

THE MYTH OF ONTOLOGICAL HUMAN SINFULNESS:
HOW THE NOTION THAT HUMANS ARE INHERENTLY SINFUL CONTRIBUTES TO
THE INSTITUTIONAL SCAPEGOATING OF THE URBAN POOR

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Fresno Pacific University Biblical Seminary

In Partial Fulfilment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Theology

by
Ivan Christian Paz
December 2015

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Accepted by the Faculty of the Fresno Pacific University Biblical Seminary in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in Theology.



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Abstract of:

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A culture of conflict generally exists in the U.S. between people of color who live in economically disadvantaged, urban neighborhoods—i.e. “the urban poor”—and the criminal justice system. This conflict was graphically illustrated in the demonstrations for racial justice that recently occurred in many cities, like Ferguson (MO) and Baltimore (MD), tense demonstrations that sometimes erupted in violent melees between protesters and law enforcement. Since the New Testament declares that followers of Jesus have a primary responsibility to build peace (Mat. 5:9) and reconciliation in the human community (2 Cor. 5:18-19), responding passively to this reality of conflict is not an option. Christians must engage the conflicting parties by confronting their patterns of rivalry through peacemaking, not perpetuate their conflict by supporting the justice system over against the urban poor, as many evangelicals have done.

Concerned about the mission of the church within this particular setting, this thesis addresses the following question: *instead of being a prophetic voice and building peace between the two, why do evangelical Christians tend to side with the criminal justice system and support its institutional mistreatment of the urban poor?* The answer to this question focuses on the subtle fusion of two perspectives: the concept of ontological human sinfulness—i.e. that humans are inherently sinful—and the assumption that crime is primarily an urban phenomenon. This thesis demonstrates how these two notions usually combine and compel its religious proponents to perceive the urban poor not only as immoral sinners, but as criminally inclined sinners. Hence when the urban poor suffer at the hands of the criminal justice system, those influenced by these perceptions tend to respond indifferently or with approval because they assume that, congruent with God’s will, order is being established in inherently evil places.

Based on the analysis above, *this thesis argues that the concept of ontological human sinfulness is an unbiblical perspective that contributes to the institutional scapegoating of the*

urban poor and that in order to be prophetic agents of reconciliation, evangelicals will need to reinterpret their understanding of the human by building on the biblical concept of Imago Dei— i.e. the biblical concept that humans are created in God's image.

This thesis takes an interdisciplinary approach. Together with scripture, this thesis draws on the anthropological perspective of social theorist Rene Girard in order to guide the theological process of deconstructing the concept of ontological human sinfulness. This deconstruction process exposes the ways in which this concept functions as a myth in evangelical theology and how it is ideologically bound to structural categories of criminality, a bind which has historically furthered western practices of institutionally scapegoating social outcasts.

Concerned about the identity and mission of the church, this thesis offers evangelicals an alternative interpretation of the human, one which does not extenuate the evil nature of sin and violence. By building on the doctrine of *Imago Dei* and utilizing Girard's perspective, this interpretation argues that humans are essentially mimetic in nature and relationally disconnected from God; therefore, instead of emulating God, humans imitate each other and engender patterns of competition and violence in society. This interpretation of human nature reveals that the patterns of urban violence emulate the justice system's practices of institutional violence. Hence the former's violence is an imitative reflection of the latter's violence.

This thesis ultimately reveals that Christians who support the criminal justice system against the urban poor compromise their mission to be agents of reconciliation. By setting the doctrine of *Imago Dei* as an anthropological starting point, this thesis endeavors to empower evangelicals to resist and subvert the patterns of structural violence that tend to focus on the urban poor. In this way, evangelicals will faithfully assume their roles as prophetic agents who reflect the likeness of Jesus in a context characterized by rivalry and violence.

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Most of all, I want to thank Jesus, my Savior and King, who has led me through such an amazing journey. It was in a prison cell where, through a dream, he sowed the idea that I should pursue a theological education, a dream that is now reality. Exactly ten years have passed since my release from that place of violence. And now, because of God's faithfulness in Christ Jesus, I write from a theological perspective informed by this journey. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

Chapter One: Introduction

Racial tensions between the African American community and the FPD (Ferguson Police Department, MO) had been growing for months. The community was outraged over the killing of unarmed black teenager, Michael Brown, who was shot by a police officer after being accused of stealing a pack of cigars. On November 24, 2014, the prosecutor of St. Louis County announced the grand jury decision not to indict Officer Darren Wilson for the shooting. Suddenly, rioting erupted in Ferguson. Fire quickly consumed buildings as protesters and rioters faced-off with police and their tanks. Rioters tossed Molotov cocktails at buildings, officers threw tear-gas bombs at rioters, while demonstrators and religious leaders stepped in between the melee only to be struck by the cross-fire. The Ferguson demonstration immediately replicated itself in over 170 cities across the nation, as protestors sought to express solidarity with the people of Ferguson and to address the institutional violence inflicted on ethnic minorities in their own towns.¹ From a distance, many sympathized with the protestors, some justified the system while condemning the violence of rioters, and others remained indifferent. But when a federal report later revealed the FPD's longtime practice of revenue production through racialized policing, the public received a better glimpse of the controversy.²

The Social Context

Ferguson has become a symbol. This symbol reflects a national reality in which people of color living in contexts of urban poverty—whom I will call *the urban poor*—

¹ The frequency of these demonstrations eventually gave rise to the “Black Lives Matter movement.” During these demonstrations, protesters faced-off with riot police, waving signs that read “Black Lives Matter” and raising hands in the air chanting, “Don’t shoot!” Mirroring them in opposition, police supporters waved American flags, raising up signs that read, “Police Lives Matter.” See *The Economist*, “We don’t belong here” 413, iss. 8915 (2014): 25.

² United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, *Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department* (Washington, DC: March 4, 2015), http://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/ferguson_police_department_report.pdf.

are mistreated by the *criminal justice system* (i.e. law enforcement, the courts, and prisons). In this reality, the justice system is often vindicated in its mistreatment of the urban poor because the latter tend to be associated with criminality by virtue of their neighborhoods: “impoverished, high-crime areas.” For so long, these stereotypes of criminality have served to validate the justice system’s “tough on crime” approach to the urban context, while also muffling advocacy on behalf of the urban poor.³ However, these practices are now being challenged by the clamoring “voices of the unheard.”⁴

The Bible declares that God hates violence (e.g. Ps. 11:5) and is grieved by it (Gen. 6:5-7). Violence destroys God’s order of fellowship in creation, creating fear, pain, and trauma in the human community. It turns wives into widows and children into orphans. Violence takes people, who are made in God’s image, and transforms them into monsters, oppressors, victims, and carcasses. Many argue that violence is redemptive; that it is necessary for the removal of evil and instrumental for establishing peace and justice. But others have rightfully called this idea a myth—the *myth of redemptive violence*—because violence never extinguishes wickedness.⁵ “Instead of diminishing evil,” says Dr. King, “[violence] multiplies it.”⁶ For this reason, God has given the church the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18): the responsibility to transform rivalry into community and the rhetoric of hatred into the message of peace (Eph. 2:15-17; Mat. 5:9).

³ Alex Himelfarb, “Is it getting tough on crime, or getting tough on the poor?,” *CCPA Monitor* 18, issue 3 (2011): 14-15.

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Other America,” Grosse Pointe Historical Society, www.gphistorical.org/mlk/mlkspeech/.

⁵ Walter Wink (1935-2012) is credited with coining the term “myth of redemptive violence.” This myth, he argues, “enshrines the belief that violence saves, that war brings peace...the belief that violence ‘saves’ is so successful because it doesn’t seem to be mythic in the least. Violence simply appears to be the nature of things... the first resort in conflicts” (*The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millenium* [New York: Galilee Doubleday, 1999], Kindle edition, chap. 2).

⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 67.

However, instead of “transforming society,” American Christians have generally “conformed to a racialized, patriarchal, and class-based society.”⁷ This is especially true of evangelical Protestants in the U.S. who often condone systemic violence while condemning urban violence, interpreting the latter as the manifestation of evil and the former as a display of divine justice. When the two collide, as they did in Ferguson, the imitative nature of the collision is usually overlooked and interpreted as rebellion which is being confronted with justice. Rather than mediating peace, evangelicals, like Franklin Graham, tend to criticize the urban poor and exhort them to submit to the law.⁸

This brings us to the critical question which this thesis will explore: *Instead of being a prophetic voice and seeking reconciliation, why is there a tendency among evangelicals to support the criminal justice system’s institutional violence against the urban poor?*⁹

The Theological Starting Point

Many scholars today, through critical analysis of society and culture, have sought to change this tendency by making evangelicals aware of the racially biased values that

⁷ Allan Aubry Boesak and Curtiss Paul De Young, *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2012), Kindle edition, chap. 5.

⁸ Graham recently ignited controversy over his Facebook post: “Listen up: Blacks, Whites, Latinos, and everybody else. Most police shootings can be avoided. It comes down to respect for authority and obedience. It’s as simple as that” (Mark Woods, “Franklin Graham branded ‘crude, insensitive, and paternalistic’ for Facebook comments on police shootings,” *Christianity Today*, 20 March 2015. www.christiantoday.com/article/franklin.graham.branded.crude.insensitive.and.paternalistic.for.facebook.comments.on.police.shootings/50387.htm).

⁹ I recognize that the term “evangelical” (incl. “evangelicalism”) has a wide range of meaning. In this thesis, when I use this term, I am referring most specifically to the contemporary movement whose heritage can be traced to the revivalist movements of early American Protestantism. Mark Baker indicates that “it is helpful to think of ‘evangelicalism’ as a specific a movement that sought to reform fundamentalism from within—those who identified with the National Association of Evangelicals which was formed in 1942” (“Freedom From Legalism and Freedom For Community: A Hermeneutical Case Study of Reading Galatians in a Tegucigalpa Barrio” [Duke University, Durham NC, 1996], 15). Today, evangelicalism tends to be more generally associated with “proto-fundamentalists in the late 19th century, fundamentalists in the early 20th century, and those called evangelicals and fundamentalists today (16). Evangelicalism [therefore] refers to the descendants and heirs of fundamentalism” (16), and it is in this way that I will be using this term.

evangelicals have inherited from early American Protestants, who not only participated in the founding of a racist nation but also in the formation of the criminal justice system.¹⁰

This approach, however, has not completely led to change because, for many evangelicals, supporting the justice system is primarily based on theological principles, not cultural or racial ones.¹¹ Others, taking a more theological approach, contend that evangelical support for the justice system's institutional violence is part of an ideological bind rooted in the commonly held notion of retributive justice, the idea that true "justice requires compensatory violence or punishment for evil deeds committed."¹² This approach has more effectively challenged evangelicals because it engages the latter's rootedness in doctrine and theology, using scripture to shed light on the fact that God's justice is restorative in nature and not retributive.

I ally myself with this latter camp, yet this argument alone does not specifically address why evangelicals tend to support the criminal justice system's mistreatment of

¹⁰ Three outstanding books that have in some ways taken a socio-cultural critical approach but powerfully partnered with theological analysis are (1) Christian Smith and Michael O. Emerson, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Racism in America*; (2) James Cones, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*; and (3) J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account*. See *Bibliography* for more details.

¹¹ Scholarship, however, is correct to point out that the the theological concepts of evangelicals, and their subtly racist conceptual heritage, are inextricably linked.

¹² For many Christians, this concept of justice is buttressed by the Protestant doctrine of PSA (penal substitutionary atonement): Jesus attains divine absolution for humans by being divinely punished on the cross. The assumption is that since God executes justice retributively in the work of redemption (on the cross), then retributive justice must be the appropriate way to respond to evil. PSA engenders the idea that retributive justice is divinely sanctioned (see J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011], 2-3). At the same time, however, the concept of retributive justice reinforces the concept of PSA. Mark Baker and Joel Green indicate that "the normalized order of guilt and punishment," as practiced by most western justice institutions, makes PSA unquestionably acceptable to many Christians (*Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Intervarsity Press, 2011], 24-25). While the correlation between the two compels many Christians to espouse both concepts and practically support the justice system's practices of institutional violence, contemporary scholarship is growing increasingly critical of both concepts, especially PSA. Many, like the authors above, have demonstrated how this idea of atonement, established on unbiblical notions of retributive justice, is (1) a contextual byproduct that began with the assumptions shaped by the feudal and legal culture of the Middle Ages, culminating with interpretations of Protestant thinkers during the Reformation; (2) a minority view that is not embraced by the broader Christian community/tradition; and (3) a perspective that compels Christians to support practices of institutional violence, which are often ideological in nature rather than biblical in nature.

the urban poor. To understand this phenomenon theologically, our analysis must move beyond, but not exclude, concepts of justice and consider the role of evangelical anthropology. Why? Because the way that evangelicals understand justice is largely influenced by their understanding of the human being. Concepts of justice are theoretical solutions to social problems that involve human relations (e.g. rivalry, social/economic inequality, violence): *retributive justice* attempts to resolve these problems through acts of punishment, repression, or expulsion; *restorative justice* seeks to repair these problems through restitution, reconciliation, and rehabilitation.¹³ If the problem in the world is that humans are inherently sinful, what I call the concept of *ontological human-sinfulness*, then restorative justice becomes inadequate.¹⁴ What is there to restore in an inherently evil being if it has become inescapably tainted with wickedness? Would not suppression and annihilation be much more reasonable responses, since such a creature stands as a perpetual threat? If the problem, however, is that humans have broken their relationship with God so that their sinful actions flow from this deep alienation, then retribution will be unwarranted cruelty and restoration would be a just solution.

¹³ Concepts of retributive justice and restorative justice tend to be more sophisticatedly articulated in criminological studies. In this thesis, however, I will use the broad meaning of both. Howard Zehr provides a helpful understanding of both concepts: “Both retributive and restorative theories of justice acknowledge a basic moral intuition that a balance has been thrown off by wrongdoing. Consequently, the victim deserves something and the offender owes something. Both [concepts] argue that there must be a proportional relationship between the act and the response. Where they differ is on the currency that will right the balance or acknowledge that reciprocity ... Retribution as punishment seeks to vindicate and reciprocate, but is often counterproductive. Restorative justice ... argues that what truly vindicates is acknowledgement of victims’ harms and needs combined with an active effort to encourage offenders to take responsibility, make right the wrongs and address the causes of their behavior” (“Journey to Belonging,” *Restorative Justice: Theoretical Foundations*, ed. Elmar G.M. Weitekamp and Hans-Jurgen Kerner [Portland: Willian Publishing, 2002], 29).

¹⁴ Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, vol. 1, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 553. Like Weber, in this thesis, I will use the term “ontological” to indicate notions of “being” and “existence.” To claim that humans are “ontologically sinful” thus implies the idea that humans are holistically corrupt, that is, intrinsically and inherently sinful.

Although this thesis will focus on evangelicals who embrace the concepts of ontological human-sinfulness and retributive justice, I want to make clear that simply rejecting the latter is not enough. If Christians redefine justice as restorative, but still maintain that humans are ontologically sinful, they will find themselves stuck in a theological paradox, reasoning their way through a labyrinth of logical hurdles. They may attain a rational middle ground, but will not be completely empowered to advocate for the urban poor. As long as the urban poor are cogently demonized, and since it is much easier to tolerate efforts to expel things deemed inherently evil, the idea of inherent sinfulness will tend to prevail and engender indifference when the urban poor are punished.

Thesis

The idea that humans are inherently sinful must be challenged, not only because the urban poor are vulnerable to its demonizing tendencies, but also because Christian doctrine should never compel the church to aid the endangerment of human life. Doctrine must further the church's mission, not compromise it. *In this thesis, I will argue that the concept of ontological human sinfulness is an unbiblical doctrine that contributes to the institutional scapegoating of the urban poor, and that in order to be prophetic agents of reconciliation, evangelicals will need to reinterpret their understanding of the human and its sinful condition through the biblical concept of Imago Dei.* To this end, I will employ the work of Rene Girard, whose *mimetic theory* elucidates the imitative nature of human violence and whose perspective on myth exposes the ways in which sacred concepts have potential to conceal cultural mechanisms of violence against social outcasts.¹⁵

¹⁵ For more on Rene Girard's life and career, see Michael Kirwan, *Discovering Girard* (Wandsworth: Darton, Longman and Todd Publishers, 2004).

Outline of Chapters

In the next chapter (chapter two), I will establish Girard's anthropology as an analytical framework for this thesis. The first half of the chapter will focus on mimetic theory which contends that instinctual mimesis impels people toward rivalry and collective violence, eventually leading the community to violently converge upon an innocent victim, who is blamed for the community's ills and ultimately scapegoated. As I introduce this theory, I will use real stories from my experiences growing up and ministering in the urban context to make abstract theory concrete and to familiarize the reader with the culture of urban violence. In this way, mimetic theory will help demonstrate that the culture of urban violence is more complex than simply claiming that it arises out of the depravity of human nature. The second half of chapter two will establish Girard's perspective on mythology, which will illumine my argument in the next chapters: that the concept of ontological human sinfulness functions as a myth in evangelical theology.

Chapters three and four will utilize Girard's anthropology to analyze the role that evangelical anthropology plays in the interactions between the church, the criminal justice system, and the urban context. Chapter three will specifically establish the theological problem pertaining to the perspective of ontological human sinfulness. I will argue that it is a myth that contains an unbiblical description of human nature and fosters a theological basis for redemptive violence, which ultimately preys on the outcasts of society. Chapter four will establish the social problem that this perspective poses. I will demonstrate how the concept of ontological human sinfulness contributes to the institutional mistreatment of the urban poor by combining with the criminal stereotypes

that are typically applied to the urban context, binding the church ideologically with the criminal justice system in its institutional mistreatment of the urban poor.

The last chapter (chapter five) will provide an alternative perspective of human nature. This view, which I will call *mimetic malformity*, will build on the doctrine of the image of God and utilize mimetic theory to empower the church to think biblically about the human, sinfulness, and the mimetic nature of urban violence. I will argue that humans are created in God's image, but because of the tangible human-divine separation resulting from sin, people imitate the wrong things, resulting in the rivalry and violence we witness in society. By examining the nature of urban violence in relation to the structures of retributive justice that tend to focus on the urban poor, the perspective of mimetic malformity will help evangelicals understand that the former essentially emulates the latter. I will end with a brief exhortation to the church, encouraging Christians to be the reflection of God in Christ to the world by engaging justice restoratively and building peace rather than supporting or imitating the patterns of institutional violence.

