

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

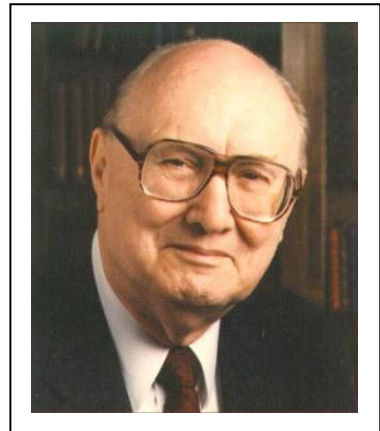
## Thirty-Three Words for Sin in the New Testament: Part 1

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### Introduction

Every system of theology can be characterized by its conception of sin. It is, therefore, a matter of great importance that the words used in the Holy Scriptures for sin in its various aspects be carefully studied with a view to establishing distinctions and conclusions which are fundamental to the study of Hamartiology and which bear an important relation to the doctrine of salvation. Fundamentally, this is the task of the lexicographer, but it is impossible for either the lexicographer or the theologian to work alone, as the work of either is colored by the work of the other.



The present study is limited to the thirty-three words for sin found in the New Testament. Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer has pointed out that there are thirty-three aspects to the riches of grace bestowed upon the believer in Christ at the moment he believes.<sup>1</sup> It is interesting that there should be, in contrast, exactly thirty-three generic words for sin in the New Testament, excluding specific names for acts of sin. While the Old Testament has its important contribution, and the Septuagint does much to link it with the New Testament, in the final analysis the New Testament must be its own authority as to its definition of words for sin, with uses outside the Scripture merely confirming and illustrating their meaning.

Before turning to the ten words for sin in the New Testament from which all the rest are derived, it may be helpful to take a foreview of the contribution of each. The thirty-three words for sin consider sin from every angle, even different forms of the same root word not being used exactly with the same emphasis. One of the most important words is ἁμαρτία and its kindred forms, in which sin is viewed as *missing the mark*, "coming short

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\* This article is the first of a series dealing with the words for sin in the New Testament, an important foundation for the study of Hamartiology.

<sup>1</sup> *Salvation*, pp. 54–68.

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of the glory of God.” In παραβαίνω, we see sin as *transgression*, characterizing sin as a *breaking of moral law* and a *turning from the perfect will of God*. In παράπτωμα, sin is viewed as a *fall*. In παρακούω there is a picture of sin in the light of *failing to listen* to God, with open and flagrant disobedience being the result of this failure. The verb ἀδικέω and its kindred words point to sin as *being unrighteous, unjust, void of God’s approval, and contrary to the holy character of God*. Ἄσεβέω defines sin as *rebelling against God, open and active sinning in defiance of God and His judgment*. Another word for sin, not found in verb form, is ἀνομία, which considers sin as being *lawless, in spite of and contrary to law*. Ἀγνοέω traces sin as springing from ignorance as well as the resulting blindness to spiritual truth, combined in the definition, *to err*. Ἡττάω views sin as a defeat, and when used in the passive means *to be defeated, overcome*, pointing to the need of the power of God for victory. Finally, πονηρία pictures sin as *utter corruption, depravity, iniquity*, which is to be subjected to the righteous judgment of God.

The panorama of sin furnished by these words for sin is a commentary in itself in the number of words used and the frequency of their occurrence. What meaning it gives to the Scripture that “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3)!

## I. Ἄμαρτία

(ἀμαρτάνω, ἄμαρτία, ἀμαρτωλός, ἀμάρτημα, προαμαρτάνω, ἀναμάρτητος)

### 1. Preliminary Definition

The Greek word for sin, ἄμαρτία, is one of the most common found in the New Testament. From it comes the formal name for the doctrine of sin, Hamartiology. The noun form occurs 174 times in the New Testament, with the adjective, ἀμαρτωλός, next in number with 47 instances. The verb, ἀμαρτάνω, occurs 44 times, and the other forms are found only four times or less. The large number of instances makes it the most important word for sin in the New Testament.

A simple definition, as commonly accepted, is *missing the mark*, which is the consistent use of the word both in classic literature as well as the New Testament, though in the New Testament it is restricted in its use to moral or ethical significance.

### 2. Derivation

There is a significant difference of opinion on the derivation of these words for sin which has an important bearing on the ultimate definition and the resulting theology. According to Trench,<sup>2</sup> Suidas has suggested that these words are derived from μάρπτω, meaning *to*

<sup>2</sup> *Synonyms of the New Testament*, p. 240.

