that "religious sins" against God are inconsequential compared to "real crimes" against humanity. However, it is worth remembering that in Scripture, to sin against another part of creation (human or non-human) is to sin against its Creator (e.g. Matt 25:31-46). The Bible is concerned with "social justice" from cover to

[46] Frank Furedi, "Making a Virtue of Vice," *The Spectator* (12 January 2002). Cited 31 May 2013. Online: http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-82481131/making-virtue-vice-world.html.
[47] Charles H. Kraft, "What You Heard Is Not What I Meant," in *Culture, Communication, and Christianity: A Selection of Writings by Charles H. Kraft* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2001), 177.

cover.[48] Not only do secular people make "horizontal" sins a priority—apparently the God of Scripture does also.

Rejection

Of course, with resonance, there is clearly also a strong *rejection*. However, here also we need to ensure that we do not give them unnecessary cause to reject the Gospel we're communicating because of the *way* we communicate it. One of the difficulties arises from the significant diversity of views on specifics. The whole of the Gospel can often be rejected due to one objectionable part. This of course doesn't mean we conveniently delete these parts—far from it. At the very least it does mean that care must be taken with statements about these parts.

For example, statements about the specific topic of "hell" were the top category of rejected statements. Many of them seemed to reflect a narrow exclusivism, which is not the only Christian understanding of ultimate human destiny. Whatever view is taken (i.e. exclusivism, inclusivism, etc.) the conviction that Jesus is the exclusive source and means of salvation does not necessitate statements that can sound as though the final destiny of every single person is (or can be) known—as though we were omniscient.[49] At the very least, it is commendable for statements on this topic to be characterized by both Christ-centred conviction and awareness of other views in the Church. As a general rule, opinion is not changed in quick-exchange contexts (single conversation, or many online formats) but instead is usually a longer process.

Another topic demanding careful discussion is sexuality—most of all, homosexuality. Homosexuality in particular is both a divisive and global topic, and the brief mention here may risk being simplistic.[50] Nonetheless, our study showed many NRNZs are sensitive to the topic, so rather than ignoring or evading the issue, we should develop a more considered posture. As with "hell," the most fruitful approach and language will be informed, and compassionate, as well as from a place of conviction. Like many areas of mission, this will not be easy.

In our communication, we can be arrogant and brash, as will be some we communicate with. The number of "jabs" can be a signal that some reject the doctrine with such emotion that discussion may

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[48] See Stephen Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2011).

[49] For a basic introduction to the topic, see Gabriel Fackre, Ronald H. Nash, and John Sanders, *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?: Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Downers Grover, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995); for a recent history of Christian versions of Universalism, see Gregory MacDonald, *All Shall Be Well: Explorations in Universal Salvation and Christian Theologym From Origen to Moltmann* (Cambridge: James Clarke Lutterworth, 2011).

[50] For two recent treatments (more or less representative of both "sides" of this issue) see Gordon Preece and Michael Bird, eds., *Sexegesis: An Evangelical Response to Five Uneasy Pieces on Homosexuality* (Sydney: Youthworks Publishing, 2012); and Patrick S Cheng, *From Sin to Amazing Grace: Discovering the Queer Christ* (New York: Seabury Books, 2012). Several resources specifically for resourcing and enhancing dialogue have also been produced, for example Philip Groves, *The Anglican Communion and Homosexuality: The Official Study Guide to Enable Listening and Dialogue* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008). An affirmative view of homosexuality will of course be welcomed in a modern secular context, so (as this is not an essay on this particular in-house discussion) the suggestions to follow will reflect the "traditional" (conservative) view, which (in addition to being the view of the present author) reflects the majority position of delegates at the 2013 "Gathering" of NZ Baptists, who also voted to establish a "working group" to determine NZ Baptist policy for pastors and churches on same-sex marriages.

prove unfruitful. Prolonged attempts to debate people into agreement with the Gospel often (if not always) do more harm than good. Sin is an inescapable offense to human pride, and it will never be popular. However, it is our responsibility to ensure that they are in fact rejecting the *rightly-offensive Gospel*, as opposed to either being repulsed by an *overly-offensive messenger*, or being merely refreshed by a *non-offensive message*.

On the one hand, we must not *add to* this offense, by being offensive ourselves. Some of the respondents seemed to be rejecting offensive forms of communication. The infamous behaviour of the Westboro Baptist Church (not least their equally infamous website "GodHatesFags.com") is a notorious example of an approach that seems to maximise the offensiveness of their forms of communication in order to ensure their validity ("Oh well, Jesus did say the world would hate us, didn't he?").[51] On the other hand, we must not *take away from* the offense of the Gospel. One also thinks of invitations to receive Christ that are light on repentance from sin and heavy on how much converts will "get" by being a Christian. The study even included respondents who approved of statements from ministers who had preached that sin "doesn't exist." To take sin out of our message or to retain it in a "softened" form is to compromise the integrity of the message itself.

