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Communal Reconciliation: Corporate Responsibility and Opposition to Systemic Sin

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Abstract: Recent events have given rise to considerations of systemic sin and how the church should respond to it. This article looks at passages in the Hebrew Bible which demonstrate the communal character of sin and atonement. God holds the whole nation responsible despite righteous individuals, often for the sins of individuals. Paul develops this relation between individuals and groups in his ecclesiology. I argue from this development that responsibility for sins, individual or systemic, is placed on the whole community. Thus, there is for the church a corporate responsibility for reconciliation, demanding group agency in rectifying systemic sins like racism.

Introduction

Recent events which highlight the ingrained racism of our societies have given rise to new considerations on how we ought to think about the response of the church to the idea of systemic or structural sin. This has become a pressing problem for Christian theologians as modern observations of sin 'are prominently *social and corporate* in character, as opposed to the very individualistic traditional version of the seven deadly sins'.[1] After identifying what is meant by the idea of systemic sin in conversation with figures such as James Cone and

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1 Derek R. Nelson, *What's Wrong with Sin: Sin in Individual and Social Perspective from Schleiermacher to Theologies of Liberation* (London: T&T Clark International, 2009), p. 1.

John Williamson Nevin, I will look at key passages in the Hebrew Bible which resonate with the concept of systemic sin. In the failings of Israel, God holds the whole nation responsible despite righteous individuals. In other instances, God holds the nation responsible for the sins of individuals. This relation between the individual and the group is further developed in Pauline ecclesiology. From these developments, I will argue that responsibility for sin, whether individual or systemic, is placed on the community (defined provisionally as a group of persons).[2] Paul's ecclesiology further focuses on the responsibility of the church to respond to sin in light of this corporate solidarity in sin and atonement. This requires a communal conception of responsibility and reconciliation, which demands group action in rectifying both past and present sins. To conclude the article, I will consider implications for the church's response to systemic racism today.

What is systemic sin?

What is being referred to when theologians talk about systemic or structural sin? This is the first question we must ask if we are to understand how the church ought to respond to such sins. 'Traditional theology', McCall argues in his recent monograph on sin, 'has focused very heavily – indeed almost exclusively – on *individual sin* . . . when traditional theology does consider more corporate or social concerns, even the way it does so shows evidence of myopia'.[3] What counts as sin and who is responsible for wrongs committed is typically reduced to individual agents on these accounts. Theologies of liberation highlight how such reduction cannot account for the infiltration and inscription of sin in societal structures and the resultant prevalence of such sins in society.[4] What is generally meant by system or structure in this context is the social regularities of groups and societies in which individuals interact with one another and act as morally responsible agents. Social regularities include rules, social norms and other strictures that to some extent determine the kinds of social interactions that occur within the socially regulated group. Such rules and regularities, while developed over time and perhaps without full knowledge of their extent and affect, arise from the coordination of group members. The regularities of a given group form a

2 This raises immediate questions, such as whether this is true of all sins, even those committed by mere individuals. These questions will be explored at length below.

3 Thomas H. McCall, *Against God and Nature: The Doctrine of Sin* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), p. 260.

4 Bernard Ramm, *Offense to Reason: A Theology of Sin* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2000), p. 143. Ramm, in his description and assessment of liberation theology, lists 'imperialism, neocolonialism, exploitation, international cartels, dictatorial governments, landlessness of the masses, endemic unemployment, brutal dictatorships, hunger, and disease'.

system that coordinates individual members in certain ways, giving some members specific powers over other members, determining which members can (or cannot) take certain actions, offering motivations and incentives for following such determination and so on. For instance, citizens of a particular country live under specific rules, social norms and consequences for transgressing those rules and norms. The same could be said for state governments, institutions of education and even churches. There is more we will say later about the nature of such systems, but this gives us a sufficient idea to begin with of what liberation theologians have in mind when they speak of corrupt systems. It is these rules and norms, whether stated or unstated, that liberation theologians point to as corrupt and corrupting systems of sin. Cone, as one such theologian of liberation, more broadly describes these sins as systems of oppression, identifying them with the powers and principalities in Scripture that crucified Christ and attempt to keep the oppressed from God's love.[5] Thus, Cone maintains the transcendent and spiritual categories of sin found in Scripture when describing systemic evils.

What Cone and others see in the witness of Scripture to the nature of sin is a deep permeation of sin in social structures, so that our conception of sin cannot be isolated from the being of the community. This problem is helpfully typified in a nineteenth-century debate between two prominent theologians. John Williamson Nevin critiqued the individualism he perceived in his opponent, the revivalist Charles Finney. His critique will help us to frame the problem theologians like Cone aim to address. Nevin writes that

> the true theory of religion carries us continually beyond the individual . . . Thus, sin is not simply the offspring of a particular will, putting itself forth in the form of actual transgressions, but a wrong habit of humanity itself, a general and universal force, which includes the entire existence of the individual man from the start.[6]

Nevin and Finney had fundamentally different conceptions of how individual persons relate to their communities.[7] This is nowhere better shown than in how both thinkers approached the abolition of slavery. Both staunch abolitionists in an era when it was neither common nor popular for white churchmen to be such, Finney sought to overcome slavery by compelling individual sinners to see the personal error of their slave-owning while Nevin argued that the church ought to be an agent of social change in opposing the racist evils of the American

5 James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011), p. 158.
6 John Williamson Nevin, *The Anxious Bench* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000), p. 65.
7 Derek Nelson, 'Charles Finney and John Nevin on Selfhood and Sin: Reformed Anthropologies in Nineteenth-Century American Religion', *Calvin Theological Journal* 45 (2010), p. 294.

slave trade.[8] This disagreement was not over whether the slave trade was racist and evil; both men clearly agreed that it was. Rather, it was over the right approach to abolition. This demonstrates the deeper problem of how sin is conceived of in relation to individuals and social structures: while Finney believed that the sin of slavery sat in individual hearts and minds, so that societal change would have no lasting effect on the issue,[9] Nevin believed society and the individual to be inseparably bound together in a way that required both individual and societal transformation.