Why This Thesis Matters

I recognize that some will find my arguments offensive. Evangelicals maintaining a fundamentalist temperament may dismiss me as a heretic for challenging the doctrines of Original Sin and Total Depravity, and those holding a staunch national identity might consider me unruly for challenging the concept and system of retributive justice. Many, having a strong commitment to the church, may characterize me as too critical, while those who have a strong commitment to racial justice and urban ministry may argue that my emphasis on the violence in the urban context vilifies the urban poor. While I know the issues that I raise and the critique that I make of evangelicals will not be without

controversy, it is not my intention to discredit anyone's faith nor to incite anyone to shame. My intention is to prompt Christians, especially my evangelical partners in God's mission, to reimagine their role as prophetic agents of reconciliation and to inspire followers of Jesus to transform both the people involved in the culture of urban violence and the people who participate in the structures of institutional domination.

As a Christian who values evangelism and personal transformation, I believe that the church bears a responsibility to call society to repentance from sin and to faith in the Jesus Christ. Thus I take the reality of personal and structural sin seriously. As an urban minister who lives among the poor and who collaborates with many churches in an effort to attain the well-being of urban neighborhoods across the nation, I believe that it is the church's duty to care for the outcast of society.¹⁶ Hence my commitment to the church is sincere. Along with sincerity, I engage this work with deep pain. As a former gang-member, my personal history is marked by violence, and my theology was formed by personal experiences in the prison system as an inmate. I have buried several friends due to street violence; my father and most of my brothers are, or have been, incarcerated; one brother has been in county jail for six years fighting a life-sentence. My own body has scars and tattoos that reflect the pain I have endured. This thesis is therefore more than an academic endeavor for me. It is a conviction born out of suffering and an invitation for the church to reimagine the human and to consider its own prophetic role in society as it seeks to establish peace and reconciliation where violence prevails.

¹⁶ Since 2008, I have ministered in Fresno (CA) through InterVarsity's Fresno Institute for Urban Leadership (see, www.fiful.org), directing a Christian urban leadership development program for college students. For about the same amount of time, I have been involved with the Christian Community Development Association (see, www.cdda.org), a national movement seeking the transformation of urban neighborhoods across the nation.

Chapter Two: Girard and Urban Violence

Although violence appears in many places and in many forms, it tends to be prevalent in densely populated and economically challenged urban neighborhoods—i.e. the urban context.¹ Violence is manifested in scuffles among teenagers during and after school hours. It breaks out among neighbors over the scarcity of space, disrespectful words, or facial gestures that are found offensive. Violence appears, as it does in many places, in the form of domestic abuse, mostly affecting women and children.²

Criminal street gangs are perhaps the most notorious for violence in the urban context.³ In fact, these “criminal organizations” are founded on violence, which is evident in the stories we often hear in the news about gangs expanding their territorial domains using violence. By developing “sophisticated criminal networks,” usually connected to transnational drug-trafficking organizations, gangs are able to establish illegal economic systems in the urban context, which they then protect with systems of violence.⁴ These networks and systems generally have powerful influence in economically disadvantaged, urban neighborhoods. They tend to shape the economic and, consequently, the social culture of the urban context. Urban sociologist Sudhir A. Venkatesh has demonstrated how these criminal networks often combine with conventional and unconventional systems, forming subaltern, economic cultures in the urban context, which he calls the

¹ See James Diego Vigil, “Urban Violence and Street Gangs,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 32 (2003): 225-242.

² See Bridie-Ann Milner, “Recognizing Children and Young People Living in the Context of Domestic Violence,” *Internet Journal of Criminology*, last modified 2010, http://www.internetjournalofcriminology.com/milner_children_young_people_and_domestic_violence_oct_2010.pdf.

³ Criminal street gangs have become a common population in the U.S., and are overwhelmingly present in urban neighborhoods. According to records, there is well over an estimated 1.4 million gang-members in the country active within around 33,000 different gangs, which account for about 80% of crime (FBI, “2011 National Gang Threat Assessment- Emerging Trends,” Reports and Publications, last modified 2013, <https://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/2011-national-gang-threat-assessment>).

⁴ Ibid.

“underground economy of the urban poor.” This system is an abstruse conglomeration of economic networks, containing “a widespread set of activities, usually scattered and not well integrated, through which people earn money” and through which the patterns of violence are also transferred to the broader community.⁵ In an effort to maintain this underground economy, gangs seek to forestall police presence by using intimidation, violence, and the dreaded label of “*snitch*” to establish a code of silence among residents.⁶ These systems of violence and economics subsequently attract others, offering people protection and security in exchange for their loyalty and commitment to advance this criminal-economic enterprise.⁷ Whether through intimidation or attraction, gangs thus have a prominent role in influencing and facilitating a culture of violence in the urban context.⁸

Although the urban context is recognized as a violent place, not everyone therein is violent. Many people work hard to pay the bills. Some do everything possible to raise their kids well and keep them safe. Others live quiet lives, hoping that someday they will have the capacity to break the bonds of poverty and move out to a safer neighborhood. Many have no choice but to remain economically trapped in these violent neighborhoods where politeness often conveys weakness and calling the police is regarded as treason.

⁵ Venkatesh, Sudhir A, *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), Kindle edition, chap. 1. In these types of neighborhoods, Venkatesh explains, “one will find not only gangs, but networks of personal tailors and clothiers, burglary and gambling outfits, stolen car rings, livery services, and other organizations that develop clandestine entrepreneurial schemes,” usually involving individual transaction. “Other parties... may [get] involved if regulation is necessary... [e.g.] third-party arbitration, holding cash or goods in escrow, or... a threat to household security or public safety that ensues because a conflict has gotten out of hand” (Ibid.).

⁶ When the “snitch-label” is applied to residents they are immediately shunned by all out of fear because they are regarded as traitors who cooperate with the police. Violence is anticipated for snitches. Those who associate with them run the risk of being labeled together with them.

⁷ Venkatesh, *Off the Books*, chap. 6.

⁸ Gina Penly Hall, Terence P. Thornberry, and Alan J. Lizotte, “The Gang Facilitation Effect and Neighborhood Risk: Do Gangs Have a Stronger Influence on Delinquency in Disadvantaged Areas,” In *Studying Youth Gangs*, ed. James F. Short, Jr. and Lorine A. Hughes (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2006), 47.

When violence strikes, people often feel like there are only three options of response: be quiet, call the police, or fight back.

Surely, the culture of urban violence is a lot more complex than this. Yet for many Christians, namely evangelicals, this kind of culture is considered the direct result of the inherent sinfulness of human nature. While I agree the culture of violence is unjustifiably sinful, I contend that the assumption that urban violence merely stems from a sinful core in human beings is presumptuous. If all human nature is sinful and all humans share in this same nature, then why are not all humans equally violent? And why is violence more prevalent in one part of town than in the other part of the same town? This assumption, that urban violence can be explained by inherent sinfulness alone, implies that the urban poor are fundamentally more sinful than others, since violence is statistically higher in the urban context. A more adequate explanation is needed, one that will consider the individual and structural mechanisms at work in the urban context.

Rene Girard's anthropology is an excellent resource in this regard. There are two reasons for this. First, his mimetic theory (explained in the first half of this section) provides insight into the individual and collective mechanisms at work in the patterns of human violence. Second, Girard's perspective on myth—explained in the second half of this section—shed light on how foundational narratives, social and religious, tend to conceal and perpetuate institutional violence against vulnerable people in the midst of a community. Establishing Girard's anthropology will thus provide the analytical lens necessary for understanding the nature of urban violence and the anthropological framework which will help navigate the logic of this thesis as a whole.

Mimetic Desire

Mimetic theory maintains that human beings have a natural impulse to emulate others by way of desire, a tendency that Girard calls “mimetic desire.” *Mimesis* is the act of imitating, *desire* is the act of wanting. By combining these two words, Girard intends to make clear that mimesis and desire are inseparably connected and mutually reinforcing. On the one hand, the human proclivity to imitate engenders desire; on the other hand, desire powerfully impels the proclivity to imitate.⁹ Both mimesis and desire work together, not linearly, as in “Joe desires Jane for himself,” nor in a Hegelian sense, as in “Joe desires that Jane desire him.” Both rather work together triangularly, directing one’s attention to another person and the object that person possesses, as in “Joe desires the iPad that Jane has and wants to play with it just like she does.” Mimetic desire is, therefore, “desire according to the desire of the other.”¹⁰

Figure A provides a helpful frame of reference.

Individuals caught in a triangle of mimetic desire are called *models*. Each model is located on opposite sides of the base. The *object of desire* is found at the apex of the triangle. During the interaction, models imitate each other in relation to the object.¹¹

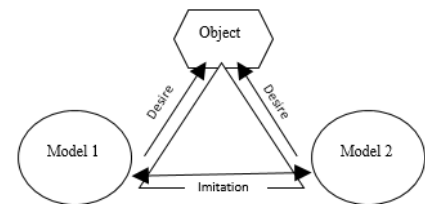


Figure A: Triangular Desire

For example, Model 1 finds the object desirable only because Model 2 expresses fascination with it. Model 2 simultaneously becomes more fascinated with the object only

⁹ Rene Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), Kindle edition, forward.

¹⁰ James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1998), 9.

¹¹ Rene Girard, *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1996), 7.

because Model 1 seems to be attracted to it.¹² Becoming aware of the other's delight with an object stimulates one's mimetic impulse and desire for the object, creating reciprocity of mimetic desire. For example, an infant sharing a crib full of toys with another child often loses interest in all of the toys except for the one in the hands of the other child.

The object of desire can also involve metaphysical things, like virtue or popularity, and does not exclusively involve material things. In the urban context, this kind of desire—metaphysical desire—can be seen in the way that gang-members often attract adolescents or shape youth culture. Gangs exhibit qualities—such as power, honor, and loyalty, often tied to the prosperity of their illegal economic systems—that young people in poverty often find desirable because these qualities seem to compensate for the impoverished and undignified conditions in which many young people live. As a result, gang-members become models in the community, in many ways enticing young people to join their criminal circles or to imitate their language, manners, fashion, and even their patterns of violence.

Before I became involved in gangs, I had a friend who was a *Bulldog* gang-member.¹³ His nickname was Blunt. We were both fourteen years old. He modeled courage very well. He fought anyone at any time. He was feared and respected. I was insecure and often scared. Therefore, Blunt's courage was attractive to me. I wanted the respect that he had. So I imitated him, took risks and fought others. Eventually, respect and courage became my own. Soon others, including Blunt, began to imitate me. And though I was not yet a gang-member, I began to resemble one.

¹² Michael Kirwan, *Discovering Girard* (Wandsworth: Darton, Longman and Todd Publishers, 2004). 21.

¹³ The Bulldog gang, primarily a Latino gang, is the dominant gang in Fresno (CA) and considers the whole city as their rightful domain. See History Channel, "Dog Fights," *Gangland*, Season 4: Episode 21, first broadcast 23 July 2009.

As models grasp after the same object, they eventually transition into another phase, *rivalry*. Competition and conflict over the object ensues between the two models. Both desire full control of the object and both compete for it, obstructing each other's endeavors and creating frustration. The irony is that if one model decides to pull away from this triangular interaction, the other will become even more frustrated. The reason is that models crave their rival's desire and envy. Being imitated validates one's self-worth; when one is not imitated, it creates insecurity. People like being imitated, yet they hate it. Their heart cries out, "Imitate me!"¹⁴ However, when imitation happens, the heart cries, "Stop imitating me!" Imitation creates a sense of similarity with the imitator, threatening one's sense of originality and unique worth. Differentiation is therefore pursued by obstructing the imitation of the imitator, but when differentiation is attained, one yearns again for the imitation of the imitator. The tables turn and the imitated seek the imitation of their imitator, stubbornly returning to the triangle of mimetic desire.

Blunt and I became good friends. In fact, he was one of my best friends. But I was always annoyed and frustrated with him. I am certain he felt the same way about me. It seemed like we were always competing for the image of courage. If he fought two guys last month, I fought three the next. Pretty soon it wasn't about courage anymore. It was about making a follower of one another. This motive was mutual and so was our tension. This became apparent to me when we became cellmates in juvenile hall.

It was lunch time and as we ate our sandwiches in our cell, he asked if he could have my mustard. I mischievously squeezed it onto his shirt. He reacted by squeezing mayonnaise on my face. I threw my food at him and he threw his at me. Somehow we

¹⁴ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 164.

ended up wrestling on the ground, and when I overpowered him, he shouted, “Alright dog! I surrender. I love you.” So I let him go, and we both laughed. But deep inside, I was not laughing. I grew even more frustrated because he refused to compete against my strength. Moreover, his affectionate expression prompted another object of desire—loyalty. We had made a bond to stick together during our incarceration, and while I wanted to hurt him, he was able to maintain his side of the deal. This frustrated me! I may have surpassed Blunt in courage at times, but he undoubtedly surpassed me in his loyalty and his unashamed willingness to be affectionate to the *homies*.¹⁵ I wanted his type of loyalty. This was a loyalty that I could not fully embody, especially since I was not yet a gang-member. I was aggravated! I found myself wanting to be like Blunt. At the same time, I didn’t want to be like him. I wanted to be me. Sometimes I wanted Blunt to be like me.

Rivalry can escalate. When it does, models transition into a phase that Girard calls the *double bind*.¹⁶ Figure B illustrates that at this point the object of desire is no longer in sight. Models become preoccupied with each other, and consequently triangular interaction fades away.

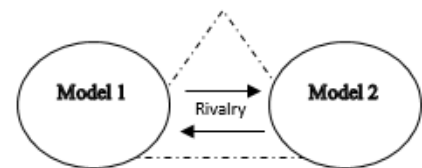


Figure B: Double Bind

Models go beyond the “threshold of frustration” and, forgetting the object of their quarrel, they turn “against each other with rage in their heart.”¹⁷ The two become either parallel or antithetical to each other; they become very similar or become exact opposites, in either case, imitating each other’s anger and hatred. They exalt themselves over each other, shaming and demonizing one another, sometimes

¹⁵ *Homies* in urban slang means “buddies.”

¹⁶ Rene Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), 101.

¹⁷ Girard, *I See Satan*, chap. 2.

engaging in violence. The two become “monstrous doubles”: twin-like enemies, who reflect the monstrous qualities that they claim to identify in their rival. The more they seek to be different, the more they become alike; the more they become aware of similarity, the more they seek differentiation through demonizing and violence.

Mimetic Crisis

Triangular desire and the rivalry that ensues between models often affects the broader community. Since people are mimetic creatures and the models in rivalry are usually linked to an intricate network of relations, there is a tendency for associates of each model to get pulled into collective

rivalry. Girard calls this occurrence *mimetic crisis*. Figure C provides a helpful illustration.

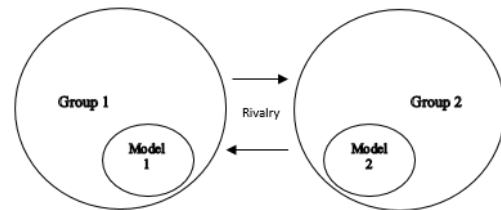


Figure C: Mimetic Crisis

People feel compelled to choose sides between

one rival over the other.¹⁸ The mimetic impulse in people follows a formation of collective conflict that reflects the rivalry of the original models. The larger community becomes polarized and the original models fade into the background. There are no longer two models in conflict but two communities in rivalry. Mimetic interactions accelerate, conflict amplifies; rumors, insults, propaganda, and threats circulate. Many plot, others wait for the battle cry. Suddenly, one in the crowd throws the first blow and activates a series of mimetic responses, culminating in a crisis of collective violence.

This pattern of mimetic crisis was reflected in Ferguson. Tension and rivalry between the African American community and the FPD had been growing for years but the night after the killing of Michael Brown, the former and the latter became intensely

¹⁸ Rene Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 26.

polarized: angry protestors on one side, militarized officers with tanks on the other. Both groups faced each other for months with occasional spurts of violence, but when the court declared Officer Brown not guilty, someone in the crowd lost their temper and acted aggressively.¹⁹ Suddenly, a mimetic melee erupted: rioters vandalized buildings, looted shops, and threw objects at officers, while officers hurled tear-gas bombs, shot rubber-bullets, and forcefully used their batons. Reprisals were met with reprisals until exhaustion settled and the violence dissipated.

Riots, like those in Ferguson, are prime examples of what Girard calls *mimetic contagion*: the culminating phase of mimetic crisis where violence draws on the mimetic impulse of the masses and multiplies itself, so that “each reprisal calls forth a new one more violent than [the previous one]. It leads to an everlasting series of vengeful acts in a perfect fusion of violence and contagion.”²⁰ This phenomenon, however, does not always have to display itself in rioting. Usually, it displays itself in ongoing tension and social unrest. Yet what makes mimetic contagion significant is its infectious nature. It is like a disease, infecting everyone with whom it comes into contact, and like a giant snowball, it absorbs everything that gets in its way.²¹ The mimetic contagion can manifest itself in disorganized and chaotic violence, like the violence of the Ferguson rioters, as well as in organized and well-ordered violence, like that typically practiced by the criminal justice system or the military. In any case, the mimetic contagion tends to affect everyone because people are imitative in nature.

¹⁹ Some news reports claim that Louis Head, Michael Brown’s stepfather, incited the riot by crying out, “Burn this bitch down!” This claim, however, is uncertain. See John Bacon, “Police consider charges against Michael Brown’s stepdad,” *USA Today*, December 3, 2014, <http://www.usatoday.com/>.

²⁰ Girard, *I See Satan*, chap. 1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, chap. 2.

For a long time, the Bulldogs have been bound to a cycle of mimetic violence with *Sureño* gang-members in the ghettos of Fresno.²² The *Sureños* are a southern California gang, having a criminal empire that stretches from Bakersfield to San Diego, and over several southwestern states. They are also present in Mexico. So when *Sureños* began to make an appearance in the Fresno streets, especially in the 90's, the Bulldogs felt threatened and decided that it was necessary to repress *Sureños* in order to prevent them from expanding their empire into Fresno. This repression, however, only created a culture of violence that has drawn hundreds of urban youth into its contagion.

Let me make this more concrete. Bulldogs often walk through neighborhood streets in cliques, “flamed up.”²³ Their courage and toughness draws the mimetic desire of many teens. On the other hand, they pull others into the contagion in different ways. For example, they may pressure the neighborhood to never wear blue but may often encourage wearing red attire. When youth defy this dress code, they run the risk of being associated with the *Sureños* and violence can ensue. If youth call the police, they risk being labeled a snitch. If they retaliate, they immediately get trapped in the cycle of violence. When youth submit to the dress code, others mimic. These are known as “wanna-be’s” because they want to be like gang-members. They do this sometimes unaware of the implications. They do not know that their mimicry immediately affiliates them with those caught in the cycle of violence. Consequently, they get swept by the mimetic contagion on the streets.