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*grasp*, which, with the alpha privative comes to mean a *failure to grasp*. A more common conjecture, however, which is accepted generally, is that ἀμαρτία is derived from μέρος and μείρομαι. This is advanced by Thayer in his discussion of the verb,<sup>3</sup> and even Trench admits this when he writes:

“Buttmann’s conjecture (*Lexilogus*, p. 85, English ed.), that it belongs to the root μέρος, μείρομαι, on which a negative intransitive verb, to be without one’s share of, to miss, was formed (see Xenophon, *Cyrop.* i. 6. 36), has found more favour (see a long note by Fritzsche, on Rom. 5:12, with excellent philology and execrable theology).”<sup>4</sup>

Thayer and others go back to classical literature to prove their contention that the word has a deeper meaning than that offered by Suidas. Thayer quotes Homer’s *Iliad*, 8, 3111, and also 10, 372, to illustrate this point.<sup>5</sup> The word is commonly used to represent the situation where a spear is thrown but fails to hit the mark. Trench finds a hundred such instances in Homer.<sup>6</sup> In Thucydides, iii.98.2, Trench points out that the same word is used to represent the idea of missing one’s way.<sup>7</sup> From these references in Greek literature, it is plain that two things are true: first, the true meaning of the word in classical literature is *to miss the mark*, or *to fail to attain the goal*; second, in classical use the word does not always involve moral guilt or ethical failure. In the instances cited above, it is obvious that the word is used in an unmoral sense. In contrast in the New Testament, the word is *always used in a moral sense* in the 272 instances it occurs, illustrating the premise that in determining the technical meaning of words for sin in the New Testament, in the last analysis, the usage of the New Testament itself is the final authority. A preliminary investigation of the derivation of the word, therefore, leads to the conclusion that ἀμαρτία and its other forms mean essentially *to miss the mark* in a moral or ethical sense, a deeper significance than merely a failure to grasp or achieve intellectually.

### 3. The Verb Ἀμαρτάνω

The verb naturally expresses the action involved in sin. In 39 out of 44 instances it is translated *sin* in the Authorized Version, the other translations being, *trespass* (3 times), *offend* (once), and *for your faults* (once). It is used as a general word for sin as an act of any character which is inferior in righteousness to the holy character of God and fails to measure up to the standard.

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<sup>3</sup> *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, s.v.

<sup>4</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 241.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

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The chief passage in which the importance of the use of the verb is illustrated is Romans 5:12–21. In this passage and its description of original sin much depends upon the meaning of the words used for sin, and in turn, the passage helps to define the nature of sin. In particular the statement, “all have sinned,” is important. The passage reveals the far-reaching effect of Adam’s *missing the mark*. All the race are seen to have sinned in Adam; Adam’s act is revealed to be their act; because of Adam’s sin, all the race receive the imputation of sin, pass into a sinful state, and are under the domination of sin. It is significant that these tremendous results follow Adam’s sin.

In William G. T. Shedd’s discussion of the subject of original sin he points out that the expression “all have sinned” means that all individuals sinned in Adam, i.e., that Adam’s act is their act.<sup>8</sup> As such the reference is to Adam’s sin and not to the individual’s sin. It is the imputation of the first sin, not the sins of individuals which are committed through choice after human birth. Shedd brings this out in the following discussion:

“But while ἥμαρτον in Rom. 5:12 is active in signification, it does not denote the transgressions of each individual subsequent to birth, and when no longer in Adam, but the transgression of Adam and Eve inclusive of their posterity. This is proved by the following considerations: 1. *One*, and but one sin is specified as the ground of the penalty of death. This is asserted five times over, in succession, in Rom. 5:15–19. In Rom. 5:12, ἥμαρτον unquestionably refers to the same sin that is spoken of in Rom. 5:15–19.

“2. In Rom. 5:14, some who die, namely, infants, ‘did not sin after the similitude of Adam’s first transgression.’ That is, they did not repeat the first sin. They must, therefore, have sinned in some other manner because they are a part of the ‘all’ (πάντες) who sinned, and because they experience the death which is the wages of sin. The only other conceivable manner of sinning is that of participation in the first sin itself. But participation in Adam’s first sin is not the repetition of it by the individual.