Such instances of socially ingrained racism are easily recognizable as sin, despite not being reducible to individual agents. Indeed, history has shown that even as government leaders who instantiate sinful structures leave their positions, the systems which they build persist in their oppressive affect. When a racist law is ratified, it does not disappear when the politicians who wrote, passed and enforced it retire; it continues to be upheld by the governing body and the individuals that replace its ratifiers. An understanding of sin that reduces responsibility for a given sin to a single, individual sinner would struggle to explain who is responsible for a racist law like this because the law itself requires a network of individuals working together in order to wreak its havoc. Apart from a robust sense of systemic sin, we would struggle to find sufficient categories by which the church can confront such injustices. 'Sin in the Biblical tradition . . .' Cone posits, 'is only meaningful in the context of the Israelite community. Sin is not an abstract idea that defines ethical behavior for all and sundry. Rather it is a religious concept that defines the human condition as separated from the essence of the community'.[10] Despite the widespread call to understand sin in systemic categories, this construal of the doctrine is not without objections.

One objection is that systemic sin depersonalizes sins, abstracting them from human agency and, as one theologian of liberation helpfully summarizes, 'denaturing what is most profound in sin – that it is the fruit of a personal and responsible freedom'.[11] The concern of this objection is to maintain that individuals are responsible for their sinfulness. What is meant specifically by responsibility here is difficult to narrow down; responsibility has been taken to mean several different things in discourses on sin, ethics and moral philosophy.[12] Rather than defending a particular view of responsibility, I will use a broad definition to capture many relevant aspects of responsibility for

8 Charles Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), pp. 227–8; Nevin, *The Anxious Bench*, pp. 67–8.
9 Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, pp. 102–3.
10 James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010), p. 110.
11 Jose Ignacio Gonzalez Faus, 'Sin', in Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuria, eds., *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), p. 199.
12 Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this incredibly significant point.

sin operative in the witness of the Christian Scriptures. For instance, sin harms the relationships between sinners, their victims and God. Sin also must be atoned for in order for the sinner to be restored to relationship with God and others. Finally, responsibility is something that can only be had by agents, as it places some sort of demand for atonement or rectification on the one who is responsible. Thus, responsibility for sin will be taken here to mean an obligation or duty to amend a state of affairs that comes about because of sin. It is obvious, at least in the Christian Scriptures, that the one who commits a particular sin is in some way responsible for that sin; that is to say, they have a personal duty or obligation to repair the damaged state of affairs created by that sin. It is this personal responsibility that the above objection desires to protect. Saying that the sinner is responsible for their sin, however, is not necessarily the same thing as saying that the sinner is guilty of a particular sin, because persons can have obligations that do not arise from blameworthiness. For example, I have a responsibility for the well-being of my daughter that arises from my being her father; I do not have to incur guilt in order to have this obligation. While much of what will be argued in this article could be relevant for a corporate or communal account of guilt, the broader category of responsibility for sin will allow us to capture more of the relevant biblical data, as will be shown later. And while guilt is important for understanding the nature of sin, the scope of this article will limit our focus to responsibility. What does matter for the purposes of this objection is that a personal sense of responsibility that arises from guilt be maintained in whatever accounting of sin we offer.

This significance of individual responsibility for sin is perhaps what motivated Finney to reduce the solution to slavery to individual conversion. The concern is that systemic sin places the blame (and therefore the responsibility) for sins like racism on impersonal systems of government and society rather than on the people responsible for building, maintaining and participating in those systems.[13] Pope John Paul II criticized that it 'leads more or less unconsciously to the watering down and almost the abolition of personal sin, with the recognition only of social guilt and responsibilities'.[14] He continues: 'a situation – or likewise an institution, a structure, society itself – is not in itself the subject of moral acts. Hence a situation cannot in itself be good or bad. At the heart of every situation of sin are always to be found sinful people'.[15] A close look at sin in the Hebrew Bible and its development in Paul's ecclesial ethics will show that this objection can be avoided by how structures are thought to be related to individual persons in the nature of sin and atonement for sin.

13 James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), p. 37.
14 Pope John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1984), p. 16.
15 John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, p. 16.

Systemic sin in the Hebrew Bible

Conceptions of sin which are merely individualistic look to passages such as Ezekiel 18 for support: 'therefore, I will judge the whole house of Israel, each according to their conduct'.[16] Such passages are responding, as shown in verse 19 of the same passage, to the assumption that the son should bear responsibility for the parents' sins. Jesus addresses this very same assumption when asked whether a man's blindness is caused by his sin or his parents'.[17] Rather than dismissing this assumption outright, we should explore from where it is that this assumption comes.

Surprisingly, we shall find that this assumption is rooted in Scripture itself. The Hebrew Bible is rife with examples which demonstrate, both explicitly and implicitly, a corporate ethic for sin and its associated punishment. I can think of no clearer an example than God's commandment not to worship other gods. 'You shall not worship nor serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the punishment of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who despise me'.[18] Here God explicitly states the assumption against which passages like the one above are often employed. This assumption has theological roots in Hebraic understanding of sin and atonement, and cannot so easily be dismissed.

In the prophetic literature, Boda observes that 'sin and its accompanying guilt and punishment is understood in terms of corporate solidarity'.[19] The prophets look to sins of previous generations in order to explain the wickedness of their audiences. Nehemiah prays a prayer of repentance for the sins of the nation and the previous generation:

> Let your ear be attentive and eyes be open to hear the prayer of your servant that I pray now before you day and night, on behalf of the children of Israel, your servants, confessing the sins of the children of Israel which we sinned against you. My father's house and I have sinned.[20]

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16 Ezk. 18:30. לָכֵן֩ אִ֨ישׁ כִּדְרָכָ֜יו אֶשְׁפֹּ֤ט אֶתְכֶם֙ בֵּ֣ית יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל נְאֻ֖ם אֲדֹנָ֣י יְהוִ֑ה שׁ֚וּבוּ וְהָשִׁ֔יבוּ. At first glance, it seems God does not condemn the son for the sins of the father. Other verses cited include Gal. 6:5 and Gen. 4:7. Unless stated otherwise, translations are my own from Westminster Leningrad Codex (Hebrew Bible) and SBL Greek New Testament (New Testament).

17 Jn 9:2–3.

18 Ex. 20:5. לֹֽא־תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶ֥ה לָהֶ֖ם וְלֹ֣א תָעָבְדֵ֑ם כִּ֣י אָנֹכִ֞י יְהוָ֤ה אֱלֹהֶ֙יךָ֙ אֵ֣ל קַנָּ֔א פֹּקֵ֣ד עֲוֹ֔ן אָבֹ֖ת עַל־בָּנִ֑ים עַל־שִׁלֵּשִׁ֕ים וְעַל־רִבֵּעִ֖ים לְשֹׂנְאָֽי׃.

