

Can a Believer Commit Voluntary Sin and Still  
Remain a Believer?

Sam Degner

Middler Dogmatics  
Professors Bivens and Gurgel  
May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2003

Can a believer commit voluntary sin and still remain a believer? This question is more than just dogmatic hair-splitting. The matter has real significance for a pastor as he ministers to his flock. It is something that ought to be studied because it can have direct import on situations that a pastor will face. It makes a difference when a pastor seeks either to cut with the law or to comfort with the gospel as he counsels his members. And along with the above question, other issues arise. What exactly is a voluntary sin? Have some believers fallen from grace and been re-converted many times in their lives? If that is the case, and the person dies while committing this voluntary sin, does that mean he must have gone to hell? Does a voluntary sin cause a fall from grace? Does it *indicate* a fall from grace? This paper will touch on all of those related issues as it examines whether a believer can indeed commit voluntary sin and still remain a believer.

In order to begin, some definitions must necessarily be set out. First, who is a believer? A believer is one who believes in Jesus Christ as his or her only Savior from sin. A believer is one in whom the Holy Spirit is active, strengthening the faith that is in the heart. A believer is one whose life, sanctified by the Spirit, is full of good works motivated by the gospel. A believer, as 1 John 3:9 says, no longer keeps on sinning. “No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.” However, that does not mean that a believer’s life is perfect. In fact, even the life of a sanctified believer will never be perfect and completely devoid of sin on this side of death. The concept of *simul iustus et peccator* is very important in this discussion. Every believer is at once both sinner and saint. Although he has been justified by Christ and sanctified by the Spirit who has created a new man within him, he still has the old man to contend with. A believer’s life is marked by a constant struggle between the Old Adam and the New Man. However, a believer is never fully dominated by his Old Adam. Paul writes in Romans 6:14, “For sin shall not be your master,

because you are not under law, but under grace.” At times it may even appear that the Old Man is winning the struggle, but the Holy Spirit is at work nonetheless. Faith is still present and has not been driven out. This is how a believer is characterized.

It is then also necessary to define the term “voluntary sin.” A voluntary sin is one that a person commits willfully and purposely. It is a sin that a person considers, plans, and executes. Edward Koehler says, “Voluntary sins are sins we commit by deliberate volition, contrary to our conscience; involuntary sins are those which a man commits when he is carried away by the lust of his flesh to do what otherwise he would not do.”<sup>1</sup> Francis Pieper has this to say:

“The will of a man plays a part in every sin, whether he is aware of it or not, and in that sense we might call all sins voluntary sins. But the will of man participates in varying degrees. In some cases the participation of the will is so pronounced that man plans the sin, though he may hide behind all manner of excuses, and executes it with heart and soul. Examples: Judas’ betrayal (Matt. 26:14-16); Absalom’s rebellion (2 Samuel 15). In this sense we speak of *peccata voluntaria, proaeretica, malitiae* (willful, premeditated, malicious sins). In other instances the will of man so recedes into the background that the sin is called forth by ignorance, by passions, such as fear, by natural love, by partisanship, etc...(involuntary sins, sins of ignorance, of rashness).<sup>2</sup>

In a believer, voluntary sin is a sin that the person commits even though his conscience is warning him and he is well aware that he is going against the will of God—as opposed to a sin of “weakness.”<sup>3</sup>

Having defined those two terms, we proceed to look at whether a believer can commit a voluntary sin and remain a believer. We have seen that a believer’s life is characterized by faith in Christ and good works produced by the Spirit. However, the believer’s life is also marked by a constant struggle between his old and new men. Therefore, this question must be answered:

When a believer commits a voluntary sin, does that indicate that the Old Man has completely

---

<sup>1</sup> Edward W. A. Koehler, *Summary of Christian Dogmatics*, River Ford, Ill: Koehler Publishing Company, 1939.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950, vol. 1, p. 564.

<sup>3</sup> Theodore F. A. Nickel, “Sin,” *The Abiding Word*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, vol. 2, 1947, p. 162.

won over his heart and snuffed out the flame of faith? Or does it signify that the old man has for that moment gotten the upper hand, and caused the believer to go through with the sin he had contemplated, but has not completely pushed the Holy Spirit out of his heart?