“From these considerations, it is evident that the word ‘sinned’ in Rom. 5:12 is active in its signification.”<sup>9</sup>

Now, if the meaning of active sin be affixed to the verb ἁμαρτάνω, the suggestion of Suidas and others that the word means only an intellectual insufficiency is at once ruled inadmissible. Adam’s sin, and our participation in it, is not simply a failure to grasp the character of sin and the results of sin. It was willful disobedience in the face of God’s

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<sup>8</sup> *Dogmatic Theology*, Vol. II, pp. 169–256.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 183, 184.

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specific instruction on the matter of inevitable punishment if he sinned. It may, therefore, be concluded that Adam's first sin, being active in its nature and tremendous in its results, characterizes the meaning of the verb.

There is no necessity of defining the verb further inasmuch as the discussion of the various uses of the noun-form to all practical purposes coincides with the verb, except, of course, that the verb is limited to the idea of action, while the noun may refer to a state or a condition. Apart from this, the noun and the verb are used in the same sense.

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## 4. The Noun ἁμαρτία

The noun is found most frequently in the New Testament, a total of 174 times, and is translated sin in all but two instances in the Authorized Version (*offence*, once, and *sinful*, once). As indicated above, it is identical in idea to the verb.

A study of the uses of the noun reveal that there are seven important aspects indicated in the meaning and use of the word: (1) the sin which is imputed to man because of Adam's sin; (2) the sin nature, which is transmitted from generation to generation; (3) the sphere of domination of the sin nature in which the sin nature rules; (4) the act of sin itself; (5) sin in its total, i.e., the collective use of the word; (6) the use of the abstract (ἁμαρτία, *sin*), for the concrete (ἁμαρτωλός, *sinner*); (7) the use of the noun (ἁμαρτία) for the adjective (ἁμαρτωλός).

The first use of the noun, in reference to imputed sin, may be well illustrated by Romans 5:12. If the expression "all have sinned" refers to the participation of the race in Adam's sin, it necessarily follows in the nature of the case that the noun found in the same verse would be similar in meaning. In both cases in verse twelve the article is used with the noun, in contrast to verse thirteen where the article is not used. In verse thirteen, it is referring to sin in general, such as was in the world before law came into existence in the form of the law of Moses. In verse twelve, death is directly related to "the sin," that is, to the sin which "entered the world." Death is said to have come by this sin. It must follow, as Shedd indicates, that sin here is imputed sin, whereby the race is placed in a state in which there is an absence of righteousness.

It may be noted, however, that in addition to the imputation of Adam's sin, God imputes or does not impute acts of sin performed after Adam. In Romans 4:8, for instance, where we have an accurate translation of Psalm 32:1, 2, the state of the righteous and the unrighteous is contrasted in that though both are sinful, God does not impute sin in the case of those who stand justified. It is clearly not only Adam's sin that is meant here, but acts of sin on the part of the individual.

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The second use of the noun is in reference to the sin nature. It is an historic fact that all men since Adam have sinned. This is best explained on the ground that they have inherited a sin nature. In contrast to imputed sin, which is not experimental, the sin nature is felt and seen in action by everyone. A. A. Hodge in his discussion of the effects of Adam's sin in outlining the sin nature which men from Adam down have possessed writes:

"The whole nature became depraved. The will being at war with the conscience, the understanding became darkened; the conscience, in consequence of the constant outrage and neglect, became seared; the appetites of the body inordinant, and its members instruments of unrighteousness.... There remained in man's nature no recuperative principle; he must go on from worse to worse, unless God interposes."<sup>10</sup>

The fact of the sin nature is everywhere assumed and clearly taught in Scripture. Romans six and seven constitute an exposition of the sin nature as well as its manifestations. In this section, the sin nature is viewed as our master until Christ came and through His death wrought liberty for us. The sin nature must be carefully distinguished, however, from its manifestations. Every Christian has the sin nature, but it does not necessarily follow that this sin nature should be allowed to manifest itself. Progressive sanctification is only possible in human experience as the character of the sin nature is recognized and the principles of overcoming it are understood and used.

In 1 John 1:8, 10, we have a careful distinction between the sin nature and sins which proceed from it. The sin nature is always represented by the singular, while the act of sin which proceeds from the sin nature may be either singular or plural, though usually plural in the nature of the case. In 1 John 1:8, there is clear reference to the sin nature, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." *Sin* is a translation of ἁμαρτία in the singular. In verse ten, the verb is used, "If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." The verb (ἡμαρτήκαμεν) is found in the perfect active indicative and its *aktionsart* is iterative. The meaning is, then, that in the past there have been definite acts of sin repeatedly committed until this reiteration can be said to be a settled habit.