19 Mark J. Boda, 'Prophets', in Keith L. Johnson and David Lauber, eds., *T & T Clark Companion to the Doctrine of Sin* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), p. 32. He here cites the Achan incident, Benjamin's association with Gibeah and the generation that followed Josiah. This statement is made based on reflection of the prophets back on these events.

20 Neh. 1:6. תִּהְיֶ֤ינָא אָזְנְךָ֙־קַשֻּׁבָ֔ת וְעֵינֶ֖יךָ פְּתֻח֑וֹת לִשְׁמֹ֗עַ אֶל־תְּפִלַּ֞ת עַבְדְּךָ֤ אֲשֶׁר֙ אָנֹכִ֣י׀ מִתְפַּלֵּ֣ל לְפָנֶ֔יךָ הַיּ֥וֹם׀ יוֹמָ֖ם וְלַ֣יְלָה עַל־בְּנֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֑ל עֲבָדֶ֔יךָ וּמִתְוַדֶּ֗ה עַל־חַטֹּ֛אות בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵ֥ל אֲשֶׁר֙ חָטָ֣אנוּ לָ֔ךְ וַאֲנִ֥י וּבֵית־אָבִ֖י חָטָֽאנוּ׃.

Israel later repents of the previous generations' sin while separating themselves from foreigners who worship other gods.[21] Daniel also offers prayers of repentance for the sins of Israel and for the previous generation (כִּי בַחֲטָאֵינוּ וּבַעֲוֹנוֹת אֲבֹתֵינוּ), attributing responsibility and punishment to the current generation.[22]

Rather than undermining individual responsibility for sin, corporate solidarity for sin undergirds individual responsibility. Individualistic passages, often abstracted from this corporate context, are not meant to contradict corporate solidarity, but to highlight the place of the individual within the group. Kaminsky argues that these passages serve to personalize responsibility in a fundamentally corporate context.[23] This implies a different relation between structures and individuals than the depersonalization objection.

Israel is being condemned as a group for sins of injustice towards oppressed peoples, despite the existence of righteous individuals serving as counter examples. This is made clear in God's speech to Elijah on Mount Horeb. When Elijah bemoans Israel's wickedness, God informs him of 7,000 who remain faithful to Yahweh.[24] Yet in the next chapter, God pronounces judgement on Israel because of their unfaithfulness. Similarly, God condemns the whole nation of Israel for worshiping the golden calf despite opposition from Levites. Later, he forces Israel to wander in the desert for their mistrust of God despite the faithfulness of Caleb and Joshua.[25] The entire nation (including those who are not individually committing those sins) is responsible for amending the community's wrongdoing.

Boda argues that this is because individual persons are formed by the communities which they are a part of, establishing solidarity with past generations.[26] This corporate solidarity is reflected in narratives of God dealing with Israel's sins and his prescriptive determinations in the Levitical Law. In the latter, God sets precedent for atoning for the sins of past generations. This atonement is a task which Israel is called to perform as a nation in the maintenance of their covenant with God. When Israel breaks covenant with God, the whole nation must atone for current and past sins to restore the covenant with Yahweh and rectify their wrongdoings.[27] This reflects both a corporate solidarity with past generations and with other members of the current community. Israel is judged as a corporate whole, not merely as

21 Neh. 9:2.
22 Dan. 9:16. Other explicit examples include Deut. 9:5, Ex. 20:5 and Num. 14:18.
23 Joel S. Kaminsky, *Corporate Responsibility in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 184–6.
24 1 Kgs 19:14–18.
25 Ex. 32; Num. 14.
26 Mark J. Boda, *Return to Me: A Biblical Theology of Repentance* (Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 2015), p. 155.
27 Lev. 26:40–5.

individuals, and so it is the whole community that must act to rectify these wrongdoings.

This is the shape of Israel's redemption under King Josiah. When the Book of the Law is found, Josiah realizes that Judah is condemned for the sins of their parents.[28] Because of this responsibility that the current generation has for past sins, he initiates reforms to oppose those sins of the previous generation now ingrained in the community's social structures. Boda observes how Josiah places responsibility on his generation to actively resist the sins of past generations.[29] This sense of active resistance is key to understanding the corporate sense of holiness that goes with the corporate understanding of responsibility which we see permeating the Hebrew Bible. Esau McCaulley notes:

> According to Isaiah, true practice of religion ought to result in concrete change, the breaking of yokes. He does not mean the occasional private act of liberation, but 'to break the chains of injustice'. What could this mean other than a transformation of the structures of societies that trap people in hopelessness?[30]

Israel's communal call to righteousness as the covenant people makes them responsible for not only each individual's own righteousness before God, but for resisting sins ingrained in communal norms so that the social structures of the community are actually changed.

Corporate solidarity not only makes individuals responsible for sins of the community, but the community responsible for sins of individuals as these eventually become ingrained communal norms. When some spoke against Moses, the entire nation was plagued by fiery snakes.[31] Another example from the history of Israel is Joshua's conquest of Jericho:

> Now the children of Israel acted unfaithfully with respect to the things that were banned for Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, from the tribe of Judah, took some of the things that were banned, so that the anger of the Lord burned against the children of Israel.[32]

Note here the use of plural for 'children' (בְּנֵי) despite Achan (עָכָן) being the sole transgressor. Many are killed because of his sin for which the whole community

28 2 Kgs 22:13.
29 Boda, 'Prophets', p. 33.
30 Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope* (Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 2020), p. 94.
31 Num. 21:4–6. In Num. 12:1–10, a similar instance happens in which those who speak live through the punishment where others do not, so they might live to repent.
32 Jos. 7:1. וַיִּמְעֲלוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מַעַל בַּחֵרֶם וַיִּקַּח עָכָן בֶּן־כַּרְמִי בֶן־זַבְדִּי בֶן־זֶרַח לְמַטֵּה יְהוּדָה מִן־הַחֵרֶם וַיִּחַר־אַף יְהוָה בִּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל׃

must atone. The Lord passes judgement, saying that Israel has sinned, not merely Achan.[33]

Sin in the Hebrew Bible is fundamentally corporate. This is true not only of sins which are systemic, being embedded in the laws and culture of ancient Israel, but also of individual sins which contribute to the sinfulness of the nation. No sin is purely individual, but rather the community is called by God and his representatives to resist all sins that take place in the community. Individuals contribute to the sinfulness of the community and are shaped by the community's sinfulness. Far from depersonalizing sin, structural sin in this conception includes individual agency. Rather than the corporate responsibility for sin undercutting individual responsibility for sin, corporate solidarity adds corporate responsibility to individual responsibility. While the systemic sins of Israel are not reducible to the actions of individuals, the responsibility of individual persons is nonetheless ratified and included in the communal calling of the nation as a whole to be holy before God and resist the sinfulness of previous and contemporary generations.

