



4-1-2002

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Recommended Citation

Swedin, Eric G. (2002) "Sin and Evil: A Commentary on The Paradoxical Nature of Sin," *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy*: Vol. 27 : No. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol27/iss1/4>

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Sin and Evil: A Commentary on The Paradoxical Nature of Sin

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Dr. John Rector's article, "The Paradoxical Nature Of Sin," provokes serious thought and contemplation. His emphasis on the curious nature of paradox and the virtue of compassion rings true.

Because I agree with him on every principle, this commentary will expand on only one point – the relationship between sin and evil. These are not synonymous: sin is the knowing violation of divine law; evil is defined as bad things happening (see Elder Orson F. Whitney in Green, 1963, pp. 435-436). Understanding the difference between the two is based on an understanding of divine law.

The divine laws of God the Father, established before the creation of the earth, govern every aspect of existence. Some of these laws have been discovered by science and amply demonstrate the cause-and-effect relationship that exists in our universe. No one may abolish or alter the laws which govern our existence (Widtsoe, 1960).

The prophet Joseph Smith said, "A man is saved no faster than he gets knowledge" (Smith, 1980, 4:588). Thus salvation is a process of discovering, understanding, and applying through obedience, our knowledge of those laws.

God the Father and Jesus Christ are bound by the laws of the universe just as much as we are, and They always work through these laws. Furthermore, according to Elder Orson F. Whitney, some of these "... laws are fundamental. The Almighty did not create them,

but he controls them and overrules their workings for the welfare of his creatures" (Green, 1963, pp. 471-472). These pre-existent laws are part of the nature of ultimate reality, beyond the control of God's creative powers. It seems logical that among these laws is the law which decrees the necessity of opposition in all things (2 Nephi 2:11, 15) as well as the law of agency (D&C 29:34-35). Elder Whitney also pointed out that "the gospel, like all other creations, was organized out of materials already in existence – eternal principles adapted to the needs of man and the purposes of deity" (Green, 1963, p. 438).

During the great council in heaven, Satan proposed to do away with the law of agency (Moses 4:1-3). Satan did not understand that God the Father was in no position, because of the laws of the universe, to approve a plan of forced obedience. As President John Taylor pointed out, "everything in Nature is governed strictly according to immutable, eternal, unchangeable laws" (*Journal of Discourses*, 20:112). Jesus, with his superior knowledge and understanding, knew that no alternate

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plan was possible. In fact, without real agency, existence is quite meaningless (2 Nephi 2:23). Ironically, while trying to deny the agency of others, Satan and his followers exercised their own agency in order to rebel against God (D&C 29:36; Moses 4:3). Satan and his followers could not accept the idea that agency cannot be denied, and so chose to live a lie for eternity (D&C 76:25,33,37).

Sin can only happen because a superstructure of laws exists, as Alma demonstrated when he asked rhetorically “How could he sin if there was no law?” (Alma 42:17). The possibility of sin is essential in order to experience opposition (2 Nephi 2:16, D&C 29:39). Without the possibility for opposition and sin there can be no progress (Moses 5:11) – and the Plan of Salvation is all about progress. Our earthly existence is necessary for the children of God to advance so they may become like him (Abraham 3:25-26). Life here is a test, and that testing can only come through exercising agency (2 Nephi 2:27; D&C 101:78), making real choices between good and evil. The ability to sin is necessary.

Elder Orson F. Whitney defined sin as the knowing violation of divine law (see McConkie, 1979, p. 735). The key word here is *knowing*. There is a distinct difference between *evil* and *sin*, which Elder Whitney stated quite eloquently:

Sin is the transgression of divine law as made known through the conscience or by revelation. A man sins when he violates his conscience, going contrary to light and knowledge – not the light and knowledge that has come to his neighbor, but that which has come to himself. He sins when he does the opposite of what he knows to be right. Up to that point he only blunders. One may suffer painful consequences for only blundering, but he cannot commit sin unless he knows better than to do the things in which the sin consists. One must have a conscience before he can violate it. (Green, 1963, pp. 435-436; also quoted in McConkie, 1979, p. 735 [note that a printer’s error left out part of the first sentence in Green, 1963])

A person’s conscience comes from the Light of Christ, which is given to every person born in the world (D&C 84:45-46). Social and environmental conditions can erode and destroy this precious gift that all are born with. But the young man or woman raised in a society that encourages promiscuity or other such sins would certainly be held much less accountable than a person raised within the LDS church and taught the correct principles with respect to these sins (see D&C 101:78). Perhaps this is what President Joseph F. Smith meant when he said: “all men will be held accountable for the use they make of the light which they possess” (1919, p. 205).

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