²² Originating with the marginal Jewish neighborhoods during Europe’s Nazi occupation, “ghetto” is here used in reference to U.S. neighborhoods that are marginalized, both ethnically and socio-economically.

²³ “Flamed up” is a gang term meaning to be dressed in a predominance of red-colored clothing. Red is the color that Bulldogs use to represent their gang. Being flamed up in many ways expresses a kind of gang “patriotism.” Blue is the color *Sureños* use as a representation of their gang. It is their version of being “flamed up.”

I was caught in this contagion when I was 15 years old. I was not yet a gang-member, but I was good friends with many Bulldogs, including Blunt. One day, Blunt and I walked to the park to smoke some weed and we saw some friends of ours there. They were facing off *Sureño* rivals. A fight ensued and everyone got involved. I did not know what to do. This was not my battle to fight. On the other hand, they were my friends. Suddenly, Blunt jumped into the rumble. I could not simply watch or run away. If I did, my friendship would be questioned by Blunt and by my Bulldog friends. So I joined them in the fight. A week later, the *Sureños* jumped me because of my involvement in the fight.²⁴ I became angry, so I gathered some of my Bulldog friends and I retaliated. We jumped them, and then they jumped us back. Suddenly I found myself fully immersed in a cycle of violence, and I could not get out of it. Eventually, I became a Bulldog gang-member myself. Together with Blunt and others, I began to roam the streets with my friends, flamed up, demonizing our rivals and calling youth to choose sides between us or the “*scraps*.”²⁵ We multiplied our numbers and accelerated the spiral of reprisals, while many young lives were swept into the mimetic contagion in our neighborhood.

The illusion created by rivaling communities caught in the contagion is powerfully deceptive. Logic and rhetoric is used by each party to create the illusion of good people fighting bad people. Rivals demonize each other and consider each other “monsters” that need to be repressed. When one group retaliates, they seemingly become monstrous to the other. More violence seems necessary, but sooner or later participants in cycles of violence grow weary. Some make an effort to establish peace and order, but

²⁴ *Jumped* is urban slang, referring to the experience of being physically assaulted by a group.

²⁵ *Scraps* is a derogatory term that Bulldogs use for *Sureños*. It is an insult implying that *Sureños* are worthless cowards.

nothing seems to work. Every form of retribution is unleashed, even the kind that compromises one's integrity, but all seem ineffective. The velocity of reprisals decrease and the power of propaganda subsides as people on both sides of the rivalry carry wounded loved ones in tears, gradually noticing the likeness between enemies. The more that differentiation from the monster is pursued, the more that similarity is exposed.²⁶

Girard calls this growing consciousness an *eclipse of culture*. In this phase, people's self-perceptions of innocence are increasingly "eclipsed" by a sense of similarity with the enemy. In his work *The Scapegoat*, Girard says,

Everything [in this rivalry] has the same monotonous and monstrous aspect... The reciprocity of negative rather than positive exchanges becomes foreshortened as it becomes more visible... Negative reciprocity, although it brings people into opposition with each other, tends to make their conduct uniform... Culture is somehow eclipsed as it becomes less differentiated.²⁷

Confronted with this eclipse, rivals gradually become hesitant to blame each other for the culture of conflict they created, yet they stubbornly refuse to blame themselves. While tension may endure, this eclipse will pave the way for rivaling communities to gradually merge and become one by engendering what Girard calls the scapegoat mechanism.

Scapegoat Mechanism

The *scapegoat mechanism* is the human impulse that steers a troubled community into finding a culprit that can be held responsible and expelled for the problems they suffer. The culprit can be an individual or a group of people, and the expulsion can be exile or execution. When this mechanism is awakened by the cultural eclipse, the community in conflict begins to shift their suspicions in a different direction. They begin to blame government, economics, society, and key people. They consciously and

²⁶ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 180.

²⁷ Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986), 13-14.

unconsciously seek a culprit because the community's appetite for violence remains unappeased.²⁸ When the culprit is finally "found," namely by authority figures, rivals begin to merge and become one as they execute vengeance. This phenomenon is often seen when rivals identify a common enemy and form an alliance. In the community's mind, allowing the culprit to remain seems to jeopardize order and peace.²⁹ The culprit is thus held "responsible for the cure because [it was] responsible for the sickness."³⁰

Girard indicates that "people who seem particularly harmful for easily identifiable reasons" are the most vulnerable to the scapegoat mechanism.³¹ This tends to be true of social minorities—the poor, women, foreigners, the deviant, the socially and mentally ill, and, especially, the criminal—because they are often experienced by the social majority as a threat to the cultural milieu of society. Girard states that a community's selection of a culprit seems legitimate because "the crimes of which they are accused are [often] real," yet the truth is that they are chosen "because they belong to a class that is particularly susceptible to persecution [i.e. they are easy to blame and punish] rather than because of the crimes they have committed."³² When these people are accused and condemned, it is difficult for people to vouch for them because they are socially despised; people do not usually desire to advocate for a criminal. Though certainly not righteous, the culprit is not guilty of the accusations. In this sense, they are innocent victims who become scapegoats for a community that seeks to replace turmoil with peace and order.

²⁸ Ibid., 16.

²⁹ Ibid., 15.

³⁰ Ibid., 43.

³¹ Ibid., 14.

³² Ibid., 17.

Girard calls the moment of expulsion the *scapegoat ceremony*.³³ For clarity, this term does not necessarily suggest a religious gathering. The term is metaphorical. It refers to the quasi-religious nature of the culprit's expulsion, in some ways reflecting the religious ceremony Yom Kippur (Lev. 16). Like the expulsion of the goat in the Israelite ceremony, the community brings forth the innocent victim, who supposedly represents the evils that plague them. Having ratified the accusations, the community executes the expulsion.

The scapegoat ceremony is illustrated well by Figure D: rivals become one and redirect their rage on the scapegoat. Everyone participates in some capacity, whether they facilitate, assist, or simply observe. People's desires

"cluster together [against the victim] in systems of opposition that are obstinate, sterile and contagious."³⁴

Even if people disagree with the expulsion, they

cooperate with everyone else because in the moment of



Figure D: Scapegoat Ceremony

expulsion, the rivalry seems to be supernaturally supplanted by unity and harmony.³⁵

Mimesis impels the crowds, drawing them together, transforming rivals into a unified mass against one regarded as the "monster," thus criminalized, and expelled.³⁶

This reminds me of a situation I was a part of in 2002. I was an inmate in Wasco State Prison.³⁷ The Bulldogs had joined forces with their mortal enemy, the *Sureños*.

"Tiny," the Bulldog representative, was making rounds around the cellblock, informing

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Girard, *I See Satan*, chap. 7.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 33.

³⁷ In 2001, I was sentenced to eight years in prison for gang-related assault with a deadly weapon against a *Sureño*. I completed over four years, almost five, as an inmate in a California state prison. I finished the remaining three years on parole.

Bulldog gang-members of the truce they were establishing. He explained the whole situation to me and my roommate through the cell window. Apparently, *drop-outs*³⁸ of the *Norteños*, a notorious gang and common enemy of the Bulldogs and *Sureños*, were being transferred to our facility. The plan was that Bulldogs and *Sureños* would ally in order to expel the dropouts from the prison. I was confused! Drop-outs are never a threat! They are simply men who retire or forsake their commitment to the gang. However, as Tiny sought our cooperation, it became clear to me that both Bulldogs and *Sureños* had grown weary of their rivalry. They now found a perfect opportunity to establish peace by shifting their rage onto an innocent group of victims. Eventually, the truce was effected and the hostility ceased. The Bulldogs and *Sureños* shared marijuana and *pruno*.³⁹ While the truce seemed like a contradiction to me, I remained silent. I came under the spell of my mimetic impulse, following the crowd like everyone else, and for the following four years I witnessed the allies unleash their violence upon a vulnerable group of scapegoats.

Mimetic theory has thus far described the human mechanisms which transform social interactions into the kind of collective violence that culminates with the expulsion of a scapegoat. According to Girard, this expulsion becomes a tale that paves the way for the establishment of a new kind of community. We now turn to Girard's theory on myth.

Myths as Socio-Foundational Narratives

A common anthropological view is that myths are traditional narratives that engender cultural identity by explaining a community's origins and sacred mission.⁴⁰

According to Sigurd N. Skirbekk, myths (1) give personal—often spiritual—meaning to

³⁸ *Drop-outs* is a prison and urban term that refers to former gang-members who were either expelled or expel themselves from the gang.

³⁹ *Pruno* is a term used in prison that refers to wine made in prison from fruits and sugar.

⁴⁰ Charles Selengut, *Sacred Fury: Understanding Religious Violence* (New York: Altamira Press, 2003), 142.

community members; (2) they usually interpret complex social-struggles as conflicts between two cosmic forces; (3) they incite members to participate in the culture; (4) they offer symbols to help members interpret social experiences; and (5) they mobilize members toward specific social agendas.⁴¹ Apart from these functions, myths are usually expressed in legendary form, like the Oedipus Story.⁴² They can also be expressed in historical form, like a novel account of the founding of America. In many ways, myths are “fictive representations of cultural development” that cultivate community identity.⁴³

Girard agrees: myths are foundational narratives for culture and society. But in terms of how myths are constructed, Girard argues that they are transfigured accounts of scapegoat ceremonies.⁴⁴ According to him, myths conceal the true story of an innocent victim, but these stories get shrouded in legend-like tale because they are told from the perspective of the persecutors.⁴⁵ Many do not recognize this because, as Girard indicates, the accusation against the scapegoat “is so absolute in myth, and the causal relationship between crime and collective crisis [attributed to the scapegoat] is so strong, that... scholars have as yet failed to disassociate these details and to identify the accusatory process.”⁴⁶ But the fact that myths tend to portray the dominant community as the victim and the scapegoat as the malefactor should be enough to make us suspect the credibility of their account.⁴⁷ By engaging myths with a hermeneutic of suspicion and with the lens of mimetic theory, Girard contends that the story of the unjust expulsion can be detected.

⁴¹ Sigurd N. Skirbekk, *Dysfunctional Culture. The Inadequacy of Cultural Liberalism as a Guide to Major Challenges of the 21st Century* (Lanham: University Press, 2005), 25.

⁴² The *Oedipus* story, an ancient Greek myth, tells the story of the character Oedipus who killed his father and married his mother. See Sophocles, *Oedipus Trilogy* (Radford: Wilder Publications, 2008).

⁴³ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 105.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁴⁵ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 9.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

If one pays close attention to the narrative sequence in a myth, the social patterns taught by mimetic theory can often be identified. Consider the following sequence, common among many myths. A trial of some sort troubles the community (mimetic crisis). Then a malefactor is discovered. When this person is found to be the culprit, he or she is expelled and trouble disappears (scapegoat mechanism). The community is then restored to peace. Finally, the culprit who was first a malefactor becomes a supernatural being that supposedly visited the community to lead them out of trial (myth formation).⁴⁸ In the end, this resurrected being becomes the sacred symbol of a community's cultural unity and the story becomes the foundational narrative for an emerging society.⁴⁹

This is a striking connection! But what does the historical process look like from the moment of the expulsion to the founding of a society? I will simplify this process by listing four occurrences that theoretically take place. One, *the scapegoat is divinized and the true story is mythologized*. The unification of the community accomplished by the expulsion is interpreted as a supernatural occurrence: divinity made great efforts to teach the community what really matters, even if it entailed death. Hence, though first demonized, the scapegoat is then perceived as the benevolence of cosmic goodness. Two, *the myth supposedly establishes precedents for preventing future crises*.⁵⁰ It is assumed that if trouble came once, it will come again, and because the expulsion worked once, it will work again. Rules, laws, and legal consequences are therefore developed. Three, *the repetition of the myth establishes sacred practices*. These practices become ritualized,

⁴⁸ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, chap. 5.

⁴⁹ For a list of examples of how the innocent victim becomes the mythical symbol of the community, I recommend a complete reading of Girard's *The Scapegoat*.

⁵⁰ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 24.

forming rites and holidays.⁵¹ Finally, *institutional society is engendered*. The myth, precedents, law, and sacred customs all contribute to the establishment of social structures, each with their own special function to serve the common purpose of maintaining order.⁵² Yet the myth remains at the center, functioning as the cultural adhesive of the community. The true story of the innocent victim may be long forgotten, but being foundational and sacred to the cultural life of community, the myth lives on.

The prominence of the mythic story in the daily life of the community may grow dim over time, but its implications, both positive and negative, will continue to impact the culture. The reason for this is that the principles implicit in the myth shape the development of the community's identity, imagination, and social interaction. These three things then navigate the development of social structures. In turn, these social structures institutionalize the principles, thus sustaining the community's traditional identity, imagination, and social interaction. For example, while the Indian myth *Valghira Manickam* is no longer central to the *Paraiyars* (a caste group found in the Indian states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala), it subtly continues to reinforce the ancient caste system it once helped establish in certain parts of India.⁵³ As long as people, live, move, and have their being within the structures of a society, the spirit of that society's myth will continue to influence their social life. Some may consider the myth significant, but for those resembling the culprit in the tale, the myth can become a curse: it can cause them to be held in suspicion when the community faces disorder.

⁵¹ Chris Flemming, "Mimesis, Violence, and the Sacred: An Overview of the Thought of Rene Girard," *Violence and the Sacred: Rene Girard and Sacrifice in Life, Love, and Literature*, ed. Scott Cowdell, Chris Fleming, and Joel Hodge (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵³ Robert Deliege, "The Myths of Origin of the Indian Untouchables," *Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 28, no. 3, (1993): 535-536.

Myths as Texts of Persecution

According to Girard, myths are never innocent accounts; they are full of violence. If he is correct, then as Christians, we must hold the myths of our context with suspicion, not only because we need to be informed about the original act of violence, but also because they tend to reinforce patterns of institutional scapegoating, which usually affect the people resembling the original victim.⁵⁴ In other words, myths tend to function as texts of persecution: that is narratives that incite violence on vulnerable social outcasts. When a society experiences cultural crisis, the imagination of the myth, which is sustained by custom and ritual, often compels the members of that society to resolve the crisis in ways that correspond with the principles that they have inherited. Desiring order in society, those whose presence seem incongruous with the culture—social outcasts—are suspected. They are costumed with criminality and sacrificed on altars of legality, all in the name of re-establishing unity and peace. In this way, myths not only conceal the scapegoat practices of antiquated communities, but also hide the scapegoat mechanism inherent in a society. This is something that Christians must confront at all costs.

The Power of the Gospel Narrative

The Gospels are crucial for this prophetic task. In fact, it is in the Passion of the Christ that the scapegoat mechanism and the illusions of myth are completely inverted and exposed.⁵⁵ Rivals on all sides are present in the Passion scene: Pilate, Herod, the Roman guards, crowds who are politically divided against each other, Pharisees, Sadducees and priests—and they are ready to tear each other down. Suddenly, there is a mimetic shift. The crowds merge together as one and turn against Jesus, crying out,

⁵⁴ Flemming, “Mimesis, Violence, and the Sacred,” 7-11.

⁵⁵ Girard, *I See Satan Fall*, chap. 11.

“Crucify him!” The mimetic impulse is so strong that even the disciples were powerless in attempting to intervene. All they did was watch Jesus die.

The story of Jesus, however, does not end with a scapegoat ceremony. On the third day, Jesus rose from the dead, revealing that he was a holy man sent by God. Thus he exposed the mechanisms of violence that were hidden in the Roman system that put him to death, a system sustained by the Roman Empire’s myths and promises of *Pax Romana*. The many lies that Rome and Israel stood upon deteriorated before the eyes of those who witnessed his resurrection. “We must understand,” Girard says, “that the *control* exercised by persecutors and *their accounts of persecution* over the whole of humanity are at stake in the Passion... [The Gospels are] the refusal of everything that is accepted blindly by persecuting crowds.”⁵⁶ Unfortunately, many evangelicals in the U.S. have not refused everything that is accepted blindly by persecutors. Many have taken the gospel of Jesus and constructed a sophisticated theology that is grounded in an erroneous myth about the sinfulness of human nature. Consequently, this myth has intertwined with an American ideological scheme of domination that has contributed to a culture of violence in the urban context.

Conclusion

Our urban neighborhoods tend to be ravaged by mimetic violence. Many follow the drumbeat of drug pushers, thugs, and gangs. Others do not. Nevertheless, despite the scenes of street fights, police lights, and yellow tape, all of the urban poor, violent or non-violent, are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). Yet, they are not always recognized as such. In fact, for many Christians, everyone in the urban context looks the same. The urban poor are all potentially dangerous, equally evil, and ontologically sinful.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 102-103.

Chapter Three: The Concept of Ontological Sinfulness

Cheryl registered her teenage son to our boxing ministry, assuming that we trained and produced amateur fighters.¹ Puffing on her cigarette and holding a can of beer wrapped in a paper-bag, she tried to relate to me by sharing how many people she had beat up in her earlier years, particularly in jail. I wasn't surprised; I sensed she was a fighter. Cheryl was not tall but was physically built. She was a short-haired African American woman in her late 30's, wearing a tank top with tattoos drawn across her left arm. I told her that we were a Christian ministry. Nearly choking, Cheryl began to apologize about her foul language, drink, and cigarettes. She then expressed her love for Jesus, saying, "I don't go to church but I pray to God every night. I give to the homeless. I try to love my neighbors, though they be fighting each other all the time." Then with a serious glance, she said, "I just don't like the police, you know what I'm saying? When I see them, I grab my drink like this..." She clenched her can of beer with her middle finger pointing out. Then I said, "Cheryl, at some point you got to love them too." And she responded, "I'll probably go to heaven hating the police, but that's okay because we're all sinners. There is nothing good in me except the Holy Spirit."

Cheryl was right. We are sinners. Throughout the Bible, it is clear that every human sins and "falls short of God's glorious standard": they forsake their relationship with the Creator and replace it with idolatry, and they forsake their kinship with each other, replacing it with social structures that marginalize, oppress, and massacre humans for profit (Rom. 3:21-23). While human sinfulness affects every aspect of people's lives, is Cheryl correct to say that there is absolutely nothing valuable in us? Does this mean

¹ 701 United is a faith-based martial-arts ministry program that works with at-risk youth in the downtown Fresno area. Its mission is to reduce violence in the community by using the frameworks of honor and respect that are embedded in martial arts. See www.701united.com.

that there is something in the core of our being, which is fundamentally evil? Evangelical Protestants usually answer, “Yes! Sin is embedded in human nature and has corrupted every aspect of one’s being, even from the moment of conception.”