Pauline ecclesiology and corporate responsibility

This corporate sense of sin and atonement is developed further in Paul's ecclesiological ethics. Paul grounds oneness in Christ in the mutual indwelling of the Spirit. Paul identifies in the Gentiles who have come to know Christ, 'fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel'.[34] Partaking takes place in the context of the body via union with Christ and one another.[35]

This is described in more depth in Paul's depiction of the people of God, who come from varying cultural and ethnic backgrounds, being built together into a dwelling place for God.[36] This constitutes a major theme for Paul in the Jew–Gentile conflict within the Roman, Corinthian and Ephesian churches. In 1 Corinthians 3:16 and Ephesians 2:22, Paul identifies the church as the 'temple of God' (ναὸς θεοῦ) and 'a dwelling place of God in the Spirit' (κατοικητήριον τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν πνεύματι).[37] In both of these verses, the verbs ἐστε and συνοικοδομεῖσθε are second person plural. However, the words for temple and dwelling, ναὸς and κατοικητήριον respectively, are singular. While

33 Jos. 7:11–13. Other examples include Abraham's conversation with God over the destruction of Sodom, the war wrought from David's polygamous lifestyle and the exile of Israel despite a faithful remnant. These examples are of the sin or sins of an individual impacting the entire community in judgement and, in some sense, responsibility to the extent that guilt could be suggested.

34 Eph. 3:6. συγκληρονόμα καὶ σύσσωμα καὶ συμμέτοχα τῆς ἐπαγγελίας ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ διὰ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου. See also 1 Cor. 12:12–28 and Rom. 12:4–5.

35 Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2012), p. 287.

36 Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ*, p. 290.

37 1 Cor. 3:16 and Eph. 2:22 respectively.

this has often been understood as every individual believer being a dwelling place for the Spirit, it is better construed to mean that the body of believers is built together (συνοικοδομεῖσθε) into a single, unified dwelling for God. God dwells not simply with each individual, but with the whole community that has been reconciled in Christ.[38] This reading is preferred by many exegetical scholars.[39] This trajectory in Paul's ecclesiology overcomes the societal barriers often placed between human particularities, such as race, culture and ethnicity, but not in ways which erase or eradicate their significance, especially with regards to Paul's ethics.[40] The union of the reconciled body in the Spirit is in direct opposition to the societal evils that divide the body.

Implicit in this communal understanding of the reconciled body of Christ as a dwelling place for the Spirit is a corporate sense of what it means for the church to be called to pursue holiness over and against purely individualistic conceptions of religious morality. Susan Eastman notes this communal nature of transformation and the pursuit of holiness in Paul's ecclesiology. She writes: 'it is more accurate and closer to Paul's thought to describe change rendered effective and visible through the quality of relationships. Change happens "between ourselves" more than within discrete individuals'.[41] This is why we see Paul admonish entire congregations, calling them to reconcile for their sins. In some instances, such as in Jewish treatment of Gentiles, Paul admonishes congregations for sins that have pervaded the entire community. Partiality is being given to those of Jewish background, treating Gentile converts as 'second-class citizens' within the body. Paul's admonishment to the Galatian church includes Peter, who previously had verbally opposed the Judaizer treatment of Gentile converts, but later separates himself from the Gentile converts in his actions.[42] Despite being able to name this treatment of

38 Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), p. 415; Frank Thielman, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), p. 185.

39 Stephen E. Fowl, *Ephesians: A Commentary* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2012), pp. 99–100; Thielman, *Ephesians*, pp. 183–5; Hoehner, *Ephesians*, p. 413; Markus Barth, *Ephesians* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1974), p. 274; Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. edn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), p. 159; and Pheme Perkins, *First Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), p. 75. Thielman and Fee note the addition in early manuscripts of the η to emphasize this point and the common use of the definite noun despite a lack of definite article. This is meant to evoke temple imagery, referencing back to passages like Isa. 28 and Ezek. 43. Whereas in the temple the barriers were between God's people and those outside of the covenant, so that God's blessing spread to the nations, here Paul uses this to indicate a breakdown of societal barriers within and without the church.

40 Erin Heim, *Adoption in Galatians and Romans: Contemporary Metaphor Theories and the Pauline* Huiothesia *Metaphors* (Boston: Brill, 2017), p. 296.

41 Susan Eastman, *Paul and the Person: Reframing Paul's Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), pp. 181–2.

42 Gal. 2:11–14.

Gentiles as a sin, Peter is passive towards it when representatives come from James and the church in Jerusalem. Paul's understanding of sin as a corporate reality demands that we go 'beyond naming, there has to be some vision of the righting of wrongs and the restoration of relationships. The call to be peacemakers is the call for the church to enter the messy world of politics and point toward a better way of being human'.[43] It is for this reason that Paul warns that we as individuals can become weapons of injustice (ὅπλα ἀδικίας), so that even those individuals who are not actively participating in a particular sin of the community are still guilty for passivity towards it.[44] Paul's call for ecclesial holiness is not merely a call to not sin, but to oppose sin together. To be passive is to be used by the enemy for injustice. Only active resistance to sin in the community results in holiness.

In other instances, Paul admonishes whole congregations for individuals' sins. When Paul admonishes the Corinthian church for the sexual immorality of a man with his step-mother, he uses the plural reference in his condemnation, holding the community responsible for allowing this sin to occur unresisted.[45] It is the responsibility of the community to come alongside the sinner and help them overcome their sin, lest it should fester and come to infect the entire community or that the sinner should be left unreconciled. Two places Paul addresses this are Galatians 6 and Romans 13. In the former, Paul places an obligation on the spiritually strong. They are to bring the spiritually weak to reconciliation, carrying one another's burdens (ἀλλήλων τὰ βάρη βαστάζετε). Paul is keenly aware of the impact sin could have on the community, as shown in his warnings about how to reconcile without also falling into temptation. In the latter example, Paul contends that a part of this reconciliation includes that certain rights and freedoms should be laid down for the sake of the weaker believer. For one to ignore the struggle of fellow Christians is to be guilty of their stumbling.