Restatement

If it is not obvious by now, the differences in style, content, tone and wording of the doctrine require us to continually work at *restating* the doctrine. As we have already seen, it is a distortion of the Gospel to try to make the message about human sin sound either harder (to provoke a response from fear) or softer (to provoke a response from relevance). American Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Spong provides a convenient example of the "soft" end of this spectrum, using "victim" language of humans. For Spong, we were not "created good only to fall into sin," but rather are "victimized by the unfinished nature of our humanity."[52] Similarly, for local Anglican Glynn Cardy salvation is *not* about "individual sins being 'cleansed by the blood of Jesus.'"[53] We must resist the temptation to assume that these voices are deliberately seeking to water-down or deny the Gospel. No doubt, these "soft" perspectives stem from a genuine concern for people, and are likely to be a response to overly aggressive or "hard" approaches that use manipulation, fear and guilt to "convert" people. However, because the Gospel does indeed declare humanity equally and universally guilty of sin, we dare not drift into the ditches of either playing up or merely pacifying the guilt that the Gospel of Grace simultaneously exposes and expiates. As local theologian Neil Darragh helpfully points out, there is a difference between what he calls "disabling" guilt, feeling guilty for things one is not responsible for, which does more harm than good, and "enabling" guilt,

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[51] A doctoral dissertation observes dynamics and mechanisms of "social control" using Westboro Baptist Church as a test case; see Todd Powell-Williams, *Social Control and the Westboro Baptist Church: Fuel to the Fire?* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2008).

[52] John Shelby Spong, "Reforming Christology: He Did Not Die for My Sins!" *Human Quest* (December 1999): 7.

[53] Glynn Cardy, "Sin in the City: a St. Matthew's Perspective," in *A Thinker's Guide to Sin: Talking About Wrongdoing Today* (ed. Neil Darragh; Auckland, NZ: Accent Publications, 2010), 50.

which helps people face their real sin, and thus progress toward wellbeing.[54] And in the light of the Gospel, human wellbeing is found not when victims have their guilty feelings relieved, but when sinners have their guilt removed. Following this critique of going "soft" on sin and sinners, it of course needs to be said that the whole church, not just the "soft" parts, needs to give careful attention to its sin-language. According to Marsha Witten's study of Southern Baptist and Presbyterian sermons, even in these supposedly "harder" churches, sin is deflected, weakened and sympathized with.[55]

Again, in our statements about the human condition, we need a "both/and" tension. No human is so devoid of common grace that they are without worth, dignity and rights; and no human is so "good" that their sin has not affected their relationship with God, others, self, and the created order. Communicating a Gospel with sin and forgiveness right in the middle of it can remind us that Jesus said that we are sent like sheep among wolves (Matt 10:16). We should take heed of his advice, then, to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves." We are not *wise* when we add to the offense of the Gospel, and we are not *innocent* when we take away from it.

Relationship

Fourthly and finally, the results evidenced the importance of *relationships* between Christians and NRNZs. It is not insignificant that the top category of sources for both the positively and negatively viewed statements were personal: friends, family, acquaintances, flatmates, or other contacts. One interviewee spoke highly of a friendship with a Christian friend that they "loved to bits." The Gospel has always been shared through everyday personal relationships. The better these relationships, the better space we have to not only share our views but to listen to theirs. Some respondents supplied lengthy answers to the questions, which (along with the willingness to simply participate in the research) could indicate a simple desire to be heard. All the more reason to be "quick to listen" (Jas 1:19b NRSV).

CONCLUSION

This study was primarily a theologically informed listening exercise, and whilst it was not representative of all NRNZs, the responses yielded clear and at least somewhat representative categories to consider. We observed both resonance and rejection, and offered some basic and clear points of implication for communication between Christians and NRNZs, most notably to make the most of our restatements of the doctrine and of our relationships with them. Though unpopular, unfashionable and for some untenable, sin is still an intelligible concept in our world. More than that, it is an essential component of the Christian Gospel, which doggedly insists that we are not all that we were meant to be or can be through the grace and transformation found in Christ. Let this message be rejected on its own terms, and

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[54] Darragh, "The Problem with Talking About Sin Today," 16, emphasis in original.
[55] Marsha G. Witten, "Preaching About Sin in Contemporary Protestantism," *Theology Today* 50, no. 2 (1993): 243; Marsha G. Witten, *All Is Forgiven* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

not by the fault of those who communicate it. To this end, the more deeply we are immersed in this Gospel, and the more patiently we listen to culture, the more effectively we will translate between the two.