There are many reasons why evangelicals tend to embrace the concept of ontological human-sinfulness, that is, the idea that humans are inherently sinful. I highlight three. First, *this understanding of the human is often perceived as a biblical teaching*. Evangelicals usually emphasize a literal reading of the Scripture. Consequently, passages that address sin often appear to support the concept of ontological human-sinfulness. For example, when Psalm 51:5 and Jeremiah 17:9 are read literally, without regard to the text’s genre, they seem to teach that humans are fundamentally and intrinsically evil.² Second, *the concept of ontological human sinfulness is considered an orthodox doctrine*. Because this concept is rooted in historic doctrines, namely Original Sin (4th c.) and Total Depravity (16th c.), many evangelicals are convinced that their interpretation of the human is the correct view. The truth is that this interpretation has been held only by a particular stream of Christianity (explained later), something that many evangelicals are not aware of. Finally, *the concept of ontological human sinfulness is considered crucial for understanding the work of salvation*. In evangelical soteriology, this concept establishes the universal problem (sin) which God seeks to resolve (salvation) retributively. Since God is holy and intolerable of sin (Hab. 1:13) and humans are innately sinful, many evangelicals assume that God is obligated to punish everyone (e.g. Rom. 1:18), unless they accept Jesus’ death as a substitutionary punishment.

² Psalm 51:5: “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” Jeremiah 17:9: “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.”

Without this idea of sinfulness, salvation thus becomes unintelligible, and critiquing it may be perceived as a denial of sinfulness altogether.

I do not deny that humans are sinful, nor do I argue that they are fundamentally good. Scripture and experience testify that the human is a sinful creature. However, the concept of ontological human sinfulness is problematic and dangerous. In this chapter, I will expose the unbiblical nature of this concept by building on the work of John E. Toews.³ Then, using Girard's perspective on myth, *I will demonstrate how this concept of human nature is a foundational myth in evangelical theology, which establishes the notion of redemptive violence and functions as a text of persecution.* Uncovering the unbiblical and mythical dimensions of this concept requires familiarity with its construction. It is thus necessary to begin with a brief overview of its development.

The Doctrine of Original Sin

The evangelical idea of ontological human sinfulness is rooted in the doctrine of Original Sin. This doctrine offers an interpretation of human sinfulness that is based on a specific reading of the narrative in Genesis 3. The story focuses on Adam and Eve, the first humans who, according to the text, were created in God's image and declared "good" by God (Gen. 1:27-31). However, having been tempted by a cunning serpent, they committed the first sin. They ate fruit from a forbidden tree and, through this act, introduced sin into the world. It is primarily from this text that Saint Augustine of Hippo (354 CE – 430) developed the doctrine of "Original Sin," the idea of *originale peccatum* (Lat.), the first sin that was thought to affect everyone.⁴

³ John E. Toews, *The Story of Original Sin* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2013).

⁴ Ibid.

Alister McGrath provides a helpful summary of the doctrine, identifying three main components.⁵ First, *Adam and Eve's transgression has brought about the corruption of human nature*. This corrupted nature functions as a kind of lump—"lump of sin" (Lat. *massa peccati*)—from which humans are created.⁶ Second, *this sinful condition damages the freewill of human beings*. Because human nature is corrupted, the will loses the capacity to seek things that are pleasing to God; it becomes biased toward evil. Augustine contended that only through the grace of the sacraments (esp. infant baptism) can the will be empowered to do good things again.⁷ Lastly, *Adam and Eve's sinfulness is genetically transferred to all of humanity*. This transmission is of two kinds: the first is biological, also called "seminal identity," and the second is forensic, that is the idea of "original guilt" (Lat. *originale reatus*).⁸ Regarding the first, the idea is that sin is transmitted "to all subsequent human beings because all human beings were present in Adam's semen."⁹ Regarding the second, the idea is that since humans inherit a corrupted nature, which is an offense to God's holiness and law, humans are born in a state of forensic guilt. "For this reason," Augustine argues, "our guilty nature is liable to a just penalty."¹⁰ This punishment supposedly takes place "in the bottomless pit," that is, hell.¹¹

John E. Toews indicates that there were many thinkers in the Judeo-Christian tradition (during, before, and even after Augustine) who articulated the idea of human

⁵Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 4th ed., (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 362-363.

⁶Toews, *The Story*, 74.

⁷Peter Sanlon, "Original Sin in Patristic Theology," in *Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin: Theological, Biblical, and Scientific Perspectives*, ed. Hans Madueme and Michael Reeves (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 91-96.

⁸Toews, *The Story*, 85.

⁹Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 362-363.

¹⁰Augustine of Hippo, "Augustine on Human Nature," *The Christian Theology Reader*, 4th. Ed. by Alister McGrath, (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 352.

¹¹Toews, *The Story*, 75.

sinfulness and that Augustine was the first to construct a doctrine using ontological terms. Augustine often used metaphysical categories—like substance, entity, nature, and being—to describe human nature and its corrupted state. He acquired these categories from “the Manichean movement of which he had been a novitiate for nearly ten years.”¹² The dualistic cosmology of Manicheanism shaped Augustine’s perspective, and even though he ceased being a Manichean after his conversion, he continued to think like one. He ascribed notions of substance to sin and human nature, arguing that the two converged and became one in Adam and Eve’s sin, thus reinterpreting the human as inherently sinful and casting this image against the backdrop of a celestial justice system. In this way, the narrative in Genesis 3 was turned into a philosophical interpretation of human nature that, in many ways, was alien to most of the Christian tradition up until Augustine’s time.¹³

While most of the early church fathers, from both western and eastern traditions, considered Genesis 3 as marking the human-divine relational disruption, their definitions of evil, sin, and human nature varied. Toews indicates that the Greek fathers (and some Latin fathers), often found notions of ontological sinfulness repulsive. Instead, they defined human sinfulness in covenantal and relational terms.¹⁴ The problem of human nature for them was not that humans inherit biological corruption or “original guilt.”

¹² Ibid., 74. Manicheanism was a popular Iranian religion that maintained a sophisticated dualistic cosmology. It described the universe in terms of conflict between spirit and matter. The former was associated with light and goodness, the latter with darkness and evil, and since human beings were part of the material world, they were interpreted in negative light.

¹³ Ibid. In chapter 2, Toews introduces Second Temple Judaism’s interpretations of human sinfulness, and in chapter 3, Toews provides insight into interpretations from Jewish thought during Jesus’ time.

¹⁴ Ibid., 37.

Rather, humans inherit mortality and a social reality where “children are born outside of Paradise and [are] influenced by the example” of others.¹⁵

For more on how human sinfulness was interpreted in the first three centuries of Christianity, both in the western and eastern tradition, I recommend a thorough reading of Toews’s book *The Story of Original Sin*.¹⁶ What is important to assert here is that despite the variety perspectives on human nature existing in the first few centuries of Christianity, the Augustinian version became the prominent one for the western tradition.

The Doctrine of Total Depravity

Just as Augustine’s doctrine of Original Sin builds on a peculiar reading of Genesis 3, the doctrine of Total Depravity, developed during the Protestant Reformation (1517- 1648), builds on Augustine’s doctrine. The two doctrines are often confused with each other because both advocate the notion of ontological human sinfulness and consider human nature corrupted as a result of Adam and Eve’s transgression.¹⁷ The two doctrines are, however, slightly different: Original Sin’s claims focus on the origins, transference, and penal consequences of human sinfulness, while Total Depravity’s arguments focus on the immoral tendencies of human behavior and the inability for humans to seek God. This doctrine describes humans as perpetually desiring evil (Gen.6:5); “hostile to God” (Rom. 8:7); essentially rebellious and violent (Rom. 1:30-32); and lacking any form of righteousness (Rom. 3:12). The doctrine of Total Depravity contends that this human inclination toward evil results from a total corruption of human

¹⁵ Ibid., 60-61.

¹⁶ See note 2 of this chapter.

¹⁷ C.C. Ryrie, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), s.v. “Total Depravity,” 312.

nature, which has caused the human will to become “totally depraved.” The will is not just injured by the corruption of sin, as Augustine thought. It is completely spoiled.

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was a committed Augustinian who embraced the doctrine of Original Sin. While he did not establish the doctrine of Total Depravity, he certainly paved the way for it by redefining the human will. In *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther argued that the power of reason and the will are the most excellent things in human nature. Yet they are totally powerless in relating to God. “It is in reason and the will,” he says, “that God is known. But no one by nature knows God. We must conclude, therefore, that man’s will is corrupt and man is totally unable by himself to know God or to please him.”¹⁸ For Luther, then, the human will was not handicapped to spiritual matters, as Augustine argued but rather dead and incapable of seeking God.

According to Luther, sin is the lack of trusting and being reliant upon God.¹⁹ If human beings are completely sinful, and if their wills are ultimately dead, then there is nothing in them capable enough to produce trust and reliance upon God. Human effort is useless. The sacraments are powerless. The only way people can direct themselves toward God is if God first changes their hearts. Many, especially in the Reformed tradition, call this idea of divine intervention “regeneration.” Luther, however, called it the “grace of divine revelation”: an act of divine grace whereby God, through the Spirit and the gospel message, changes people’s minds and wills and reverses their “inborn

¹⁸ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, abridged edition (1525; repr., Pensacola: Chapel Library, 1984), Kindle ed., Arg. 2.

¹⁹ Robert Kolb, “Lutheran Doctrine,” in *Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin: Theological, Biblical, and Scientific Perspectives*, ed. Hans Madueme and Michael Reeves (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 113.

inability to trust in the Creator and to be in fellowship with him.”²⁰ Hence grace creates faith that regenerates the will and causes people to live for God.

Following Luther’s thinking, John Calvin (1509-1564) established the doctrine of Total Depravity by taking the concept of the human will a bit further than Luther. Whereas Augustine considered it injured, and Luther deemed it dead, Calvin argued that the human will is depraved and restlessly inclined toward sin. According to Calvin, depravity is inherited through *natural corruption* (Original Sin).²¹ Because this corruption is “diffused into all parts of the soul... our nature is not only destitute and empty of good, but so fertile and fruitful of every evil that it cannot be idle.”²² The will’s primary function is to arouse choice and action, but since it is preoccupied with sin, Calvin argues, it only sinks the human deeper into sin. Human nature is, therefore, not only incapable of seeking God, as Luther suggested, but also opposed to the Creator.²³

What about acts of kindness? We often see humans doing good things in the world, even caring for the poor. Are humans really driven by depraved behavior? The doctrine of Total Depravity does not necessarily suggest that human behavior is as wicked as possible. It does characterize human nature as perpetually inclined toward evil, but it also recognizes that human behavior can exhibit acts of righteousness. These acts, however, are also interpreted as sinful by this doctrine: they fall short of divine approval

²⁰ Ibid., 111.

²¹ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536; repr., Oxford: Acheron, Press, 2012), Kindle edition, Book 2, chap. 1. For clarity, according to Calvin, corruption is inherited through physical conception as opposed to a kind of corruption that is environmentally conditioned, which some of Calvin’s opponents contended.

²² Ibid.

²³ R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1986), 180.

because they are driven by self-seeking motives, such as self-glorification, the alleviation of guilt, or manipulation of others for selfish gain.²⁴ There is always a selfish motive.

The Early Revivalists and The Concept of Ontological Sinfulness

The doctrines of Original Sin and Total Depravity are both components pertaining to the evangelical perspective of ontological human sinfulness. It is true that each doctrine focuses on a different aspect of human sinfulness, but in the end, both define human nature in ontological terms: both maintain that human beings are innately evil. In American evangelical thinking, however, the concept of ontological human-sinfulness is taken to a more extreme level. Apart from being rooted in the two doctrines, the evangelical concept of ontological human sinfulness has overwhelmingly failed to emphasize, or even maintain, the biblical concept that humans are made in God's image.

Failure to balance the view of ontological human-sinfulness with the biblical concept that humans are made in God's image—a concept regarded by many Christian traditions as a biblical doctrine, which will be explained more thoroughly in chapter five—creates serious challenges in one's theology. Even the forerunners of the view of ontological sinfulness (e.g. Augustine, Luther, Calvin) understood the theological complications that this imbalance poses and therefore tried, in different ways, to balance their understanding of human sinfulness with the biblical concept that humans are made in God's image. For example, Calvin, who was a proponent of *creationism*, accordingly believed that God creates the individual soul of every human that is being born into the world.²⁵ He maintained that the soul contained the image of God but through physical

²⁴ Ryrie, "Total depravity," 312.

²⁵ *Creationism*, is not to be confused with the Christian perspective that interprets the Genesis account of creation literally in an attempt to counter the claims of evolutionist theory. This view of creationism rather promotes the idea that God, in continuing the work of creation as Creator, infuses a new

conception, the image becomes corrupted because of the depravity of “the flesh.”²⁶ In other words, the image remains, though it is blurred by sin. In this way, Calvin used the concept of God’s image in humans to protect the notion of God’s holiness. Otherwise, if God, who “creates the innermost parts of our being” (Ps. 139:13), creates humans without the divine image, or perhaps with a distorted image, then God would be rendered the author of sin because he would be creating souls with a corrupted image. The concept of the image was crucial for harnessing the risk of theological extremity. Unfortunately, the concept of the image has nearly vanished in evangelical anthropology while notions of ontological sinfulness have taken up significant space in defining the human, causing the meaning of the human to lose any value it may have possessed. Hence the human is often regarded as some kind of devilish creature.

This anthropological imbalance can be traced to a paradigm shift that took place in American Protestantism during the 18th century. Preoccupation with theological reconstruction (as a result of the Protestant break with the Roman Catholic Church) transitioned to a revivalist preoccupation with homiletics. The reason for this is that evangelistic outreach grew in popularity as Protestant churches of different streams participated in the revivals of the Great Awakening.²⁷ This does not mean that theology

soul in every person at the time of birth. This soul is good, but then it becomes corrupt by the sinful nature inherent in the body. This view is in direct contrast to *Traducianism*, a view maintaining the idea that all souls existed in Adam and were stained by his sin and, therefore, through procreation, every human is born with a corrupted soul, a weakened will, and a sinful nature. Unlike Calvin, Augustine was proponent of traducianism.

²⁶ John Calvin makes this balance most clearly when he admonishes the reader “to love those that hate us, render good for evil, and blessing for cursing, remembering that we are not to reflect on the wickedness of men but look to the image of God in them, an image which, covering and obliterating their faults, should by its beauty and dignity allure us to love and embrace them” (*The Institutes*, Kindle edition, bk. 3, chap. 7).

²⁷ During this period, revivalism was characterized by dramatic and enthusiastic gatherings of people, especially Protestant Christians, across the American landscape, who were committing or recommitting themselves to the Christian faith. The movement is usually attributed to the cross-denominational leadership of Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and John Wesley.

was completely abandoned. It simply means that the growing emphasis was on preaching. In fact, many revivalists were rooted in their Protestant heritage and were significantly fond of the Reformed doctrines developed by many Protestants during the Reformation. Others were not as zealous but critical, particularly of Reformed theology. As a result, many disputed, especially over theological controversies that arose during the later part of the Reformation period, like the Calvinist-Arminianist debates.²⁸ Nevertheless, while revivalists differed on multiple theological points, what is important to note about this time of transition is this: *the view of ontological sinfulness went nearly unchallenged because it provided a theological premise for the revivalist's salvation message.*

Take for instance, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1753), a pioneer of the Great Awakening and a mediating figure between American Puritanism and evangelicalism.²⁹ In his sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, Edwards declares that the human soul is constituted by corrupt elements of violence and depravity, and if it were not for the restraining hand of God upon them, they would soon break out... after the same manner [of other sinners who have been damned].³⁰ After making it clear that everyone is on the brink of divine wrath, Edwards presents the message of salvation. He explains that while God is not entitled to save anyone, he provides a gracious opportunity “where Christ has thrown the door of mercy wide open, and stands calling, and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners...” Therefore, he asks, “how can [we] rest one moment in such

²⁸ Justo Gonzalez points out that it was, in fact, the Calvinism-Arminianism debates that led George Whitefield (Calvinist) and John Wesley (Arminian), two pioneers of the Great Awakening (c. 1731-1755), to part ways. The former maintained that certain humans, the elect, were predestined by God to salvation; the latter argued that people were saved by their choice (and faith), or free will, to follow Jesus (*The Story of Christianity*, vol. 2 of *The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* [New York: Harper San Francisco, 1984], 229).

²⁹ Jane Donahue Eberwein, “New Perspectives on American Rhetoric of Conversion,” *Christianity and Literature* 49, no. 1 (1999): 116.

³⁰ Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” ed. Tony Cappocia (1741; repr., 2007); pt. 6, <http://www.biblebb.com/files/edwards/je-sinners.htm>

a condition?”³¹ This sermon often struck its audience deeply. It became very influential, accelerating the momentum of the Great Awakening, ultimately shaping the theology and style of revivalist preaching for years to come.³²

Revivalist preaching eventually became a common practice and evangelistic outreach became routinized by professional evangelists, like Charles G. Finney (1792-1875).³³ In his monumental work *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, William G. McLoughlin says that Finney helped “make revivalism a profession... [popularizing] the practice of ‘protracted meetings’—usually three or four days of revivalistic meetings.”³⁴ People flocked to these gatherings, sermons were preached, people were converted, and songs were sung. It was definitely a powerful experience, especially for a new generation of Christians, also known as “New Lights,” who were less concerned about theological scholasticism and more zealous about evangelism.³⁵

Reformed scholar, Michael Horton, states that many became preoccupied with “getting the gospel out” rather than “getting the gospel right.”³⁶ Interest in preaching and conversion increased and, consequently, doctrinal precision decreased.³⁷ As a result, theological anthropology grew increasingly ambiguous and equivocal and the idea of human sinfulness, though strongly maintained, was not always conveyed strictly according to the theological articulations of the Protestant forefathers. The only thing that

³¹ Ibid., pt. 4.

³² Douglas L. Winiarski, “Jonathan Edwards, Enthusiast? Radical Revivalism and the Great Awakening in the Connecticut Valley,” *Church History* 74, iss. 4 (2005): 703-704.

³³ Larry Eskridge, “Defining Evangelicalism,” Institute for the Study of American Evangelicalism, Wheaton College, last modified 2012, <http://www.wheaton.edu/isaie/defining-evangelicalism>

³⁴ William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, ed. Martin E. Marty (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 127.

³⁵ Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 139.