Paul's understanding of what it means for Christians to pursue holiness, in these examples, is neither purely individualistic nor does it erase the agency and responsibility of the individual. There is a steadfast recognition of personal guilt and responsibility for the actions of individuals. Yet there is also a robust conception for Paul of how those actions affect the broader community. There seems to be some sense in which the particular actions of the individual and the responsibility for those actions is always bound up in the corporate sense of responsibility we have already seen at play. Paul readily recognizes the personal responsibility of individuals, but does not separate that responsibility from its communal context. This seems, at least to those leveling the depersonalization

43 McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, p. 69.

44 Rom. 6:13. In the previous verse, Paul advocates a resistance to the reign of sin in the flesh (Μὴ οὖν βασιλευέτω ἡ ἁμαρτία ἐν τῷ θνητῷ ὑμῶν σώματι), not merely a command to not sin.

45 1 Cor. 5:1–2.

objection toward systemic accounts of sin, to be counter-intuitive because the objection operates on the assumption that individualism and communalism are mutually exclusive. Simeon Zahl has offered a fairly damning critique of this individualism versus communalism trope in both theological and biblical studies. He argues that this trope rests on uncritical assumptions about human social psychology which falsely entail a competitive relationship between individualism and communalism, so that '"individual" and "communal" . . . are in some fundamental way at odds with one another, such that experientially salient emphasis on one must come at the expense of experientially salient emphasis on the other, at least to some meaningful degree'.[46] Ben Dunson critiques this diametric opposition in Pauline scholarship, ridiculing readings of Paul which conceive 'the redeemed individual as nothing but an isolated individual, and redemption as nothing but a transformation of inner piety . . . in abstraction from the cultivation of love and peace within the life of the believing community' while simultaneously maintaining that 'the Pauline individual is in fact a vital and complex category in Romans'.[47] Rather, in line with the understanding of sin and responsibility found in the Hebrew Bible, Paul seems concerned to maintain a socially situated sense of the individual. Paul readily recognizes personal or individual responsibility, but understands that responsibility for sin and the pursuit of holiness as entangled with the responsibility of the community.

Paul's ecclesiological development of corporate solidarity takes further the demands of communal responsibility which the church has to reconcile for sins. All individuals as a corporate entity united in Christ are personally responsible for opposing sins of the community and of individuals in the community. The church is to act on behalf of Christ as his body and the dwelling place for him by the Holy Spirit, so that the gathered community participates in Christ's reconciling work. J.B. Torrance identifies this participation in Christ's reconciling work in the royal priesthood of believers. He writes:

> So in the communion of the Spirit in the communion of saints, our prayers on earth are the echo of his prayers in heaven. By grace we are given to participate in his intercession for all humanity. So in our corporate worship we are called to be a royal priesthood, bearing in our hearts the sorrows and cares and tragedies of our world as our heavenly High Priest does.[48]

46 Simeon Zahl, 'Beyond the Critique of Soteriological Individualism: Relationality and Social Cognition', *Modern Theology* 37 (2021), p. 345.

47 Ben C. Dunson, *Individual and Community in Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), p. 176.

48 James B. Torrance, *Worship, Communion, and the Triune God of Grace* (Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 1996), p. 84. Christ's intercession on behalf of humanity mediates a reconciliation between God and humanity.

By Paul's reckoning, our participation in Christ's reconciling work must result in actual transformation. As Nevin reminds us, this occurs only when sin is actively opposed at the level of the community, so that it respects the nature of human persons as historically, socially and communally embedded beings.[49] It is not merely a collection of individuals that are called to oppose these sins as individuals, but the gathered community made whole in Christ precisely because, according to the Apostle Paul, it is Christ's reconciling work in which they participate.

Group ontology: a metaphysical framework for the oppressed

Recent work in social ontology offers a helpful metaphysic for framing the ways in which Paul develops the corporate conceptions of sin and personhood in his ecclesiology. The ontology of groups, especially as it pertains to ecclesiology, offers a helpful and clear set of terms for defining and expressing the realities that Paul is trying to get at in his development of corporate and personal responsibility for sin. Specifically, certain ontologies of groups which have been used to make sense of ecclesiology will help us to clearly explain the non-competitive relationship which Paul's sees between individuals and communities and which seems native to the Old Testament witness to the nature of sin and atonement. This will further aid our understanding of sins like racism which appear to be systemic or corporate.

The tension that appears in the questions surrounding systemic sin, and especially the objection that it depersonalizes sin, is ultimately a tension between individual agency and group agency. Detractors of systemic sin believe that one cannot have the latter without losing the former, thus sacrificing individual responsibility for sin. In other words, such detractors think that if we were to claim that the group entity, the United States, is responsible for the rampant racism occurring within its borders, then we would somehow be letting a racist police officer off the hook for murdering an unarmed teenager. In his work on group ontology and agency, Philip Pettit reframes this tension in terms of two issues he takes to be independent: individualism versus collectivism and atomism versus holism.[50] He argues at length that 'individualists deny and collectivists maintain that the status ascribed to individual agents in our intentional psychology is compromised by aggregate social regularities. Atomists deny and holists maintain that individual agents non-causally depend on their social relations with one another for some of their distinctive capacities'.[51] Debates about the nature of systemic sin often stop at the first issue, assuming (incorrectly) that

49 Nevin, *The Anxious Bench*, pp. 61–2.
50 Philip Pettit, *The Common Mind: An Essay on Psychology, Society, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 117–18.
51 Pettit, *The Common Mind*, p. 118.

individualism is a denial of any role being played by social regularities. Reframed in terms of the tension surrounding systemic racism, a collectivist would maintain and an individualist would deny that a racist system, such as a government, overrides or undermines the agency of individuals within the system. By override or undermine, it is not meant that the agency of individuals is merely influenced or mitigated, but that it is in some way causally determined by social regularities.[52] Systemic sin, according to the depersonalization objection, is collectivist. Any racism of individuals is not their fault, but is entirely caused by the system to which they belong. So a police officer that guns down a child because of the colour of their skin is racist only because they have been trained by a racist police academy, and thus the officer cannot be held accountable for their racism. Such a conception of collective agency seems absurd to us for a good reason. It collapses individual agency (at least for certain decisions and actions) into that of the collective. Thus, some abstract thing, the system, is ultimately responsible for sin, not persons within the system. This seems to be what is assumed about systemic sin as a concept when the depersonalization objection is leveled at it. If the concept of systemic sin is to avoid this charge, it must find a way to be individualist in this sense of the term; it must deny that individual agency ultimately collapses into corporate agency.