In the first place, it is abundantly clear from Scripture that those who live *constantly* in willful sin, whose lives are dominated by it, do not have faith. St. Paul says in Romans 8:13, “For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die.” For “live” Paul uses the verb ζῆτε, which is in the present tense. He makes it clear that if a person *continues* to live in sin, he is no longer spiritually alive. We read also in 1 John 3:8, “He who does what is sinful is of the devil.” Here John uses a present participle, ποιῶν. The sense is clear—he who *is doing* and *keeps doing* what is sinful is under the control of the devil, and not the Holy Spirit. In Galatians 4:19-20, Paul gives us a list of the fruits of the sinful nature. Then, later in verse 20, he says, “I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.” Here again, the verb used is a present participle, πράσσοντες. Paul’s warning is clear—that those who *continue* practicing any of those evil deeds mentioned earlier do not have the saving faith that is necessary for admission into God’s kingdom. In Hebrews 10:26 we read, “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.” Walther speaks this way: “When a person persists in his sin against his conscience, though he knows it to be a sin, and continues sinning purposely for a long time, he no longer has faith.”<sup>4</sup> Thus it is evident from the above passages and others that the manifestly impenitent who continue living in their willful sin do not have faith.

---

<sup>4</sup> C. F. W. Walther, The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986, p. 220.

But let us get rid of those words like *continues, persists, keeps on*, etc. If a believer commits a voluntary sin *just one time*, has he thereby necessarily fallen from grace? Walther seems to say yes: “The light of faith can be extinguished not only by gross sins, but by *any* willful, intentional sin...They plan to do a certain thing and carry out their purpose, although they know that it is contrary to God’s Word. In such instances faith becomes extinct.”<sup>5</sup> Luther has this to say: “When a person sins against his conscience, that is, when he knowingly and intentionally acts contrary to God...he is, while consciously persisting in his intention, without repentance and faith and does not please God.”<sup>6</sup> Koehler would agree: “No man can sin willfully [sic] and intentionally and at the same time believe in Christ for the forgiveness of his sins.”<sup>7</sup>

This is not to say, however, that that person has permanently hardened his or her heart. Walther goes on to say: “The person caught in this snare recovers his faith if he promptly arrests himself in his wrongdoing.”<sup>8</sup> He gives as an example Peter, who denied his Lord three times and subsequently repented upon catching a glance from that same Lord. (On the other hand, Pieper says that Peter’s sin was one of intimidation or fear; he did not *want* to deny his Lord.)<sup>9</sup> But this question then arises in the mind of any believer after reading Walther’s words: Have I, then, fallen from grace and been raised back up many times in my life? Walther appears to say so: “Accordingly, defection from faith occurs far oftener than we imagine.”<sup>10</sup> If that is the case, then the natural follow-up question is “What would have happened to me had I died while intentionally sinning?” To again quote Walther: “As soon as faith is lost through some mortal sin, the grace of God is also lost, and such a person becomes a child of death and damnation. He may return to faith and ultimately be saved, *but in the interval he was not a blessed, but an*

---

<sup>5</sup> Walther, *Law and Gospel*, p. 216 (italics mine).

<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, St. Louis Ed., vol. X, p. 1706 (as quoted in Walther’s *Law and Gospel*, p. 217).

<sup>7</sup> Koehler, *Summary of Christian Doctrine*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>8</sup> Walther, *Law and Gospel*, p. 216.

*utterly miserable, lost creature.*”<sup>11</sup> In this context, he is using the term “mortal sin” to refer to those who have pushed out faith by sinning willfully. So it appears that a person who commits voluntary sin is placing himself outside of God’s kingdom, at least, while he is sinning. What a scary thought! And well it should frighten believers so that they take this matter seriously and not think that they can sin on purpose “just this one time,” and then quickly repent, and not have to worry about losing the faith. Walther gives another Biblical example as support—that of David. He says that if he had died during the interim between his adultery and his confession before Nathan, he would have been eternally damned.<sup>12</sup> This seems to agree with all of the passages cited above, as well as with David’s own words in the Psalms. The way in which he describes his spiritual life before he confessed his sins to God makes it clear that he was in the devil’s grip. And so all of this should serve as a clear warning to Christians to take the matter of voluntary sin seriously.