³⁶ Michael Horton, “To Be or Not to Be: The Uneasy Relationship between Reformed Christianity and American Evangelicalism,” *The Modern Reformation* 17, no. 6 (2008): 18-21, <http://www.modernreformation.org/default.php?page=articledisplay&var2=980>.

³⁷ Ibid.

remained certain for most preachers, especially those concerned primarily about conversions, was their belief that humans were intrinsically evil and needed salvation from God's wrath. Some indeed tried to balance their view of human sinfulness with the concept that humans are made in God's image, as did John Calvin, but this was a complicated task. How can something bear the image of a holy God and at the same time be intrinsically evil? Calvin resolved this contradiction by resorting to the philosophical framework of his dualistic, creationist view. But as obsession with evangelism grew and the emphasis on doctrinal preciseness lessened, the intricate articulations needed to maintain the unity of these concepts were regularly bypassed. Many, therefore, took the most logical path: the innately sinful human no longer bears the image of God.

Matthew Henry (1662-1714), whose commentaries are still commonly used today by evangelicals, displays this logic in his interpretation of Genesis 5:3. The text states: *"When Adam had lived one hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son in his own likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth."* Since the statement of this verse takes place after Adam and Eve's disobedience, Henry concludes that Adam lost the divine image and transferred his own to human beings. What does this image reflect? Henry suggests that it reflects "the reverse of that divine likeness."³⁸ How can Adam transfer God's image to his children if he had lost it himself? Humanity, therefore, inherits Adam's image as a sinner with a "corrupt nature, wretchedly degenerated from its primitive purity and rectitude... from birth the snares of sin in our bodies, the seeds of sin in our souls, and a stain of sin upon both."³⁹ Hence no image of God.

³⁸ Matthew Henry, *The Complete Commentary on the Whole Bible* (1706; repr., Christian Miracle Foundation Press, 2011). Kindle edition, chap. 5, II.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Ps. LI, II.

Some thinkers actually argue that humans, in their unconverted state, reflect the image of the Devil. John 8:44 is typically used to argue this point. In this text, Jesus and Jewish religious leaders are seen arguing about what it means to be children of Abraham. The Jewish leaders defensively respond by claiming that both Abraham and God are their fathers. Jesus then points out their lack of understanding and says: “*Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desires.*” Taking this verse out of its context, Henry suggests that a universal line is drawn between the children of God and the children of Satan.⁴⁰ John Brown, a Reformed Presbyterian, agrees. He says that while human nature originally reflected the image of God (Gen. 1:26), this passage indicates that “now [it] bears the image of the devil.”⁴¹ In a sermon, John Wesley explains that Adam, not to mention all of his posterity who was within him, “lost both the knowledge and the love of God, without which the image of God could not subsist. Of this, therefore, he was deprived at the same time, and became unholy as well as unhappy... [and] sunk into pride and self-will, the very image of the devil.”⁴² While it is not clear here whether or not Wesley fully agreed with the idea that humans bear the devil’s image, like many preachers during and after his time, he made this implication.

The view of ontological sinfulness in evangelicalism has reached more extreme conclusions about human sinfulness than the doctrines of Original Sin and Total Depravity. The pioneers of these doctrines were already pushing the boundary, but as I

⁴⁰ Ibid., John 8:44, III.

⁴¹ John Brown, “Things Secret and Revealed,” ed. John W. Sproul et al., (1871; Harvard University), *The Reformed Presbyterian and Covenant* 9 (2008): 103.

⁴² John Wesley, “The New Birth,” *The Sermons of John Wesley: Sermon 45*, Wesley Center Online (1993-2011), <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-45-the-new-birth/>.

mentioned above, they guarded their interpretations from logically leading into more severe theological complications by counterbalancing them with the biblical concept of God's image in humans. However, when American Protestantism shifted from interest in theological construction to an interest in homiletical production, the preciseness of doctrinal frameworks became obscured. As a result, many evangelicals today, like Cheryl, believe that *humans are evil with absolutely nothing good about them*.

Evaluating the Concept of Ontological Sinfulness

As much as evangelicals would like to think that the concept of ontological human sinfulness biblically explains the truth about human nature, it is obvious that this belief has been contextually constructed and has evolved. Awareness of this may not be enough to provoke a strong Christian reaction against this view. There are many doctrines and practices (e.g. interpretations/rituals of the Lord's Supper) that are known to be historically constructed yet are satisfactorily embraced as tradition. However, the concept of ontological human sinfulness is not the kind of perspective that should be embraced. It produces too many problems, six which I will now address.

The first problem I find with this view is that *it confuses behavior with being*. It is one thing to say that human behavior is depraved; it is quite another to say that humans are depraved. While endless amount of scripture does point out the depraved behavior of human beings, it does not declare that human beings are ontologically depraved or have some type of evil gene within them. How Augustine came to this conclusion from Genesis 3 is not my concern here.⁴³ What is crucial here is the fact that there is nothing in the text that supports Augustine's interpretation of human nature. While the text does

⁴³ Toews, who has helped guide my analysis and critique of Augustine and the doctrine of Original Sin, elaborates this more effectively in chapter 6 of his book (see note 2).

imply that Adam and Eve introduced sin into the world, it does not teach that, in their disobedience, every dimension of the human being became corrupt. It does not teach seminal identity, seminal guilt, nor does it teach that humans lost the image of God. The story in the text is simple: Adam and Eve, who bore the image of God and who in many ways are analogous of the human race, broke the bonds of fellowship with their Creator by eating fruit from the forbidden tree (Gen. 3). In this way, humanity, like Cain, have wandered away from Yahweh (4:16). Neither the text nor the whole Bible has anything to say about some sort of sin mechanism sprouting up inside the human. In fact, the most it says about human beings is that they are made in God's image. Other than that, the Bible remains silent about any ontological components in human nature.

Second, the concept of ontological sinfulness also contains hermeneutical problems. It stands on faulty theological presupposition, often overlooking the genre of biblical texts and interpreting them out of context. Genesis 5:3, for example, is neither teaching seminal identity nor the loss of God's image. There are many ways to interpret this passage. On the one hand, it can be argued that the passage reinforces the biblical concept that humans are made in God's image, since in the preceding verse (v. 2), Adam is described as possessing it and not as having lost it. On the other hand, the passage could simply be the second part of a genealogical juxtaposition: Cain's genealogy being the first part (4:17-26), which introduces a godless lineage and Seth's genealogy being the second part (5:3-32), which introduces a godly lineage. Moreover, John 8:44 is not teaching that humans are born with the image of the devil. This text, rather, displays a scene in which Jesus charges the Jews with covenant unfaithfulness, calling out the devilish nature of their violent plots against him. Finally, Psalm 51:5 does not teach the

idea of original guilt. The author is, rather, expressing humility for sins committed, appealing to God for forgiveness. This is clear in the following verses, “Purify me... give me back my joy again” (v. 7-8). In these ways, therefore, the concept of ontological human sinfulness obscures the intention of the biblical text by asserting an interpretation which is often derived from a proof-texting methodology.⁴⁴

Third, the concept of ontological human sinfulness creates epistemological challenges. The way in which it defines human nature complicates the way other theological ideas are understood. Consider the following example. The concept of ontological sinfulness interprets the idea of sin and the human being using metaphysical categories, like substance, soul, evil, and etc. As a result, two things happen: the concreteness of *sin as relational disruption* and of *the human as a real person* is abstracted, while the abstract ideas of *substance* and *evil* are ostensibly concretized by their supposed manifestation in the human being. In other words, relational brokenness and the human person, two very tangible things we commonly experience in our world, are replaced with intangible concepts that belong to a realm of philosophical discourse. Conversely, the idea of substance (as an unseen property) and evil (as an invisible force), two very abstract concepts, are made seemingly concrete by their association with the human body. Consequently, the idea of the human as a person fades, broken relationships becomes an issue of secondary importance, and the strange notion that people inherit a sin mechanism becomes an exclusive interpretive lens, leaving evangelicals utterly hopeless in addressing the human brokenness.

⁴⁴ Jesse Morrell, *Does Man Inherit a Sinful Nature: A Scriptural Discourse on the Human Constitution* (Addison: Biblical Truth Publishers, 2013), Kindle edition, sect. II.

By replacing the idea of sin as relational brokenness with the idea that evil is intrinsically embedded in the human being, the concept of ontological human sinfulness discourages the biblical mandate to resolve human brokenness with acts of forgiveness and reconciliation. If the problem of human beings is ontological sin, relational actions like forgiveness and reconciliation will not resolve anything. They will be rendered useless because relational problems require relational solutions; ontological problems require ontological solutions. The two are incompatible, which is why Peter Abelard's (1079- 1142) atonement perspective—a view that interprets the cross as a relational act—does not make sense to those who hold the view of ontological sinfulness.⁴⁵ If humans are ontologically sinful, how would the cross, as an act of love and forgiveness, resolve the problem of human sinfulness? Seeking resolution in this way is like trying to cure cancer by expressing love to the patient. A relational approach to a physical problem is useless. Instead, cancer must be physically removed with some sort of medical treatment, such as chemotherapy, surgery, amputation, etc. Similarly, if the human is completely infected with the cancer of sin, and if sin is fundamentally abominable to God's holiness, then

⁴⁵ For more on Abelard, see his work *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, The Fathers of the Church: Mediaeval Continuation, trans. Steven R. Cartwright (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011). Adonis Vidu is a proponent of penal substitutionary atonement theory. He finds it difficult to completely embrace Abelard's interpretation of the Passion as a relational act intending to set a moral example of us to follow. For Vidu, the reality of sin demands a retributive resolution. Vidu argues that "the notion of sin makes no sense without the notion of punishment" (*Atonement, Law, and Justice: The Cross in Historical and Cultural Context* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014], 269). Punishment is a necessary consequence of human sinfulness, so how can Abelard talk about the cross exclusively in terms of modeling, love, and relationship when there is a reality of sinfulness that needs to be addressed with justice? Vidu deals specifically with the concept atonement in his book, yet does not thoroughly explore how concepts of atonement are connected to concepts of sin. He only explores their connection to concepts of justice. In doing so, he misses the opportunity to discover how the view of ontological sinfulness guides his conclusions about atonement. Because he views, without much scrutiny, human sinfulness in ontological terms, Vidu's conclusions on atonement are retributive in nature. For this reason, it is difficult for him to completely embrace Abelard's interpretation of atonement. For more on Abelard's perspective, see Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: A Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert, (New York: The Macmillan, Co, 1931), 112-113.

people should expect to be ontologically cut off by God, as Augustine and Calvin reasoned. Forgiveness and reconciliation are powerless.

Fourth, the concept of ontological human sinfulness lays the groundwork for a violent soteriology (this is also an epistemological challenge, related to the previous one). It interprets the problem of human sinfulness not only in ontological terms but in forensic terms as well. The idea of *originale reatus* (original guilt)—which I mentioned in the section discussing Augustine’s doctrine of Original Sin—contends that humans are liable to divine punishment because their nature is naturally contrary to God’s law and because, in a certain way, they participated in Adam’s disobedience, since they were supposedly present in his semen when he sinned. Whereas ontological sinfulness requires an ontological solution, such as the “cutting off” that I mentioned above, the supposed forensic consequences of sin require forensic solutions; namely, *divine punishment*. I call this problem-solution compound the *forensic-formula* because the problem it identifies (guilt) and the response it proposes (punishment) are both forensic in nature.

According to this compound, the forensic-formula, God is a cosmic judge who executes retributive justice either on guilty human beings or on Jesus who offers himself as a substitute for sinners. This understanding of Jesus’ work on the cross, usually maintained by evangelicals, is the major contention of the *penal substitutionary view of atonement*.⁴⁶ According to this view, if people do not accept the substitutionary punishment of Jesus, God will be forced to pour out his wrath on them on judgment day. In either case, God implements retributive justice because it is a precondition of God’s

⁴⁶ Penal Substitutionary Atonement, as opposed to Abelard’s moral/relational interpretation of the cross, maintains that Jesus took the penalty of sin (i.e., God’s wrathful judgment) upon himself so that others who believe in him could be absolved of their guilt. For a thorough critique of this view, see Mark Baker and Joel Green’s *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 2nd ed. (Downer’s Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2011).

holiness. As Charles Hodge (1797-1878) once said, “God is just in the sense that he is determined by his moral excellence to punish all sin, and thus the satisfaction of Christ which secures the pardon of sinners is rendered to the justice of God.”⁴⁷ I must point out, however, that even if violence against humans or against Jesus as a substitute for the guilt of sinners establishes justice (an idea with which I disagree), it does not resolve or fix the problem of ontological sinfulness in human beings. It addresses the supposed legal problem of sin, but it does not change the sinner ontologically. By endorsing the forensic formula, the concept of ontological human sinfulness promotes the illusive idea that divine violence is an act of justice, an act which has no restorative impact.

Sixth, the concept of ontological human sinfulness tends to damage people emotionally and psychologically. The implications of this view are often internalized, especially by pious individuals. As a result, many religious people have mistreated themselves in a variety of ways: from the physical self-mutilation of monastic flagellants, who “mortified their flesh” by striking themselves with cords,⁴⁸ to the psychological self-torture of faithful Protestants, like David Brainerd who saw himself only as vile, perpetually “fearing the vengeance of God.”⁴⁹ Moreover, by standing on the conclusion that human nature is ontologically sinful, people often feel paralyzed from living in a spiritually fruitful way. They develop “a victimized mentality that excuses wicked behavior, relieves the mind from the weight of guilt, and makes impossible the conviction of personal responsibility that justifies accountability and shows the need for pardon

⁴⁷ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, abridged ed., ed. Edward N. Gross (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1988), 379.

⁴⁸ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1 the Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation (New York, NY: Harper San Francisco, 1984), 360.

⁴⁹ David Brainerd, *The Life and Diary of The Rev. David Brainerd: With Notes and Reflection by Jonathan Edwards* (1749; repr., Amazon Digital Services, 2013), Kindle edition, pt. 1.

through Christ.”⁵⁰ This was the case with Cheryl, who was totally at ease embracing her hatred against the police and numbing her pain with alcohol and cigarettes. As I got to know Cheryl, I realized that it was difficult for her to fully love her neighbors as herself (Mark 12:31), since, of course, she had a difficult time loving herself.

The concept of ontological human sinfulness is neither biblical nor innocent. It is a perspective developed out of the fallacious doctrines of Original Sin and Total Depravity, both of which distort biblical passages and are exalted above other Christian interpretations of the human being. Furthermore, the view of ontological sinfulness sanctions the notion of redemptive violence. It assumes that God’s wrath, or eternal punishment, is aimed at human beings in an effort to establish justice and that humans can only be absolved from divine punishment by accepting Jesus’ death as a substitute for divine punishment. Sadly, masses of compassionate evangelicals have espoused these teachings and have engaged the world in an effort to “save souls” from God’s wrath. They are often seen proclaiming a gospel message which contends that human nature is the problem and divine violence is the solution (which is really no solution at all since violence is essentially destructive). They proclaim that humanity is depraved without considering the depravity of their own theology and the depravity of the kind of god they portray for the world: a god who raises bloody hands and demands tribute.

Ontological Sinfulness is a Dangerous Myth

If the evangelical concept of ontological sinfulness is not a biblical doctrine, then what is it? I am persuaded that it is a myth. In fact, it has the characteristics and functions of myth, as described by Rene Girard and Sigurd N. Skirbekk.⁵¹ Just as myth provides a

⁵⁰ Morrell, *Does Man Inherit a Sinful Nature?* Sect. 1.

⁵¹ See chapter 2, page 24.

foundational narrative for a community, the concept of ontological human sinfulness, through its interpretation of sacred texts, provides for some Christians a narrative about human origins and the problem of evil. As a myth, it also identifies a problem (human sin/guilt) and presents a solution (retribution/punishment). In this way, then, the myth of ontological human sinfulness engenders a religious imagination that nurtures evangelical identity while also inciting Christian participation in a drama of redemption, characterized by the kind of evangelism I identified above.

The social function of this myth can also be seen when one considers how its interpretation of human nature has historically been used to endorse Christian participation in the social order. Those who have been made right with God through the atoning work of Jesus are, to a certain degree, expected to follow a code of conduct that is consistent with the standards of the state. The reason for this is that many in the western Christian tradition, especially within Reformed Protestantism, have considered the state as a divinely appointed institution, responsible for harnessing human depravity. In other words, the systems of society are God's way of restraining the sinfulness inherent in human nature. This theo-political concept is traditionally known as *the doctrine of divine right*, also "the divine right of kings."⁵² Proponents of this perspective usually buttress their theo-political position by using a literal interpretation of Romans 13:1-6.⁵³ R.C. Sproul, a Reformed theologian, respected by many evangelical Christians, interprets this passage in light of Matthew 28:18, "All authority has been given to me in

⁵² For a classic and helpful exploration on this concept, I recommend the following: John Neville Figgis, *The Divine Right of Kings* (1914; repr., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁵³ Romans 13: 1-6: "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves... For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer... who give their full time to governing."

heaven and on earth.” According to Sproul, there is a hierarchy of authority, from the God the Father to the Son to governments. Therefore, he says, “By my being scrupulous in my civil obedience bending over backwards to obey my teachers, my employers, my governors, and my police officers, I am honoring Christ, who is the ultimate model of authority and of obedience to the law.”⁵⁴ Following this logic, many evangelicals equate Christian virtue with civic virtue, and human sinfulness with civil disobedience. The myth of ontological sinfulness thus joins the religion of evangelicals to state authority.

The state, of course, benefits from this function because the myth not only helps secure the social order but also the authority of the state. For example, when Augustine argued that mortality, disease, and deformity were a result of ontological sinfulness rather than a result of physiological circumstances, the powerful elite supported Augustine’s view and branded his opponents as heretics. They supported Augustine, not necessarily because they were pious and desired to be theologically correct, but because, as one critic states, “Those in power favored a belief system that emphasized man’s inability to govern himself because of his inherent depravity; such a doctrine could be [used] as an instrument for social control.”⁵⁵ In other words, those in authority knew that if religion could convince a population that human nature was essentially dangerous and untrustworthy, then support for the structures of power would increase. Hence the ruling elite’s authority would be reinforced and strengthened.

Sometimes the myth traps the church in the violent affairs of the state. By defining humans as evil and by religiously sanctioning the systems of law, the church has

⁵⁴ R.C. Sproul, “Submit to Governing Authorities,” *Ligonier Ministries: The teaching fellowship of R.C. Sproul*, last modified Aug. 7, 2007, <https://www.idisciple.org/post/submit-to-governing-authorities>.