Those conceptions of sin which see sinners as only personally responsible for their own individual actions would also likely be individualist. Yet the claim of exclusivity with regards to responsibility for sin is stronger than the claim of individualism. It outright denies influence of others on us as it pertains to our sinful actions, as well as corporate solidarity and responsibility for sin. Returning to the example of the racist police officer, such a conception of agency and responsibility would give no account of the officer's training and the role it played in teaching them to racially profile. It does not matter (or matter nearly so much) that the officer's academy is teaching racist practices and consistently putting out officers that racially profile; it only matters that the officer chose to act on that training. This is individualistic and atomistic. Individuals are treated as isolated units with regard to agency and responsibility, and so we would be left with no proper categories for making sense of the corporate solidarity in the Hebrew Bible which provides the basis for personal responsibility, nor for Paul's corporate admonishments for individual sins and calls to take responsibility for others in one's community.

However, because individualism versus collectivism and atomism versus holism are independent considerations, we need not choose between the faults of collectivism, which evacuates personal responsibility to mysterious social

52 I am using Pettit's language here. He associates undermining and overriding with causal determination, whereas influence and mitigation are a non-causal form of influence. Pettit, *The Common Mind*, pp. 142–3.

forces, or those of atomism, which isolates the agency of individuals in a way that makes corporate solidarity and responsibility for others impossible. If, as Pettit, we take the individualist and holist standpoints, we can make sense of the influence others have on our actions, our belonging to groups as part of that influence, and our sharing in the responsibilities of others without reducing individual agency to its participation in group agency or reducing group agency to the sum of the individual agencies of its members. In other words, we can maintain the individual agency required to posit personal responsibility for sins like racism while simultaneously maintaining that some groups also have agency through the non-causal dependence which individual agents have on one another in social groups. Thus, we can talk about the sinful agency or action of a group while also maintaining the individual agency and responsibility of the group's members.

This implicates a particular view of the relationship between groups and the individual members of groups. Stephanie Collins summarizes this relationship, stating that a group's

> decision is not merely the conjunction of members' decisions. The members' decisions were *to assent to the collective's doing such-and-such*. By contrast, the collective's decision was *to do such-and-such*. The collective's decision was determined by the members' decisions, but it is not to be identified with the mere conjunction of them for two reasons. First, it has a different content: the collective's decision is 'the collective will do this'. Second, the collective's decision arose out of two things: the conjunction of member's decisions *plus* the fact that they are all committed to the unanimity rule.[53]

This means that groups can have agency in addition to their individual members having agency, but not apart from the coordination of the individual members' agencies via established group decision-making processes. This sense of coordination forms the social structures and systems which provide the social context of individual agency and responsibility.

Treating coordinated groups and individuals as having separate but related agencies, we come to an account of how group agency is formed by the intentions of individual agents in the group. Joshua Cockayne's work on ecclesiology notes how most accounts of group agency implicate a joint intention, so that based on the various roles of different members, the group intends such-and-such an action through the coordination of active and authorizing intentions of its group members.[54] Because the joint intention of the group comes about through the coordination of the individual intentions

53 Stephanie Collins, *Group Duties: Their Existence and Their Implications for Individuals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 169.

54 Joshua Cockayne, 'Analytic Ecclesiology: The Social Ontology of the Church', *Journal of Analytic Theology* 7 (2019), p. 112.

of its members, all members bear some form of responsibility for the group's actions in addition to the responsibility they have for their own actions. What responsibility or degree of responsibility each member has for group actions will depend on their role within the coordinated structure of the group. As an example, we might think of a pastor or priest as having a greater degree of responsibility for maintaining racially segregated pews in her church than a lay-person in that congregation would have, even though that lay-person would still have some level of responsibility. Thus, Collins argues, 'when there is a violation at the collective level, there is *also* a violation at the member level. The two levels remain different . . . my claim is not that members failed to do *exactly what the collective failed to do*'.[55] She continues, 'a member's obligation is *not* just an obligation to perform their role, that is, to perform a specific action. It is rather an obligation to *use* their role to see to it that X'.[56] On this definition of the relationship between individuals and groups, we can say that individual members are responsible for the actions of the group in addition to being responsible for their own individual actions.

Yet Paul wants to say more than this in terms of corporate responsibility. For Paul, not only do we personally take on responsibility for the coordinated structural realities of the groups to which we belong, but we also take on personal responsibility for other members of those groups. Collins' account of group duties alone does not get at this sense of responsibility for others within a group, unless some aspect of coordination specifically demands it such as an agreed upon rule that some individual member is responsible for the actions of other individual members under such-and-such circumstances. This might get us a responsibility for others in instances where a particular individual sin is part and parcel to a broader systemic issue, but not in instances where an individual sin is not obviously part of a broader systemic sin.

However, this is precisely where Paul holds righteous individuals within the church responsible for reconciling fallen brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul invokes this responsibility in virtue of nothing more than our shared identity in Christ. Because we are all members of the same body, individual sin that is allowed to fester will continue to infect and infest the rest of the body. Individual sins for which the whole body of Christ does not take responsibility will inevitably become, on Paul's view, group-level realities of sinfulness. Paul not only holds individuals in the community responsible for coordinating to resist and reconcile for group-level sins, but also for resisting the sins of other individuals in the community and calling them to reconciliation, lest those sins should in some way contribute to a group-level sin.

55 Collins, *Group Duties*, p. 183.
56 Collins, *Group Duties*, p. 199.

Now Collins is willing to grant that there may be some duties pertaining to groups which do not arise at the level of coordination. Collins has in mind here the sorts of problems which are far too pervasive within a non-agential group to be reduced to or rectified by individual responsibility, despite that group's lack of coordination (or coordination around that particular social reality). Let us suppose that we see racism occurring in a group that is not coordinated by a set of rules or social norms, like a group of parents and their kids that meet at a park to play together. There are not necessarily rules governing the social interactions of the children, and yet social situations like this have been a common place for minorities to experience fear and distrust. For such cases, Collins argues that there is a coordination duty for individual members of the combination or coalition to form a collective to rectify the group-level moral problem.[57] There would thus be an obligation for the parents to work together to make sure that the children all feel respected and accepted in that park. Collins understands this as multiply realized responsibility of *each individual* in the non-agential group, rather than a corporate responsibility for the whole group in virtue of a group problem.[58] This seems similar to what Paul has in mind with regards to responsibility for other members of the body of Christ. Because every sin has the potential to become a group-level issue by becoming an ingrained or systematized social norm, fellow-believers are called to coordinate with fallen brothers and sisters to call them to repentance. Because this is a coordination, the individual who commits said sin still bears personal responsibility for their role in that coordination: repentance and setting to rights of said sin as appropriate to their role in committing the sin. What this coordination responsibility does is not to diminish personal responsibility, but contextualizes personal responsibility with the responsibility others have to coordinate and aid the sinner in repentance and atonement. Because of the corporate solidarity that undergirds Paul's understanding of sin and responsibility, every sin has some implications for the responsibility of the group. That responsibility can be a coordinated group responsibility in virtue of a systemic sin which the group has committed or it can be a responsibility of all members to coordinate to deal with individual sins which have or might possibly develop into social-systemic sins.