However, it would be difficult to say definitively that any time a believer sins on purpose, he has automatically fallen from grace. To make it such a black-and-white issue would be to go slightly farther than Scripture itself goes. The concrete Biblical examples given above are not solid evidence. Peter’s denial certainly could have been influenced by fear. David’s clearly was a case of a prolonged period of sinning. The New Testament passages also speak of continual sin. Moreover, an absolutely affirmative answer could unnecessarily burden consciences. A believer could look back on his life and realize that he had indeed sinned intentionally at times and be overwhelmed with guilt. Or, more likely, he might be afraid of falling into that trap again and therefore be terrified that he might die while doing so. Certainly, it is good to have a healthy fear

---

<sup>9</sup> Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 565.

<sup>10</sup> Walther, *Law and Gospel*, p. 216.

<sup>11</sup> Walther, *Law and Gospel*, p. 221 (italics mine).

<sup>12</sup> Walther, *Law and Gospel*, p. 216.

of sin as Luther says, “One who does not constantly fear and act as if he were filled with mortal sins will hardly be saved at all.”<sup>13</sup> Yet, that fear becomes unhealthy when it causes doubt of forgiveness. On the other hand, a believer could end up making excuses for every sin he commits (“that one was unintentional; that one was out of fear; that one was uncontrollable lust”) just to comfort himself because of the fear he has of committing intentional sins.

It can also be argued that a person who sins on purpose and then, immediately afterwards, realizes what a terrible act he has done and genuinely repents, had never really fallen completely from grace. For if his repentance is immediate, could that not indicate that the Holy Spirit was at work in him all the while? It is possible that while he planned and executed his sin, the old self was gaining the upper hand on the new man and controlling his actions. But the new man was not dead, and when the deed was done the Holy Spirit fanned the flickering flame of faith back to a bright glow through repentance and forgiveness.

It seems that one key to the issue is the struggle. As mentioned earlier, the Old Adam and the New Man are at constant war with each other.<sup>14</sup> As long as that struggle is going on in a person’s heart, as long as the New Man continues to fight, that means that the Holy Spirit is still at work in the heart and that faith is not lost. Walther says, “Christians in distress still have faith, and the Spirit of God is working in them.”<sup>15</sup> At times the Old Man will win the battle and produce sinful acts. At times Satan might even persuade a person to go knowingly against his conscience and against God’s will. But his new man can fight fiercely and cause his conscience to burn even as he sins, and either stop him from doing his deed or produce immediate contrition and repentance afterwards. The New Man is still winning the war. But if, through conscious and intentional sin, the believer continues to allow the Old Adam to take the upper hand, his heart

---

<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther, Luther’s Works, American Edition, Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957, vol. 31, p. 242.

<sup>14</sup> E. W. Bullinger, The Two Natures in the Child of God, London: The Lamp Press, 1950, p.27.

becomes hard and the war is lost. Pieper says, “When in the lives of erstwhile believers the struggle of the spirit against the flesh has ceased and the sins have again become dominant, then these believers have fallen from faith.”<sup>16</sup> That is why Paul admonishes us in Romans 6:12, “Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.”

Thus, we cannot say for certain that a believer automatically falls from grace when he or she commits a voluntary sin. So why do Luther, Walther, and Koehler use such strong language that seems to say otherwise? They do so for good reason. Intentional sin is a most dangerous and deadly thing. A believer cannot simply relax and say, “well, as long as I’m not always in the habit of sinning intentionally, I’m okay.” The point is that one single intentional sin can drive the Holy Spirit from the heart. Take the example of David, who lusted after Bathsheba and then followed through quite willingly with his desires. That intentional sin led to a hardening of his heart so that he seemed to have no problem with planning and executing another willful wrong—the murder of Uriah. After that we have no evidence of any spark of repentance or faith until the prophet Nathan confronts him. David gave in to his lust and decided to go through with his plan to commit adultery—one intentional sin that led him on the road to damnation! Thankfully his gracious God sent the prophet to bring him back.