⁵⁵ Felicity deZulueta, *From Pain to Violence: The Traumatic Roots of Destructiveness*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons Inc., 2006), 22.

often become directly involved with the operations of institutional repression. For example, Calvin is well-known for his participation in the execution of convicted heretic, Michael Servetus.⁵⁶ Perez Zagorin indicates that for Calvin, heresy was one aspect of human sinfulness, alongside theft and murder, because it was an offense to the sacred honor of God. Since Calvin believed there is a duty for government to harness human depravity, he found it “absurd to suppose that they had no right to punish heresy and suppress sacrilege as offenses against God’s honor.”⁵⁷

Apart from its function as a social and cultural cohesive that tends to bind the church to the state, the concept of ontological human sinfulness also functions as a myth which conceals a mechanism for institutional violence against social outcasts. This mechanism can be seen in the way in which the myth is used to further agendas of power politics: consider Augustine, Luther, and Calvin. Within their theological frameworks, each figure established an anthropological problem—namely, by reinterpreting sin’s effects on the human will—that was met with a theoretical solution, but this combination of thought was ultimately connected to a particular agenda. For Augustine, the problem was an injured human will; the solution was the sacramental system; and his agenda was to strengthen ecclesial authority. In the Roman Catholic Church, only priests are allowed to administer the sacraments, which are thought to empower the weak human will. By establishing the doctrine of Original Sin, Augustine not only secured the need for the sacraments, but also strengthened his ecclesial authority.⁵⁸ For Luther, the problem was a

⁵⁶ Michael Servetus (1509/1511- 1553) was a Spanish theologian and physician who participated in the Protestant reformation, but was arrested in Geneva and executed as a heretic for his non-Trinitarian views and his views on baptism.

⁵⁷ Perez Zagorin, *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 80.

⁵⁸ Peter Sanlon, “Original Sin in Patristic Theology,” *Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin*, 91-96.

dead will, unable to desire or attain divine favor; the solution was God's intervening grace as described by the doctrine of justification by faith;⁵⁹ and his agenda was to challenge the authority of the Catholic Church. By arguing that the will was dead to spiritual things, including the sacraments, he invalidated the logic of the sacramental system and thus struck at the authority of Rome.⁶⁰ For Calvin, the problem was an actively depraved will; the solution was God's irresistible grace and the idea of retributive justice; and his agenda was to transform Geneva (Switzerland) into a just republic, containing democratic and aristocratic elements.⁶¹ By constructing the notion of an actively depraved will, Calvin was able to persuade many of the necessity for a retributive governmental system. Retribution, he reasons, is necessary for restraining human wickedness.⁶² If they are not established, he argues, depravity will escalate and society will crumble.⁶³

If it is true that the myth of ontological sinfulness has often been configured to further specific agendas of power politics, what agenda does it conceal in the evangelical tradition? This can be a difficult thing to discern because evangelicalism is a diverse and dynamic tradition. I contend, however, that in the American evangelical tradition, this myth conceals an agenda for social, and also global, domination. This function becomes especially noticeable when considering the Protestant connection to manifest destiny.

⁵⁹ The doctrine of justification by faith argued that salvation and divine approval could only be attained "by grace alone, through faith alone," and not by any other means such as human effort or the sacraments.

⁶⁰ Kolb, "The Lutheran Doctrine," 110.

⁶¹ Mark James Larson, "John Calvin, the Geneva Reformation, and Godly Warfare: Church and State in the Calvinian Tradition," *Calvin Theological Seminary*, last modified 2005, http://www.calvin.edu/library/database/dissertations/Larson_Mark_James_ABS.pdf

⁶² Ronald Cammenga and Ronald Hanko, *Saved by Grace: A Study of the Five Points of Calvinism*, 2nd ed. (Grandville: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2002), 32.

⁶³ John Calvin, *On God and Political Duty*, 2nd ed. (1536; repr., New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Inc., 1956), 56.

Manifest destiny was the early American notion that the U.S. would lead the world in human progress. This notion interpreted America as a “Nation blessed by God,” a new “Promised Land,” the “New Jerusalem.”⁶⁴ White Americans were described as a superior race ordained by God to populate the new world, establish order, and move human progress forward.⁶⁵ But the imagination pertaining to this notion was driven by an ideological project of westward expansion. In fact, the term “manifest destiny” was constructed in 1845 to inspire national identity and courage among Americans who collided with Mexican resistance as they crossed the southwest.⁶⁶ Along with the pioneers, many of the revivalists were inspired to expand the kingdom of God westward by preaching the gospel, especially to the non-Christian natives.

Proselytizing may seem like a pious undertaking, but the truth is that land was coveted to expand national territory, slaves were needed for labor, and the natives were seen as a nuisance. Since human beings were understood as depraved and divinely condemned, and since the cultural and physical characteristics of Native American and African peoples—skin color, facial features, drums, dance, and spiritual images—seemed bizarre and obviously non-Christian, these ethnic groups were deemed heathen, sinful, and deserving of God’s wrath. They became perfect targets for violence, larceny, and repression. A hierarchy of theological and racial categories for human beings was developed and applied with legal stipulations. White Americans were distinguished from “savages,” and civilized land (American dominated land) from land that was uncivilized

⁶⁴ Enzo Pace, “The Destiny of Modern Societies: The Calvinist Predestination of a New Society,” *A Journal of Reviews* 41, iss. 1 (2012): 113.

⁶⁵ Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, revised ed. (New York: Back Bay Books, 2008), 163-164.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

(Native land).⁶⁷ Church historian Daisy Machado indicates that this inability to see the natives as people, namely human beings made in God's image, was one of the main factors that led these Christians to "create a philosophy of mission that was nuanced with the cultural values and national self-image of their day and age..."

It was a mission that sought to remake a people in the image of the missionary. It was a mission in which the national myths of the culture were infused with the theological concepts of "divine mission" and "chosen people," in which Christianization meant Americanization.⁶⁸

A racist illusion was brought forth and legally justified, resulting in the plundering of land from Native Americans, as well as the taking of freedom from Blacks.⁶⁹ It is true that not all Christians were overtaken by the power of this illusion; many sought to protect the lives of indigenous people. Yet, the impact of this illusion prevailed. As Dr. Maria Pilar Aquino points out, "the massacres committed by the conquerors had made entire peoples disappear from the face of the earth" and the "racist, ethnocentric principle of white, European superiority" destroyed the cultural sense of self-worth for native peoples who were colonized by the conquerors.⁷⁰

Today, this mechanism of domination and violence fostered by the myth of ontological human sinfulness continues to be active in American institutions of justice. Non-white people, the homeless, immigrants, and especially criminals are the most vulnerable. When society experiences social challenges—poverty, crime, and social disorder—dissidents and social outcasts are quickly blamed and scapegoated because

⁶⁷ Ibid., 28.

⁶⁸ Daisy L. Machado, "Kingdom Building in the Borderlands," in *Hispanic/Latino Theology: Challenge and Promise*, ed. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Fernando F. Segovia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 72.

⁶⁹ Gonzales, *Story of Christianity*, vol. 2, 246-247.

⁷⁰ Maria Pilar Aquino, "The Collective 'Dis-discovery of Our Own Power,'" *Hispanic/Latino Theology: Challenge and Promise*, ed. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Fernando F. Segovia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 242-243.

they are typically seen as a nuisance to the social order rather than people made in God's image. These people are often found on the margins of society, among the urban poor. They may no longer be legally lynched, burned, or massacred as they were just decades ago; but they are now systemically forced into urban pockets of poverty by a conglomeration of social policies that often work against them. There the urban poor are pressed by a culture of violence on the one hand, and monitored by police, on the other hand. The law promises that police will keep everyone's "streets safe and [their] homes secure by rooting out dangerous criminals and punishing them."⁷¹ But what the urban poor often experience is the exact opposite: they are treated like criminals or people with a "second-class status."⁷² When the urban poor lose trust in the system and pursue justice retributively with their own hands, they reinforce the public perception that the urban context is a place of criminality and depravity.

Conclusion

Many evangelicals tend to be blinded to the mythical dimensions of their anthropological view. They are often committed to it because it helps them make sense of their theology, their lives, and the world in which they live.⁷³ In addition, evangelicals are not always cognizant of the imbalanced dimensions of violence that their view spawns. When they see urban violence, they tend to interpret it as human sinfulness at work; when they see institutional violence, they tend to interpret it as justice at work. For this reason, many evangelicals support institutional violence, even the death penalty. From their

⁷¹ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, revised ed. (New York: The New Press, 2011), 59.

⁷² Ibid., 61.

⁷³ deZulueta, *From Pain to Violence*, 25.

standpoint, the state is God's authorized institution responsible to serve the common good and maintain justice in society.⁷⁴

Cheryl was the victim of this myth. Somehow she heard it and believed it, and this myth gave her a distorted view of herself. The truth is that ontological sinfulness was not located in her soul. Yet somehow, the myth found its way there. But beyond my attempts to interpret the things locked in her heart, which only God knows, I knew that Cheryl was not intrinsically evil; she was made in the image of God.

⁷⁴ Gilbert Meilaender, "The Death Penalty: A Protestant Perspective," in *Religion and the Death Penalty: A Call for Reckoning*, ed. Erik C. Owens, John D. Carlson, and Eric P. Elstain (Grand Rapids: Eerdsman's Publishing Company, 2004), 49-50.

Chapter Four: The Urban Scapegoat

In 2010, I participated in a gang intervention forum called Fresno Cease Fire. This forum, which took place in a church facility, was a collaborative effort between ministry leaders and local government, intending to confront gang-members for their street violence while also offering them opportunities to change their lives.¹ Having been ordered, either by the courts, probation, or parole, to attend the forum, gang-members arrived, most of whom were Bulldogs.² The men were asked to sit in a group and face a panel of officers. Behind the panel hung a large backdrop, displaying the mugshots of several gang-members with details of their arrests, convictions, and prison sentences. I stood in the back of the room with the ministers, leaning against a wall, facing the backs of the gang-members. Officers then began the session by delivering a message to them: “leave the gang or face the full force of the criminal justice system.”³ When the officers finished speaking, they left the building. Then it was the ministers’ turn to approach the gang-members with resources and the gospel.

As each minister approached one of the men, I approached “Wicked,” the one who seemed to be the most influential among the other Bulldog gang-members. Having come from the same background, I assumed that I would easily connect with him, and since he was an influential figure, I assumed that our bond would impact the rest of the men. I was wrong. Before I uttered my first word, Wicked said, “Look dog... You ain’t here for us. You are here for the cops. In fact, you are one with them, so fuck you! You

¹ These forums take place periodically in an effort to decrease gang violence. See City of Fresno, “City of Fresno Receives State Grant to Fund Strategies Aimed to Reducing Gang Violence,” last modified December 17, 2010, <http://www.fresno.gov/News/PressReleases/2010/CalGRIP.htm>.

² See chapter 2, note 12.

³ “City of Fresno Receives...”

ain't nothing but a *sell-out*.”⁴ This was discouraging! We were only trying to help them, I thought. When I later shared what Wicked had said to me with one of the other ministers who had been present, his response was, “Ivan, these guys are criminals and sinners. They need to accept the gospel and change their ways, or suffer the consequences of divine justice.”

The minister was right: these men are not only sinners who need the gospel but also offenders who must be held accountable for the culture of violence they sponsor in the streets. At the same time, Wicked was also right: the ministers had merged so closely with the law that they no longer seemed like agents of hope. Instead, they seemed like the religious players in a lynch mob, calling the men to denounce their ways or become like the convicts whose criminal mugshots hung on the backdrop behind the officers. Unfortunately, the minister was unable to receive this critical point of view, because from his perspective, the gang-members were nothing but depraved “criminal-sinners.”

Religious support for the criminal justice system in this scenario may not seem like a serious issue to many evangelicals. After all, the gang-members were responsible for criminal acts of violence. But what if this scenario is a microcosm of something much bigger? What if both the minister's perception of the gang-members and his partnership with law enforcement reflect a general tendency among evangelicals to support the punishment of those whom the system criminalizes? Indeed, studies confirm that this tendency exists, especially when capital punishment is taken into account.⁵ But let me

⁴ *Sell-out*, urban slang meaning “traitor.”

⁵ Research reveals that “among most large U.S. religious groups, majorities support capital punishment. Roughly six-in-ten or more white evangelical Protestants (67%), white mainline Protestants (64%) and white Catholics (59%) express support for the death penalty” (“Shrinking Majority of Americans Support the Death Penalty,” *Pew Research*, last modified March 28, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/03/28/shrinking-majority-of-americans-support-death-penalty/>).

take this further. What if we live in a reality where people of color who live in economically disadvantaged urban neighborhoods—the urban poor—are generally associated with criminality and are consequently mistreated by the system? Would evangelicals respond prophetically against the system on their behalf, or not?

The truth is that we live in this reality, and yet a large majority of American Christians, namely, evangelical Protestants, do not respond in prophetic ways. Many are blinded to this reality because, as I will argue in this chapter, *their perspective of an ontologically sinful human nature easily combines with notions of criminality that are associated with the urban context, causing them to perceive the urban poor as the embodiment of depravity and criminality*. Thus being perceived, the urban poor are often regarded as the sources of crime, violence, and moral decay; from a Girardian standpoint, they become in the eyes of many the culprits responsible for the problems plaguing society. Therefore, when police interrogate, beat, or kill them or when the courts incarcerate and execute the urban poor in overwhelming amounts, evangelicals do not usually hold the criminal justice system in suspicion. Instead, they exhibit indifference or, like the minister above, they support the system because the urban poor are in many ways perceived as “criminal-sinners,” the culprits whose punishment ensures the establishment of order and justice in society.

Evangelical Misperceptions of the Urban Poor

Protestant evangelicals who hold onto the concept of ontological human sinfulness are not always aware of how their negative perspective of human nature easily combines with notions of criminality. Yet the reality is that the two are often synthesized. The doctrine of divine right has played a historical role in bridging the concepts of sin

and crime for many in the Protestant tradition. As I explained in the previous chapter, this doctrine explicitly mutualizes the relationship between the law of the state and the law of God.⁶ It claims that God appoints systems of government for the purpose of restraining human depravity. Hence disobedience to the law is often interpreted as an act of sin against the Creator, acts of lawlessness and lifestyles of criminality are perceived as manifestations of human sinfulness, the common sinner is assumed to be criminally inclined, and the convicted criminal is regarded as the embodiment of human depravity.

This carries serious implications for the ways in which one understands the urban context. If crime is understood as a direct result of ontological sinfulness and there tends to be a preponderance of crime in urban neighborhoods, will it not be logical to assume that a preponderance of sinfulness exists there as well? Indeed this is often the assumption. Just ask a common, church-going evangelical man, “Where is the bad side of town?” Watch him point his finger toward the urban neighborhoods. Then ask him, “Where do you see human depravity the most in your city?” Watch his finger point in the same direction again. He may explain that all sins are equally evil and that all humans are equally sinful, yet the concentration of criminal reports that come from these types of neighborhoods and the evangelical tendency to associate crime with sin compels this man, and other evangelicals like him, to associate depravity with urban neighborhoods at a much higher level than economically affluent ones. One may theoretically maintain that all people are equally sinful, but in practice, the urban poor are often the ones specifically treated as sinners. They seem spiritually lost, more dangerous, intimidating, and in even greater need of the transformative power of the gospel.

⁶ See chapter 3, pages 51-52.

Most evangelicals may not have the audacity to admit that they perceive the urban poor in these terms, because doing so would compromise the kind of humility that Jesus has called them to live out. They do not want to appear like the self-righteous Pharisee whom Jesus criticized for praying, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector” (Lk. 18:11, NIV). Yet, the tendency to perceive the urban poor as criminal-sinners can be seen in the negative postures that many evangelicals exhibit when they engage the urban context.

Over the course of several years serving as an urban minister, I have become familiar with some of the negative postures (or attitudes) that evangelicals often exhibit in urban engagement. Below, I will identify four in order to demonstrate the ways in which evangelicals tend to perceive the urban poor as a kind of criminal-sinner.

The first is a *judgmental* posture. Evangelicals with this posture often allude to the immoral conditions that tend to be prevalent in the urban context or reference the urban poor when they think of human depravity. They perceive the urban context as a place infested with sinfulness and criminality, thus espousing a kind of religious isolationism, whereby they seek to live, as much as possible, far away from urban neighborhoods. If these Christians have no choice but to reside therein, they live reclusively and relationally disconnected from their neighbors. They believe that interacting with its people may negatively influence them or their children, or put them in danger of violent situations. While Christians should practice judgement to some extent, namely by confronting and critiquing the patterns of injustice and violence that plague society, those exhibiting the judgmental posture, if they engage the urban context at all, often judge by condemning the urban poor. In some ways, this posture is consistent with what Richard Niebuhr called

the *Christ-against-culture* model: Christian identity that is characterized by opposition to the surrounding culture, calling people “to abandon the ‘world’ and to ‘come out from among [it].’”⁷ The problem that their urban neighbors encounter with this call is that they do not usually have the resources to move out of their neighborhood nor to live completely unaffected by the surrounding culture because, as I explained in chapter two, everyone, even quiet residents, are impacted by the situations and the conditions therein.⁸

The second is an *assimilationist* posture. This is a less condemning posture yet it treats the urban poor as criminal-sinners by seeking their assimilation into mainstream society. In line with a literal understanding of Romans 13:1—“Everyone must submit to governing authorities” (NIV)—Christians with this posture often implement social and economic development strategies to aid the urban poor in cultivating lifestyles that reflect American values of economic productivity and civil obedience, as opposed to the lifestyles of criminality usually associated with the people of the urban context. While these types of strategies are necessary for the advancement of the social and economic wellbeing of under-resourced neighborhoods, the problem with this posture is not its strategies but its underlying assumptions: it equates discipleship with social conformity and particularly targets the urban poor for this objective. In many ways, this posture is consistent with what Richard Niebuhr called the *Christ-of-culture* model, since it confuses the call to follow Jesus with American culture, in some ways assuming that this culture is the culmination of what Jesus sought to embody.⁹ Conversion and discipleship are therefore not measured by the spiritual transformation that takes place in people’s lives, but by the social productivity that people exhibit in their work ethic. Some

⁷ Richard H. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2001), 40-41.

⁸ See chapter 2, pages 11-12.

⁹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 41.

Christian organizations imply this when their mission statements declare something to the effect that they are committed to helping “at-risk” people “redirect their own lives and become productive citizens.”¹⁰ Christians should certainly be seeking opportunities to help the urban poor develop economically, but there is a big difference between *domesticating* the urban poor and serving in *solidarity* with them: the former intends to assimilate the urban poor into the American story of material prosperity, success, and citizenship, perceiving the urban context as the place of evil from which one must be salvaged and re-trained; the latter intends to be part of their struggle and story, understanding that the urban context is a place of spiritual and cultural beauty.