Because groups and individuals are distinguishable but inseparable in this way, we can hold to the non-competitive relationship between the communal and individual which is apparent in Paul and the Old Testament witness to sin and atonement. Rather than dissolving the individual's responsibility by placing it on impersonal systems and social structures, this relationship contextualizes the agency of individuals with the agency of coordinated groups. In providing

57 Collins, *Group Duties*, p. 97.
58 Collins, *Group Duties*, p. 99.

a context for individual actions and responsibility, the responsibility for group actions is added to individual responsibility rather than detracting from it. In these groups, all individual members bear some responsibility for the actions of other members in virtue of shared group membership. The communal dimension of personhood which Paul espouses calls the individual to take responsibility for the wider community, both group agents and individual agents, in a way respective of their role or place within the community.

This is a helpful way of describing Paul's calling the church to reconcile for sins precisely because it does not reduce obligation to amend or atone for sin to the individual agent committing it and it does not leave individual members of a group guiltless for group sins or absolve them of the duty to reconcile other members who are sinning. Rather, it conceives of sins being committed by groups in a way that includes the agency, and thus responsibility, of individual members. Therefore, the group is also responsible for actions committed by its members and members are also responsible for actions committed by the group and by other group members.

This provides us with a clear set of terminology for clearly expressing what the church is and how it is to respond to the corporate realities of sin and oppression. The church is a collective group with individual Christians as its members. By putting this in the above terms of group ontology, we can clearly delineate between the actions and agency of individual Christians and the groups in which they participate without disposing of the obligation that individual Christians have to reconcile for sins committed by those groups or their members. This is done in a way which can maintain both the holism (as community) and individualism (as a community of individual selves) that seems native to the Hebrew Bible and Pauline witnesses to responsibility for sin. We can describe the sinfulness of the whole group and the sinfulness of the individual without reducing one to the other.

Furthermore, the relationship between holism and individualism can also capture the sense of responsibility that Paul places on whole communities for individual sins and on individuals for sins of the whole community. Reconciliation, recast in these terms, is better able to contend with corporate conceptions of sin without erasing the responsibility of the individual. This leaves us with a metaphysical framework for depicting the role of the church and individuals in it for responding to systemic sins like racism. This is not isolated from the reconciling person and work of Christ, but is rather rooted in the relationship between Christ and the church as his unified body.

The church's communal opposition to systemic sin

What should be clear by this point is that sin ought to be conceived of in corporate terms that can maintain both group and individual responsibility. This includes both systemic and individual sins of racism in a way that personalizes the societal structures of systemic sin by understanding them as group actions or intentions and accounts for the social ingraining of sins of

individuals. Derek Nelson rightly warns against collapsing the agential status of sin into the structures of social groups, encouraging that we describe social structures in terms of the human relations that build them.[59] This grounds individual sins in the structuring of social groups. 'When human beings sin', Faus states, 'they create structures of sin, which, in turn, make human beings sin'.[60] Far from depersonalizing, the concept of systemic sin incorporates individual agency in the creation, maintenance and influence of social structures without reducing the group's agency to the sum of individual agencies. In this way, no sin can be purely individual any more than it can be purely systemic. Every individual sinful action will introduce some change in the group which can result in group sinful action and every group sinful action can serve to proliferate individual sinful action.

Racism, as that systemic sin against which Cone and Faus rage, deserves some significant consideration on this front. It is too common a defense against the accusation of racism to say: 'I do not discriminate based on race, and so I am not guilty of racism'. This defense is often used in attempts to absolve oneself from responsibility for the racism of previous generations of one's group and the responsibility to atone for said sin. This seems immediately contrary to the picture of sin and the responsibility of the community for reconciliation depicted in the Hebrew Bible. This abstracts the individual from the corporate context of sin. If sin is irreducibly both systemic and individual, as thus far argued, then racism cannot be considered (much less absolved) in this atomistic fashion. Rather, as McCaulley observes, 'calling a system evil is a political assessment as well as a theological one . . . When black Christians look upon the actions of political leaders and governments and call them evil, we are making a theological claim in the same way that Paul was'.[61] Racism is not merely a problem of a collective for which its individuals members are not responsible, nor is it a mere problem of individual political leaders, for which members of a given group, atomistically conceived, are not responsible.

Individual Christians are responsible for structures in which we participate and the coordinated groups to which we belong. Even when we are not the individual agent of a given racist action, we are responsible for calling the groups in which we are members to reconciliation. Christians ought to take responsibility for the church's history in supporting slavery and racial segregation. In virtue

59 Nelson, *What's Wrong with Sin*, p. 184.

60 Faus, 'Sin', p. 198. Faus speaks elsewhere in his essay of individual resistance to such systems, implying that his usage of the term 'make' is not causally determinative. Rather it appears to be that systems are significant contributors to individual human sinfulness.

61 McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, p. 62. See also Esau McCaulley, 'Paul and the Police: The New Testament's Take On Cops is Good News for the Oppressed', *Christianity Today* 64 (Sep. 2020), p. 41.

of inheriting this responsibility, Christians are obligated to oppose these sins in the same way Israel was called to oppose the sins of previous generations. If as Christians we do not actively oppose our racist history, we will regress to that racism as the generation that followed Josiah's rule regressed to idol worship through their passivity.