The problem is that our sinful nature steps in as soon as we ask the question, “Does a believer who commits voluntary sin necessarily fall from grace?” He is desperately hoping for a negative response so that he can put the Christian at ease in his sin. And as soon as he hears that the Bible does not come out with a big “yes” to that question, he is thrilled that has a little wiggle room to work with—an excuse to get the Christian to try a few intentional sins every once in a while. But the point in asking the question is not to look for cracks in the stone tablets of the law.

---

<sup>15</sup> Walther, Law and Gospel, p. 399.

<sup>16</sup> Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, vol. 1, p. 565.

God's Word is perfectly clear in its warnings against the deadly danger of willful sinning. The law is the law. It condemns our sins; it does not justify them. It is not there for us to look for loopholes. Rather, as John says in his first epistle, chapter two, verse one, "I write this to you so that you will not sin." That is why the Lutheran fathers rightly speak so strongly on the subject. Thus while we should be careful of going too far and saying for certain that every willful sin that a believer commits *necessarily* causes a fall from grace, we also must recognize with utmost seriousness that every single intentional sin certainly *can* and *does* lead to damnation. If we realize that, we will want to repent for every sin we commit, especially those that we commit voluntarily, and beg for the Spirit's help in resisting temptation so that sin may not have dominion over us. And as the very next verse in John's epistle says, "But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."

All of this has very practical ramifications for pastors. A pastor will be confronted with people who are sinning intentionally and are manifestly impenitent, having hardened their hearts and finding themselves outside of God's kingdom. To these he must declare God's judgment on them in their present state. He will also have members who still confess Jesus as their Savior and still show evidence of faith, but who seem to be dancing dangerously close to the line of willful sin. These the pastor must warn with all the sternness of the law that they are taking their spiritual lives into their own hands. The pastor will also speak with conscience-stricken members who are afraid that they have committed purposeful sins in the past and may do so again. They need to receive the assurance that their concern over their past sins is evidence of faith and repentance, and that God has forgiven those sins and will be with them to strengthen them in their fight against temptation in the future. A pastor may also find himself in a situation in which

a friend or relative of a member has died while committing an apparent intentional sin, like driving drunk, a fit of rage, or a spur-of-the-moment suicide. The member may be afraid that that person must have necessarily gone to hell because of that. In an instance like that the shepherd of souls will want to assure his member that the soul of the deceased is in the hands of a gracious God and that it is solely his job to judge. However, at the same time he will want to be careful not to downplay the seriousness of sin, especially of this type, lest he give his members' Old Adams the opportunity to find an excuse to sin recklessly or purposefully. In all of these situations he will need to rightly divide the law and gospel—the law to cut and to kill the sinner and the gospel to heal and bring to life the penitent.

In the end, we can confidently say, based on Scripture, that a person who continues living in willful sin against conscience and God's Word, despite warnings and without repentance, is indeed no longer a believer. However, it is difficult to say for certain, on Scriptural grounds, that a believer who commits any sin on purpose ceases for the moment to be a believer. Nonetheless, the Bible's warnings against willful sin are clear, and we ought not file down the blade of the law. Thanks be to God for giving us his law to show us our sin; thanks be to Jesus for covering over even our intentional sins; and thanks be to the Spirit for strengthening us in our daily struggle with sin!

## Bibliography

Bullinger, E. W. Two Natures in the Child of God. London: The Lamp Press, 1950.

Koehler, E. W. A. Summary of Christian Dogmatics. River Ford, Ill: Koehler Publishing Company, 1939.

Luther, Martin. Luther's Works, American Edition. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957, vol. 31.

Nickel, Theodore F. A. "Sin," The Abiding Word. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, vol. 2, 1947.

Pieper, August. Christian Dogmatics, vol. 1. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950.

Walther, C. F. W. The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986.