The third is a *futuristic-individualistic* posture. Christians with this posture believe that personal salvation from sin and eternal condemnation is more important than the temporary trials experienced in the world. This posture is *individualistic* in the sense that the soul and the conversion of each person is considered the central element of Christian faith and mission; it is *futuristic* in that it is primarily concerned about securing one’s entrance into heaven (occurring after death or when Jesus returns) through conversion.¹¹ Since the urban poor are in many ways perceived as criminal-sinners who will eventually face God’s wrath, they are particularly targeted for conversion. In some ways, this posture is consistent with what Niebuhr called *the Christ-and-Culture-in-Paradox* model: it assumes that Christians live “in the world but are not part of it,” and the main purpose for Christians in the world is to bring people to reconciliation with

¹⁰ There are many organizational networks that I am connected to as an urban minister. For this reason, I have chosen not to disclose some of these types of ministries. For examples on how faith-based organizations use this kind of language in their mission statement, I recommend typing in Google search something like “committed to helping ‘poor/gang-member/etc’ become productive citizens.” It must also be noted that there are many organizations that are well intentioned, and although their mission statements may sound similar to the one I critique, it may not reflect an assimilationist posture.

¹¹ Mark Baker, *Religious No More: Building Communities of Grace and Freedom* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), 57.

God.¹² Structural change, if valued at all, is a secondary task, often considered the byproduct of mass authentic conversions. In other words, only when true conversions occur at a high rate will the culture and structures of society be changed.¹³ For this reason, these Christians often enter the urban context with the missional goal of saving “perishing sinners... from everlasting destruction.”¹⁴ They assume that the urban poor, like the “unreached peoples” in foreign lands, have never heard the gospel, or that God is not already present and active among them.¹⁵ Yet, even if they became aware of God’s work among them, they would probably conclude that the power of the gospel has not taken full effect because the dire conditions therein continue to prevail.

Finally, the fourth is a *philanthropic* posture. Christians with this posture rightfully engage the urban poor with acts of charity, but they do so sanctimoniously. They venture into the urban context, not necessarily to preach or to save souls, like Christians who exhibit the futuristic-individualistic posture. Nor are they necessarily intending to domesticate the urban poor into mainstream society, like those exhibiting an assimilationist posture. Instead, Christians with the philanthropic posture enter the urban context with acts of charity intending to project an image of selflessness, righteousness, and courage. This does not mean that these Christians have absolutely no sense of compassion for the urban poor. Genuine compassion may indeed be part of their experience and drive for outreach. However, through this posture, compassion is outweighed or misguided by the desire to embody the image of the Christian hero, and

¹² Niehbur, *Christ and Culture*, 150.

¹³ Walter E. Conn, *Christian Conversion: A Developmental Interpretation of Autonomy and Surrender* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006), 204.

¹⁴ John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 210.

¹⁵ i.e. “unreached peoples”.

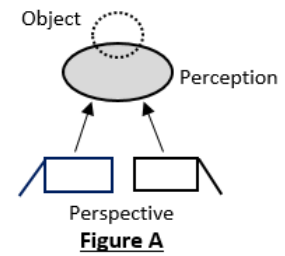
since the urban poor are associated with depravity and criminality, serving them specifically creates a living juxtaposition that highlights the one's godliness over against the wretchedness of the other. This is often seen in the photography used by many Christians to highlight their service projects: e.g. a Christian (usually White) feeding a seemingly desperate homeless man (usually non-White), a group of Christians clothing Black urban children, etc. One Guatemalan missionary identifies this tendency by referencing the evangelical church's practice of short-term mission trips, whereby people sent on the "mission" to seemingly dangerous places are often regarded as courageous and noble Christians by their congregations.¹⁶

This evangelical tendency to perceive the urban poor as dangerous and sinful is recognizable in these four postures. My point is not that urban engagement—to be distinguished from the postures above—is itself a bad thing. I maintain that ministry to the poor is a biblical mandate (Mat. 19:21; Gal. 2:10) and that some of the ministry models implied above (e.g. urban evangelism, vocational development, service projects, charity work, etc.) are in many ways necessary. However, the four postures (or attitudes) above should be critiqued because they are based on assumptions that fail to have as a starting point the notion that the urban poor bear the image of God and the simple strategy of solidarity. Instead, these postures engage the urban poor with a superiority complex that has been largely shaped by their perspective on human sinfulness and urban criminality.

¹⁶ Michelle Acker Perez, "Things No One Tells You About Short-Term Mission Trips," *Relevant Magazine*, June 2, 2014, <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/reject-apathy/things-no-one-tells-you-about-going-short-term-mission-trips>.

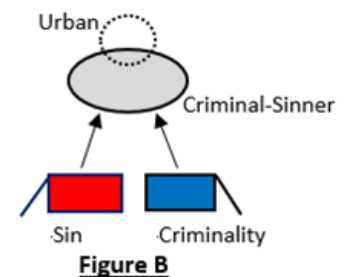
Two Lenses and The Illusion of the Criminal-Sinner

Perspectives are powerful. They function as interpretive lenses (See Figure A) through which one can understand the world. A perspective, which can come in many forms—concept, theory, idea, or point of view—draws on the human imagination to create interpretations of things: e.g. objects, places, people, or reality as whole.



Perception, on the other hand, is born out of this interpretive activity, and can be defined as the way something is understood or experienced. Perspective and perception are inseparable from each other. They are a powerful pair. Together, they have the capacity to influence and, in many cases, control the human mind. Having said this, let us now explore the perspectives that shape the evangelical perception of the urban context.

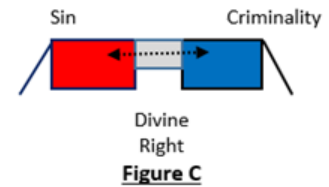
The tendency to perceive the urban poor in terms of sinfulness and criminality, or a criminal-sinner (an inferior kind of human), results from the subtle fusion of two perspectives: ontological human sinfulness and what I call *urban criminality*, a term I will henceforth use to encapsulate the stereotypes of criminality which society often associates with the urban environment as a result of the illusion cast by the criminal justice system. While the former is fundamentally a theological perspective maintained by many Christians, the latter is generally a



secular perspective—rooted non-religious ideas and sources—held by a large portion of the American population, Christian and non-Christian alike. Analogous to the way that two lenses on a set of 3D glasses function together to produce powerful and life-like illusions out of certain medium (See Figure B), these two perspectives tend to merge their

perceptions, creating for many evangelicals an image of depravity when they consider the urban poor.

Let me delineate this a bit further. Figure C provides a helpful illustration. The first lens, the concept of ontological human sinfulness, creates the perception that human nature is



totally depraved and that all humans are thus equally sinful. The second lens, the view of urban criminality, associates crime with the urban context. If the two views are like lenses on a set of 3D glasses, then the concept of divine right is like the bridge between a pair of glasses, the piece that holds the lenses together (See Figure C). The idea of divine right, as I mentioned above, hybridizes notions of sin and crime, and through this hybridity, notions of criminality and sinfulness intersect. On the one hand, the perspective of urban criminality (which tend to focus on empirical behavior) compels the perspective of ontological human sinfulness (which usually focuses on abstract theological concepts) to direct its theological focus on the concreteness of the urban context and apply its interpretation of human nature on the urban poor. On the other hand, the perspective of ontological human sinfulness ascribes a spiritual dimension to the perspective of urban criminality, so that criminal behavior begins to look more like the outworking of human depravity rather than the result of socio-economic pressures. As a result of this conceptual synthesis, people of color from poor urban neighborhoods are perceived not only as sinners, but as dangerous and diabolical criminal-sinners.

There is much more to say about how these two perspectives interact. This requires familiarity with the nature of each lens and the ways in which each shapes a certain perception of criminality. The nature of the first lens, the concept of ontological

human sinfulness, has already been defined in the previous chapter. In the following pages, I will delineate the nature of the second lens, the perspective of urban criminality, and demonstrate how both lenses together produce a sinister image of the urban poor.

The Image of the Typical Criminal

One aspect pertaining to the perspective of urban criminality is the way in which the typical criminal is perceived. When people think of crime or criminality, an image arises in their mind. This image typically involves an act and a person; in many cases, a group of people. But what kind of act do we usually conceptualize when we think of crime? Most importantly, what kind of person comes to mind when we think of criminality? Respected criminologist Jeffrey Reiman argues that there are particular preconceptions that arise in the minds of most Americans. He states the following:

The odds are you are not imagining a mining company executive sitting at his desk, calculating the costs of proper safety precautions, and deciding not to invest in them. Probably what you do see with your mind's eye is one person attacking another physically or robbing something from another via the threat of physical attack. Look more closely. What does the attacker look like? It's a safe bet he (and it is a he, of course) is not wearing a suit and tie. In fact, my hunch is that you—like me, like almost anyone else in America—picture a young, tough, lower-class male when the thought of crime first pops into you head.¹⁷

Along with these features, the typical criminal tends to be conceptualized as non-White, namely Hispanic/Latino or Black, with a stronger proclivity toward the latter.¹⁸

That this image of criminality exists generally in the minds of most Americans is not simple conjecture. Many of us have heard stories—whether through friends, family, television, or social media—about how a person of color was treated with suspicion, discriminated against, or even interrogated and abused (verbally/physically) by others

¹⁷ Jeffrey Reiman and Paul Leighton, *The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Poorer: Ideology, Class, and Criminal Justice*, 10th ed. (New York: Routledge Publisher, 2016). Kindle ed., chap. 2.

¹⁸ Ibid.

because they were mistaken for a criminal. Without a doubt, sometimes the stories are accurate, other times they are exaggerated accounts. Nevertheless, these incidents do in fact happen on a regular basis, regardless of whether or not people choose to believe these accounts. The reason is that there is a general tendency in society to associate crime with people of color. An African American male simply walking through a “white neighborhood” will more than likely be suspected of criminal activity than a white person walking through a “black neighborhood.” This general tendency to associate crime with people of color is known by criminologists as the “*ethnic typification of crime*,” and there is a lot of evidence to support the claim that this tendency is prevalent in society.¹⁹

Consider the following study. In 2014, the Sentencing Project published a report providing two decades of research on this matter.²⁰ The study pointed out that “Americans, and whites in particular, [tend to] significantly overestimate the proportion of crime committed by blacks and Latinos.”²¹ Researchers who conducted a national survey in 2010 found that White participants “overestimated the actual share of burglaries, illegal drug sales, and juvenile crime committed by African Americans by 20-30%.”²² In a survey conducted eight years earlier with an ethnically diverse focus group, researchers found that respondents overestimated the connection between violent crimes

¹⁹ Ted Chiricos, Kelly Welch, and Marc Gertz, “Racial Typification of Crime and Support for Punitive Measures,” *Criminology* 42, iss. 2 (2002): 359–389.

²⁰ The Sentencing Project, *Race and Punishment: Racial Perceptions of Crime and Support for Punitive Policies* (Washington, DC: The Sentencing Project, 2014, http://sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/rd_Race_and_Punishment.pdf). The Sentencing Project is a non-profit organization that is committed to research and advocacy regarding issues of criminal justice.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²² *Ibid.*, 3.

and African Americans by 10%, while also overestimating Hispanic participation in the same type of crime.²³

One may instantly notice the difference between predictions made by White respondents and the group of ethnically diverse respondents. The first group overestimated the correlation between crime and African Americans at a relatively higher rate than the second group. However, this does not indicate that the ethnic typification of crime is exclusively a White tendency. Both groups, despite race and ethnicity, overestimated the correlation between crime and people of color. Of course, there is a strong possibility that the overestimation on the part of the second group, as many social theorists contend, is a result of the kind of internalized racism that many people of color have espoused, having accepted the “the hegemonic hierarchal stratification of race that places them at the bottom of the order.”²⁴ From a Girardian standpoint, one can argue that the assumptions made by the second group are essentially an emulation of the White superiority complex inherent in the cultural fabric of the American system. Nevertheless, this is beyond the point. The fact of the matter, which the two surveys help establish, is that Reiman is correct: *the ethnic typification of crime is a tendency that generally exists in the American mindset.*

The Image of the Dangerous Urban Context

The tendency to associate crime with race and ethnicity is only one aspect pertaining to the perspective of urban criminality. There are many other ways in which people perceive the urban context in criminal terms; many which go beyond, but are not

²³ Ibid., 13. This ethnically diverse group, the study indicates, overestimated “the overall rate of violent crime committed by Hispanics to be 27%... [exceeding] Hispanic’s share of the general population (14%) and prison population (17%) in that year.”

²⁴ Wesley W. Bryant, “Internalized Racism’s Association With African American Male Youth’s Propensity for Violence,” *Journal of Black Studies* 42, iss. 4 (2011): 690-707, 692.

completely divorced from, categories of race and ethnicity (e.g. youth delinquency, homelessness, mental illness, and hip hop culture). One such aspect, crucially important to our discussion, is what I call the *socio-spatial typification of crime*.²⁵ I use this term to identify the tendency of associating crime with the space of urban neighborhoods, a tendency that is usually overlooked because discussions regarding criminal stereotypes tend to revolve around racial, ethnic, and class categories.²⁶ This tendency is “spatial” because its lens is focused on geographical space; it is “social” because it has in mind the urban context’s visible features of poverty and its reputation of crime and violence. People who typify crime in socio-spatial terms may not always be aware of how crime and urban space correlate, but they assume that the two are mutually inseparable: *that crime is almost exclusively an urban phenomenon*.

This way of understanding criminality is incomplete, imbalanced, and ultimately discriminatory. It compels people to conceptualize criminality with images of poor urban neighborhoods filled with violent and kleptomaniacal people of color, overlooking the fact that crime, though in different form, is likewise committed in economically stable neighborhoods. These kinds of crimes, what I call *crimes of the affluent*—cheating on taxes, prescription drug abuse, DUI (Driving Under the Influence), internet hacking, identity theft, and even domestic violence—are not always considered the kind of crimes that we should worry about, even though the impact of these crimes is just as damaging

²⁵ While “socio-spatial typification of crime” is a term I put together to reference the general tendency to associate crime with geographical spaces, the term “socio-spatial” is not a term of my own making. This is a sociological term urbanists use to reference the interconnections of urban space and socio-economics. Therefore, my use of the term socio-spatial does not radically deviate from the way sociologists use it. For more on socio-spatial theory, see Ali Madani-Pour, *Design of Urban Space: An Inquiry into a Socio-Spatial Process*, ed. 1 (Hoboken; John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1996).

²⁶ Steve Herbert and Elizabeth Brown, “Conceptions of Space and Crime in the Punitive Neoliberal and City,” *Antipode* 38, iss. 4 (2006): 755-777, 757.

as the kind of crime that prevails in urban neighborhoods.²⁷ Unfortunately, crime is generally not associated with affluent environments but with poor urban neighborhoods.

Citing survey reports or statistics to support this claim is not crucially necessary here.²⁸ Most of us are somewhat familiar with the negative perceptions of “run-down” neighborhoods and the challenging conditions that exist therein. We are aware of the poverty that impacts its inhabitants. The dilapidated and abandoned buildings full of graffiti are not completely foreign to us. The television and the newspaper continually tell us about the latest shootings, murders, or robberies that happen therein. We are familiar with the common desire people have to move into gated communities, quiet suburban neighborhoods, or anywhere as long as it is far away from urban environments. Even the thought of entering the urban context can be a fearful thing because it is seen as a malevolent place. There have been multiple times when students who have been accepted into our Christian-based, urban-ministry program in Fresno (CA) experienced resistance from their own parents (Christian and non-Christian alike) before starting their training.²⁹ The ten month commitment to live in the urban neighborhood where we are located—known for its poverty and crime—is often overwhelming for parents. They have often expressed fear that something would happen to their son or daughter. Some have literally threatened to withdraw financial support from their child’s tuition. In one extreme case, the parents of one of our students threatened to disown her if she continued the program.

²⁷ Reiman, *The Rich Get Richer*, Kindle ed., chap. 2.

²⁸ For interest in research that explores more thoroughly negative perceptions of urban neighborhoods and the fears and prejudices that these perceptions provoke, I recommend the following work: Clete Snell, *Neighborhood Structure, Crime, and Fear of Crime: Testing Bursik and Grasmick’s Neighborhood Control Theory*, ed. Marily McShane and Frank P. Williams (New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing, 2001).

²⁹ See chapter 1, note 16.

Associating crime with economically underdeveloped, urban space seems like a much more innocent way of identifying criminality than associating crime with race and ethnicity; people do not generally like to be seen as prejudiced or racist. People are, therefore, much more inclined to explicitly associate crime with areas of urban poverty. This is none other than a tortuous language game because associating crime with the urban context still affects one's perception of the people who reside therein. Associating crime with dwelling space directly associates crime with its people indirectly; applying labels geographically, labels people ontologically. Willie Jennings explains that "this [type of] linguistic deployment alters reality, blowing by and through the specifics of identity bound to land, space, and place and narrating a new world that binds bodies to unrelenting aesthetic judgments."³⁰ Labeling impacts the urban poor to such an extent that even if one of them was encountered outside of their domain and, for whatever reason, was recognized as belonging to the urban environment, that person would be stereotyped and possibly treated as dangerous or criminal.

In 2012, seventeen year-old Trayvon Martin, an African American teen, walked through a gated neighborhood wearing a large sweater with the hoodie over his head, resembling the hip hop style common among urban youth. As a result, many residents from that community perceived him as a criminal. Tragically, he was shot and killed by George Zimmermann, a Neighborhood Watch leader, who was later acquitted of murder charges on the grounds of self-defense, because he was able to convince the court that he

³⁰ Willie Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), Kindle ed., chap. 1.

had responded lethally out of fear for his life.³¹ Many accused Zimmermann of racism, hate, and murder. However, there is a strong possibility that he was sincerely frightened by Trayvon during the scuffle that occurred between them.³² After all, Trayvon was not only black, but as Zimmermann insisted, he seemed to be from the other side of town.³³

The general tendency to typify crime in socio-spatial as well as in ethno-racial terms, which together powerfully shape the general perspective of urban criminality, make one thing very clear: the urban poor stand at the intersection of the public's racist, agoraphobic, and xenophobic misperceptions. They are Black, Hispanic, Latino—basically non-White; they are poor and live in densely populated neighborhoods which seem to be falling apart; they appear to be desperate and dangerous, therefore, they must be criminal. As a result, the American public tends to scrutinize people of color who live in struggling urban neighborhoods rather than the affluent people who live in economically well-off neighborhoods, although criminality also exists among the latter. White collar criminals, who are affluent by definition, are known for stealing millions of dollars from hard-working Americans through embezzlement scandals and business frauds. Sometimes they injure or kill people indirectly by ignoring safety regulations or

³¹ Madison Gray, "Trayvon Martin's Killing: Was the Motive Self-Defense or Racism?" *TIME*, March 19, 2012, <http://newsfeed.time.com/2012/03/19/trayvon-martins-killing-was-the-motive-self-defense-or-racism/>.