To this point, McCaulley argues that reconciliation must go 'beyond naming, there has to be some vision of the righting of wrongs and the restoration of relationships. The call to be peacemakers is the call for the church to enter the messy world of politics and point toward a better way of being human'.[62] The church, in opposing sin in the groups to which we belong, is called by God to be decisively active. We are participating in Christ's making of all thing new, not simply pointing out what is old. In reconciliation, Christ 'calls us to enter into this work of actualizing the transformation he has already begun by the death and resurrection of his Son'.[63] This reconciling work in which we participate,

> could be corporate, dealing with ethnic groups and nations at enmity, or it could be personal. When it is corporate, we are testifying to the universal reign of Jesus. When it is interpersonal, we are bearing witness to the work that God has done in our hearts. These things need not be in competition . . . the work of justice, when understood as direct testimony to God's kingdom, is evangelistic from start to finish. It is part (not the whole) of God's work of reconciling all things to himself.[64]

These two senses of reconciliation that McCaulley identifies are so intwined because they are both grounded in the church's participation in Christ's reconciling person and work. The individual and the system or community to which they belong, while distinct, are so entangled that one cannot be understood properly without the other.

While the church is generally thought to be the primary group and social structure with which Christians identify, they are nevertheless parts of other coordinated groups and social structures for which they are also responsible. Christians are also parts of national, political and institutional groups which each have their own structures and systems. Erin Heim notes the duality of our belonging in Paul's usage of adoption metaphors, highlighting our 'belonging both to the eschatological family of God, but also continuing to exist and suffer within [the social structures of] the present age'.[65] When understood as coordinated groups, it becomes clear that we are also responsible for sins committed by our respective nations, political groups and institutions. 'Our modern delineation', McCaulley argues,

62 McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, p. 69.
63 McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, p. 70.
64 McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, p. 69.
65 Heim, *Adoption in Galatians and Romans*, p. 237.

> between spiritual and political evil, when read back into Paul's thought, is an anachronism. The 'present evil age' can be understood to mean the demonic evil of slavery in Rome and also rulers' economic exploitation of the populace. Both were driven by the policies of corrupt Roman leadership, and both were ultimately dictated by spiritual forces.[66]

The responsibility to oppose systemic sin is not limited to sins of the church, but includes other social structures that Christians participate in. American Christians, as one example among many in the Western world, are responsible not only to reconcile for the sins of past Christians, but also for the racist past of their nation. In so far as we can identify these as coordinated groups with racist histories, Christian group members must take responsibility for opposing these sinful histories in virtue of their group membership. Apart from such resistance, we would be living in contradiction of the reconciled unity that Paul claims we have in the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit.

Christians should further consider the ways in which we contribute to, maintain or perpetuate systems of racist oppression that have become ingrained in the structures of our social groups. This goes beyond resistance to historical sin, demanding responsibility for sins occurring in our midst. This responsibility is in virtue of our participation in groups where racism is taking place. This participation can be active, such as joining the KKK or supporting government officials that advocate for racist policies. However, this can also be done passively. One need not be the individual who is implementing or supporting the particular racist policy in order to be responsible for opposing racist policies at the group level. As an American, I would be responsible for opposing racist policies and practices being committed by the US government. I, as an individual, cannot simply decide that I am not responsible, a part of, or a beneficiary of, these group structures of racist oppression. Because human beings participate in groups as socially embedded beings, contra atomism, 'one cannot simply decide no longer to participate in sexist or racist structures. One cannot decide to eradicate institutionalized poverty'.[67] It is not enough to not be individually racist: I am responsible as a Christian for actively opposing both individual and group racism in the groups to which I belong. The responsibility to oppose the sins of our respective groups while calling those groups to repentance and reconciliation remains an obligation for Christians today.

Finally, the Christian response to corporate problems of racism should also be corporate. Because systemic sins are the result of group coordination or arise from the social ingraining of individual actions for which there is a coordination duty, coordination of some kind is required to rectify and oppose

66 McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, p. 60.
67 Nelson, 'Charles Finney and John Nevin on Selfhood and Sin', p. 293. See also Nevin, *The Anxious Bench*, p. 59.

those group-level realities. This means that systemic sins like racism cannot be resisted by an individual trying really hard not to be racist. Rather, Christians are to oppose and resist racist systems as a coordinated group, the body of Christ. This means continuously searching for and rooting out racism in the coordination of our own churches, advocating for systemic changes in the other groups to which we belong, and resisting racism through group actions. The obligation to oppose racist systems and individual racism within systems is an obligation of the community as a coordinated whole.

Let us return once more to the illustrative debate between Nevin and Finney. Finney's individualistic doctrine of sin, in which the sin is solely sourced in the individual will and is solved solely by repentance from that will, is insufficient on two levels. First, it misdiagnoses the problem as an issue of mere individual will, thus limiting responsibility for said sin to the individual committing it, despite Finney's recognition of slavery as a widespread social issue.[68] As demonstrated, this is insufficient to account for the nature of sin in the Hebrew Bible and Pauline corpus. Second, his solution only seems to be able to handle his misdiagnosis, not the actual problem at hand. If we thought that sin was merely a result of an errant will, the transformed will would be sufficient for repenting and reconciling for sin. Yet Paul also thinks that sin rests in the coordinated social structures in which individuals exist. Paul also calls believers to work together to atone for their sins and reconcile fellow-believers. The individual must be transformed, but so must the social systems in which the individual exists. Thus, Nevin critiqued that the 'renewal of society in general cannot be attained by Finney's system [because] its view of the self is so atomistic that it cannot address the individual as he actually exists, which is in a network of other selves with particular histories, social locations, community roles, and so on'.[69] Opposition to sin cannot be a mere act of the individual, but requires also coordination with others in the body of Christ to oppose both the systemic and the individual.

Reconciliation for the sin of racism ought to be a coordinated group action in which members act together in virtue of their union in Christ to root out systems of racism and reconcile their communities. We see this in how God's call to Israel to maintain covenant relationship with God through atoning for sins was a responsibility laid upon the whole nation. This is further shown in the responsibility which Paul lays on entire communities to reconcile for the group's sinfulness. This applies to responsibilities for racism within the church and to how the church responds to racism in the public square. Because Christian participation in reconciliation is a participation in the reconciling work of Christ, it cannot be separated from the union that believers have with one another in Christ as the body of Christ. Participation in Christ's reconciling

68 Nelson, 'Charles Finney and John Nevin on Selfhood and Sin', pp. 287–8.
69 Nelson, 'Charles Finney and John Nevin on Selfhood and Sin', pp. 293–4.

work is something that the body of Christ does, and thus cannot be reduced to an individual's actions of opposition to group racism. Rather, individuals within the body of Christ hold various roles which they enact towards the end of the body of Christ opposing systemic racism within and without. This is a group response of communal reconciliation to political systems of racism, such as joining marches in protest of racial injustice, advocating as a congregation for political change, and group initiatives of social justice which counteract the oppression of racist systems.