In verse nine, which precedes this verse, John has just pointed the way in which a sinning Christian is restored into fellowship with God, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." In verse nine, the noun for *sins* is in the plural as in the English translation, and it refers to sinful acts. In these three verses there is a threefold argument. In verse eight, the existence of the sin

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<sup>10</sup> *Outlines of Theology*, p. 324.

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nature is revealed. In verse nine, the manifestation of the sin nature in acts of sin is shown to require confession for restoration. In verse ten, denial of sins is declared to be a lie and a token that the word of Christ is not in us. One who properly interprets the Word of God will recognize both the sin nature and its manifestations.

The character of the sin nature is best understood in the light of the sphere of domination of the sin nature. We know the sin nature by what it does. In Romans six, it is revealed that the death of Christ voids the claim of the sin nature for expression. We are exhorted to lay hold in faith on this truth. The singular noun is used throughout the passage for *sin*, manifestly referring to the sin nature. Three principles are given as the means of overcoming the sin nature. In view of the work of Christ, we are exhorted first, to reckon ourselves dead to sin and alive to God; second, we are to refuse permission to the sin nature to continue reigning; third, we are to yield ourselves to our new Master, God. In other words, we are to face the fact of the termination of the rule of the sin nature over man, and we are to act on this fact in refusing recognition of the sin nature, acknowledging instead our new Master.

It is clear in the nature of the case that there is no ground for the theory that the Christian can eradicate his sin nature. Ultimate sanctification will effect this, but there is no hope of this in this life. The Christian positionally is perfect in Christ, but experimentally he must fight the old sinful nature with the weapons God has given him. In his old nature as well as in act, the Christian will *miss the mark* or the standard of holiness as set forth in the character of God. To avoid sinning, we are to yield to our new Master, confessing our known sins (1 John 1:9).

In the light of previous discussion, the meaning of ἁμαρτία used for the act of sin itself is fairly obvious. Whether in omission or in commission, sin is made concrete in act. Most of the references concern sin as an act. It is constantly referred to as needing forgiveness, and in the Gospels, Christ is seen forgiving the sins of men. It is a matter of considerable significance that ἁμαρτία is found most frequently in John, Romans, Hebrews, and 1 John, books of the Bible which deal chiefly with salvation from sin.

Three other uses of the noun remain to be examined. The word is used to mean sin in its total, that is, the collective use of the word. In John 1:29, John the Baptist is quoted, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." No specific sin or kind of sin is indicated, but sin is viewed in its total. Sin as an obstacle to salvation was removed by the sacrifice of Christ as the "lamb of God." The fact that the singular is used is important in specifying the collective use of the word.

An interesting reference to the use of the abstract to represent the concrete is found in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "For he hath made him *to be* sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might

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be made the righteousness of God in him.” As Thayer puts it, “He treated him, who knew no sin, as a sinner.”<sup>11</sup> There is no thought of inaccuracy in its use here, however. While Christ was made sin for us, i.e., our sin was imputed to Him, He was not made sinner for us, though He took the sinner’s place. Christ was treated as if He had *missed the mark*, but it was His sin judicially not experimentally.

The use of ἁμαρτία in place of the adjective is the seventh and last use of the noun. A good example is found in Romans 7:7, where the question is asked, “Is the law sin?”. The obvious meaning is, “Is the law evil,” as Charles Hodge points out.<sup>12</sup> The noun is used where normally an adjective would be expected. Calvin’s explanation that the law is regarded as the cause of sin, as Hodge points out, is improbable.<sup>13</sup>

All the uses of the noun in the New Testament consistently support the definition that ἁμαρτία is active sin, distinctly moral and ethical in its nature and involving God’s judgment upon it and the death of His Son. There is absolutely no ground for minimizing the nature or results of sin from the use of this word in the New Testament.

## 5. The Adjective Ἀμαρτωλός

Of the remaining words with the same root, the adjective is found most often, occurring 47 times in the New Testament, and is similar in meaning to the idea of the noun and verb just discussed. The adjective specifies an act, condition, or state as coming short of the perfect righteousness of the character of God.

In its use in the New Testament, it is remarkable that the adjective is used as a noun, or with a noun understood, in every case except four, where it is translated *sinful*. An interesting case where it is translated in its natural force as an adjective is found in Romans 7:13, “Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful.” Hodge in commenting on this verse says, “The true character of sin, as sin, is revealed by its making even that which is in itself good the means of sin.”<sup>14</sup> The adjective is used in reference to the display of sin in its true character.

The use of the adjective for the noun, or with the noun or pronoun understood (a regular Greek idiom), is capable of different shades of thought, even though it is uniformly translated *sinner*. It is sometimes used in the sense of *not being free from sin*, as Thayer

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<sup>11</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 246, 247.

<sup>13</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 354.



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points out in discussion of the adjective.<sup>15</sup> Examples of this may be found frequently in the Gospels, and in Romans 3:7; 5:19; 1 Timothy 1:15; Hebrews 7:26.

The adjective is frequently found, however, to refer to those particularly devoted to sin, especially sinful, or guilty of certain degrading sins in the eyes of others. Thus in the Gospels, tax-gatherers are called *sinners* (Lk. 15:2; 18:13; 19:7). The expression *publicans and sinners* is frequently found in the Gospels (cf. Mt. 9:10; 11:19, etc.). Gentiles in general are called *sinners* by the Jews (Mk. 14:41; Lk. 24:7; Gal. 2:15). The adjective as a whole, then, can be said to first of all represent the natural state of all men as not free from sin; second, it refers to men whose condition or act is especially sinful, i.e., above that of other men.

## 6. The Noun ἁμαρτήμα

According to most texts, ἁμαρτήμα is found only four times in the New Testament (Mk. 3:28, 29; Rom. 3:25; 1 Cor. 6:18). Some manuscripts have it also in Mark 4:12, as in the Authorized Version, and in 2 Peter 1:9. The text accepted for the American Standard Version eliminates the word from Mark 4:12 entirely, and in 2 Peter 1:9 the more common noun ἁμαρτία is recognized as correct.

ἁμαρτήμα is a noun, meaning, according to Thayer, *a sin, evil deed*.<sup>16</sup> It is the concrete of which ἁμαρτία is the abstract. In Mark 3:28 and in 1 Corinthians 6:18, it is used in a general reference to all sins. In Mark 3:29, the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is called “an eternal sin” if ἁμαρτήμα is the correct text instead of κτίσεως. In Romans 3:25, it is used for sins committed before the cross. There is no question that the word means sin in the act, as contrasted to and being more specific than ἁμαρτία, sin in the abstract. In the light of the previous discussion on Romans 5:12, it is highly significant that ἁμαρτία and not ἁμαρτήμα is used in Romans 5, or else we would be compelled to interpret Romans 5:12 as meaning that sinful acts entered the world, which is not the primary thought.

## 7. The Verb Προαμαρτάνω

This verb found twice in the New Testament (2 Cor. 12:21; 13:2) is identical in meaning with the verb ἁμαρτάνω, which has been already discussed, but with the additional thought in the prefix of *before* or *already*. The context of the two instances indicates that Paul is referring to acts of sin committed before he wrote 2 Corinthians. Apart from this time factor, the word has no separate significance.

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<sup>15</sup> *Op. cit.*, s.v.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, s.v.

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## 8. The Adjective 'Αναμάρτητος

According to Thayer this word has two possible meanings: “one who has not sinned, and one who cannot sin.”<sup>17</sup> In the only instance in which it occurs in the New Testament (John 8:7), it is used in Christ’s question, “He that is *without sin* among you, let him first cast a stone at her.” Here it is obviously the former of the two meanings, though the latter is not impossible. In that case, Christ would have meant, “He that is not capable of the same sin,” i.e., adultery, “let him first cast a stone.” The word occurs frequently in the Septuagint and in Greek literature from Homer down.

## 9. Conclusion

In the foregoing discussion, which has included the six different words of the same root found in the New Testament, the general character and meaning of this group has been established. All six words have a moral or ethical meaning in the New Testament in every one of the many instances in which they are found. All represent a position, state, condition, or act which falls short of the holy character of God. This is shown to be more than a lack of comprehension or an intellectual limitation. In every case there is a failure or sin which is subject to judgment. Because of the ἁμαρτία of Adam the whole race came under the curse of sin, and Christ in His death atoned for ἁμαρτία. To affirm in the face of these facts that this word does not represent any serious departure from the will of God is at once to declare God unrighteous in imputing Adam’s sin and make the death of Christ an unnecessary and arbitrary act. Taken in the light of further discussion of other words for sin, the whole picture is tremendous in its revelation, portraying both the utter need of salvation and the wonder of God’s grace.

—Dallas, Texas.

(Series to be continued in the April–June Number, 1943)<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, s.v.

<sup>18</sup> Walvoord, J. F. (1943). “Thirty-Three Words for Sin in the New Testament.” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 100, 164–176.