³² Because the urban poor often seem suspicious, intimidating, and deadly to many, they are sometimes met with violence that tends to be justified in the name of self-defense. There have been many examples of this: "12-year-old Tamir Rice was killed for holding a pellet gun. Off-duty cop Dante Servin accidentally murdered Rekia Boyd with an unregistered firearm because he felt threatened when her friend Antonio Cross raised a cell phone ... Officer Stacey Koon, one of the cops tried in the Rodney King beating, compared King to a 'monster' and 'the Tasmanian devil.' Officer Mathew Griffin, who shot and killed Kendrec McDade in Pasadena said McDade scared 'the crap out of me.' Three detectives fired 50 rounds into Sean Bell's car because one yelled 'gun.' From Joshua Adams, "In Fatal Police Encounters, Cops' Fear is Killing Black People," *Huffington Post*, 27 May 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joshua-adams/fear-is-killing-blacks-mo_b_7429168.html.

³³ John Minchillo, "Trayvon Martin Case: Is young, black and wearing a hoodie a recipe for disaster?" *NBC News*, March 22, 2012, http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/03/22/10814211-trayvon-martin-case-is-young-black-and-wearing-a-hoodie-a-recipe-for-disaster?lite.

by refusing to invest in safety equipment because the saving on costs and the steady inflow of profit is more important for them than the lives of others.³⁴ Unfortunately, this criminal image is not what generally comes to mind when people think of crime. Instead, it is the image of the urban poor. Affluent people are generally treated as innocent until proven guilty; the urban poor are treated as guilty until proven innocent because the public generally wears a lens which associates criminality with the ethnicity and dwelling space of the urban poor.

The Ideology Behind the Socio-Spatial Stratification

We must pay attention to the interconnection of geography and socio-economics as we consider the ways in which crime is typified. Otherwise, we will fail to see how urban space and the politics of class are inextricably linked to the kind of ontological categories (race, ethnicity, criminality, and sinfulness) that subordinate people to ideological oppression and systemic scapegoating.

Political geographer and urban planner Edward W. Soja declares that “space is not a scientific object removed from ideology and politics; it has always been political and strategic.”³⁵ He demonstrates this by pointing out that both socio-economics and space “are shaped by an exploitative relationship [between the affluent and working class,] rooted in control over the means of production and sustained by an appropriation of value by a dominant social class.”³⁶ In other words, this exploitative relationship, which reduces a particular group of people (viz., the urban poor) to a working class role at the convenience of a dominant class, is part of an ideological scheme that is generally

³⁴ Ibid., chap. 2.

³⁵ Edward W. Soja, “The Socio-Spatial Dialectic,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 70, iss. 2 (1980): 207-225.

³⁶ Ibid., 222.

manifested in the layout of city infrastructure, particularly, in the segmentation of neighborhoods which stratify people on socio-economic grounds. Soja is correct. Just take a look at how the infrastructural dynamics of a city typically coincide with the division of labor and the socio-economic status of people: the privileged on this side, the underprivileged on that side; the affluent here, the working class and the underclass there. Then examine the way in which the living spaces of those who on the socio-economic periphery are generally portrayed and perceived in contrast to the living spaces of those who can be identified with the centers of power: unproductive rather than productive; chaotic rather than orderly; corrupt rather than trustworthy; dangerous rather than safe.

Observing these concrete and visible patterns invokes the following questions: whose values (or value system) play a primary role determining the physical stratification of people on socio-economic grounds? And whose values shape the positive or negative ways in which people are socially perceived? The answer: the values of those who dominate the centers of power. This answer is evident in the fact that a common way that the urban poor attain or maintain public approval, including the approval of evangelicals who exhibit the assimilationist posture, is by honoring the values of the dominant class. By faithfully assuming their roles as laborers, often working dehumanizing types of jobs, the urban poor demonstrate that they are not a threat to society but contributors. The refusal to function within these sets of expectations—as immigrants, gang-members, welfare recipients, and the homeless are often accused of doing—frustrates the dominant value system. Not assuming the role of a laborer seems to jeopardize the economic order and progress that those at the centers of power are determined to sustain.³⁷ Because the

³⁷ Mark Lewis Taylor, *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), Kindle ed., chapter 2.

urban context is usually a place where jobs are scarce and unemployment is high, and where an unconventional economy has in many ways replaced the one that should be but is not present, the urban poor become seemingly culpable for the problems of society.³⁸

Society generally fails to notice the exploitative relationship underlying this stratification. They tend to be blinded to these patterns of exploitation and social scapegoating because the values and expectations of the dominant class, which shape the structures of law and sustain the interests of the affluent, determine the ways in which the public understands social propriety as well as criminality. Since criminality is associated with the urban context, the public's eye of judgment will tend to divert blame from the social structures and direct it toward the urban poor.³⁹

The Criminal Justice System and the Media

The view of urban criminality, the tendency to associate crime with people of color and poor urban neighborhoods, is a general lens that has been shaped by a complex set of factors: racism, classism, xenophobia, firsthand, and even secondhand experiences to real crime...the list is endless. What is most pivotal in shaping this general lens, however, involves the interaction of three factors: (1) the role of the criminal justice system, (2) the nature of criminal data the system provides, and (3) the way in which mass media reports that data. In order to adequately understand the perspective of urban criminality, I will describe how these factors interact. Since justice institutions are the primary providers of criminal data, which the mass media (e.g. news-reports, movies,

³⁸ See chapter 2, pages 10-11.

³⁹ Reiman, *The Rich*, chap. 4.

social media, etc.) communicates to the public, I will start with the role of the criminal justice system.⁴⁰

The criminal justice system was designed to protect the public, maintain order, and preserve justice in society, particularly, by preventing and controlling crime.⁴¹ As such, it specializes in acquiring and managing criminal information. This information typically arises out of actual crimes reported by civilians. The criminal justice system is not the kind of institution that possesses top of the line, anthropological and sociological dexterity; its primary role and expertise does not involve defining or theorizing about people, culture, or cities. It is an administrative institution, using the applied sciences. It is what Jacques Ellul calls an “organizational technique” or “technical apparatus,” which resembles a machine, involving “a group of [operational and methodical] movements... organized and traditional, all of which unite to reach a known end.”⁴² This end, of course, is public protection and safety. However, as a society, we have allowed—and, in many ways, delegated an authoritative role unto—the criminal justice system to define the very things it was not designed to define: people and neighborhoods.

Granting the criminal justice system this kind of leverage is unwise: it causes the system to misapply its role and create for society inaccurate ways of understanding people and space. An architect attempting to define a neighbor’s home will more likely focus on the architecture of the house rather than the cultural dynamics of the family, who call the house their “home.” The reason for this is that the architect is an architect,

⁴⁰ Jeff Ferrell and Neil Websdale, “Materials for Making Trouble,” in *Making Trouble: Cultural Constructions of Crime, Deviance, and Control*, ed. Jeff Ferrell and Neil Websdale (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1999), 9.

⁴¹ Leslie J. Smith, *Coordinating the Criminal Justice System: A Guide to Improve the Effective Administration of Justice* (Lanham: University Press, 2008), 2-3.

⁴² Jaque Ellul, *The Technical Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), 22, 100, 13.

and this is the way in which architects tend to interpret homes. In the same way, the justice system will tend to interpret people and neighborhoods narrowly, using criminal data which tends to be rigidly statistical, systematically propositional, and consistent with its own expertise but not always consistent with the broader reality. The system's interpretation, like the architect above, may be accurate, at least from one angle—from the standpoint of their profession—but incomplete nevertheless. However, the narrow way in which that information is communicated or understood, especially if the interpretation is absolutized, can distort one's perception of the people or the neighborhoods being interpreted.

Consider the way in which local justice institutions, according to Reiman, tend to construct an image of the common criminal (keep in mind that the following is a broad portrait based on national statistics):

The [criminal] is, first of all, a [*male*]. Of 13.1 million persons arrested for crimes in 2010, 75 percent were males... Second, he is *young*. Nearly half (42 percent) of men arrested for all crimes were under the age of 25... Third, he is predominantly *urban*. Cities with populations over 250,000 had a rate of 275 arrests for violent crimes per 100,000 inhabitants, while cities with populations under 10,000 had 146 such arrests per 100,000 inhabitants... Fourth, he is disproportionately *black*: Blacks are arrested for violent crimes at a rate more than three times that of their percentage in the national population... Finally, he is *poor*. Almost one-third (29 percent) of 2002 jail inmates were unemployed (without full- or part-time work) prior to being arrested.⁴³

Certainly, these criminal statistics reflect actual occurrences of crime arising from the reports made by real civilians. Yet the criminal justice system has a proclivity to focus on the type of crime that exists in the urban context rather than the type of crime that exists

⁴³ Reiman, *The Rich*, chap. 2.

among the affluent.⁴⁴ While I am not questioning or challenging the veracity of this kind of criminal data, I must point out that this type of data overlooks the characteristics of human personality and reduces people into lifeless numbers. This lifeless data is then reconstructed into an image of criminality, which the justice system uses as a primary anthropological lens for engaging the urban context.

Surely these types of images are helpful in many ways for justice institutions, but they ultimately distort the image of the people represented by the numbers (e.g. young, Black males from poor urban neighborhoods). By generalizing criminality in this way, the justice system ultimately moves beyond managing criminal data and into overgeneralizing a whole community of people. The statistics represent the criminality of a few, but the image created includes the characteristics of the many. As a result, both the criminals and the broader community to which the criminals belong become indistinguishable. In mathematical terms, the numerator (criminals) is equated with the denominator (their ethnic community), and the fraction (differences) consequently transforms into a whole number (sameness).

Since the criminal profiles, as demonstrated above, come awfully close to resembling the kind of portraits produced by the unconstitutional practice of *racial profiling* (the practice of suspecting criminals on the basis of race/ethnicity), a less controversial yet more subtle approach has been practiced by justice institutions: the practice of *geographic profiling*.⁴⁵ This approach helps construct an image of criminality

⁴⁴ Gregg Barak, Paul Leighton, Jeanne Flavin, *Class, Race, Gender, and Crime: The Social Realities of Justice in America*, 3rd ed. (Landham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 227.

⁴⁵ "The Reality of Racial Profiling," *The Leadership Conference*, Last modified 2015, <http://www.civilrights.org/publications/reports/racial-profiling2011/the-reality-of-racial.html>. The big difference between racial profiling and criminal profiling has much to do with the starting premise. In racial profiling, a criminal suspect is first stereotyped as criminal because of his or her race/ethnicity. Criminal data is then subtly used to support this assumption. In this sense, critics argue that the racial profiling

as it pertains to city space and not necessarily on ethnicity or race. Geographic profiling focuses on the repetition of crime within a particular area, helping investigators predict “the [offender’s] most likely place of residence, place of work, social venues and travel routes, etc.”⁴⁶ However, this approach, particularly applied to dense urban environments, goes beyond *identifying* repetitions of crime within geographic space. It *defines* neighborhoods ontologically and creates a one-sided portrait of a community, which then affects the public’s perception not only of the space but of its people.

Consider the term *hot spot*, a term that arises out of the practice of geographic profiling. While this term is used in a variety of ways by criminal justice institutions, it is commonly used to reference “areas of high crime intensity.”⁴⁷ It can be used to identify sections of a city, such as a complete neighborhood. Or, it can be used in reference to small areas of a neighborhood, such as a liquor store corner, wherever crime tends to happen repeatedly.⁴⁸ When multiple hot spots are identified and seem to cluster in one space, like a complete neighborhood or district, the area is then classified as a *high-crime zone* or *high-crime neighborhood*.⁴⁹

approach is inductive; it inserts assumptions into the concept of criminality. In criminal profiling, the starting point is not necessarily race, but rather raw criminal data, which supposedly point to a series of characteristics, including race/ethnicity, and help create a portrait of the common criminal. In this sense, the criminal profiling is regarded as deductive, because it draws from criminal data to construct an image of the typical criminal. Both are very similar: they tend to generalize a population with the criminality of a few. Arguments on whether a criminal portrait should be used at all are very controversial.

⁴⁶ David Webb, *Criminal Profiling: An Introductory Guide* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013), Kindle ed., see the section “Geographic Profiling.”

⁴⁷ Two helpful articles: (1) Keith D. Harries, *Mapping Crime: Principle and Practice*, (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Publishing, 1999), Kindle ed., chap. 4; (2) Jerry H. Ratcliffe, “The Hotspot Matrix: A Framework for the Spatio-Temporal Targeting of Crime Reduction,” *Police Practice & Research* 5, iss. 1 (2004): 5-23.

⁴⁸ For more information on the nature of hot spots, visit the National Institute of Justice webpage: <http://www.nij.gov/topics/law-enforcement/strategies/hot-spot-policing/Pages/why-hot-spots-occur.aspx>

⁴⁹ International Association of Crime Analysts, “Identifying High Crime Areas,” *IACA*, last modified October 2013, http://www.iaca.net/Publications/Whitepapers/iacawp_2013_02_high_crime_areas.pdf.

Now, consider the way in which these categories of urban space are portrayed by the news media to the public. In 2012, Fresno's ABC local news provided a report on the results of a local law enforcement effort to reduce violent crime in the city:

Police took significant steps after a surge in shootings four months ago and the numbers show those steps succeeded... The operation seems to have driven criminals underground... The crackdown pulled officers from nearly every assignment and put them in uniform, in violent neighborhoods. With as many as 30 extra officers on patrol at critical times, and especially on weekends, the city was suddenly safer.⁵⁰

Apparently, the city was not safe. Until law enforcement stepped in, it stood in danger of criminals and violent neighborhoods. Law enforcement thus initiated these "crackdown" operations in an attempt to establish order, and in the following year, the police chief reported a crime decrease, saying, "We're making sure we're ... putting our officers in the right [places] [These] hot spots."⁵¹

Fresno residents know that the neighborhoods being referenced in the media report are primarily located in the southern half of the city. This area, known to contain some of the highest levels of concentrated poverty in the country, is continually referred to by law enforcement and news media as high-crime areas and hot spots.⁵² The narrow lens, the one-sided interpretations, and the ontological categories that the criminal justice system and the media uses to define these areas has caused many of Fresno's residents to overlook the fact that the criminality they associate with these neighborhoods involves

⁵⁰ Corin Hoggard, "FPD Crime Crackdown Dramatically Cuts Violence," *ABC Action News Fresno*, October 10, 2010, <http://abc30.com/archive/8842840/>

⁵¹ *ABC Action News Fresno*, "Fresno police say violent crime is down in the city," June 13, 2013, <http://abclocal.go.com/story?section=news/local&id=9136888>. The article specifically reports "an overall 11.5 percent reduction in property crimes and a 9 percent reduction in violent crimes" as compared to the previous year (i.e. 2012).

⁵² Elizabeth Kneebone, "The Growth and Spread of Concentrated Poverty, 2000 to 2008-2012," *Brookings Institute*, July 31, 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/interactives/2014/concentrated-poverty#/M10420>.

only a fraction of that area's population, something that even the chief of police admits.⁵³ As a result, people, like the parents of many of my students, are convinced that these neighborhoods are absolutely infested with criminals. Even driving through the area is seemingly risky. It is no wonder that Fresno was rated first among many cities "where locals are least likely to feel safe," although crime rates have been declining since 2010.⁵⁴

Society's tendency to allow and rely on the criminal justice system to define people and neighborhoods is not exclusive to Fresno. Many people in cities across the nation do the same thing because they have also inherited the perspective of urban criminality, which causes them to fear similar neighborhoods in their own cities. Ironically, these "dangerous" spaces tend to be populated by the same people which society generally associates with criminality: working-class, people of color. Geographic and ethnic stereotypes overlap and make these neighborhoods seem more dangerous, not only because of their location but also because of the black and brown people who reside therein, who seem to be at "the heart of a vicious, unorganized [type] of guerrilla army, threatening the lives, limbs, and possessions of the law abiding members of society."⁵⁵

The Fusion of the Two Perspectives

Evangelicals should not assume that they are somehow uniquely shielded from the influence of the criminal justice system and the media and thus blameless from stereotyping the urban poor. If there is anything unique about evangelicals, it is that they

⁵³ Police chief Jerry Dyer stated: "90 percent of the people that live there are good people. It's the ten percent of the people that were trying to address. But we want the 90 percent to know we're keeping them safe and we want the 10 percent of the people, the gang-members to know, the ones that are selling drugs, that we're keeping an eye on them." "Fresno's top cop hits the streets," *ABC Action News Fresno*, June 18, 2012, <http://abclocal.go.com/story?section=news/local&id=8706217>.

⁵⁴ Ilyce R. Glink, "Cities where the locals are least likely to feel safe," *Yahoo Homes*, May 18, 2015, <https://www.yahoo.com/realestate/blogs/spaces/top-20-places-where-residents-feel-unsafe-183052414.html?ref=gs>. The study revealed that in Fresno, 37.3 percent of people surveyed could not agree with the statement, "You always feel safe and secure [in your city]."

⁵⁵ Reiman, *The Rich*. Kindle ed., chap. 2.

add another dimension to the geographic and ethnic stereotypes, a dimension that is spiritual in nature: the *concept of ontological human sinfulness*. Like the two lenses on the set of 3D glasses, the lens of urban criminality works together with the lens of ontological human sinfulness to create for the Christian a sinister image of the urban poor. The former lens obscures from their perception any innocence the poor may have had, while the latter supplants the truth that the urban poor—along with every human—bear the image of God. When the perception of the two lenses fuse into one, the religious imagination of evangelicals incorporates the ideological dimensions connected to the perspective of urban criminality, producing the illusion that the urban poor are culprits responsible for the problems threaten the social order. Evangelicals wearing these set of lenses find the illusion powerful and irresistible because it seems to stand on truth.⁵⁶

The two perspectives, urban criminality and ontological human sinfulness, easily combine in the mind of the Christian. I identify three reasons for this. The first reason is that *both perspectives pay special attention to deviant behavior*. The perspective of urban criminality, influenced by the criminal justice system, pays special attention to illegal behavior in an effort to identify crime. The concept of ontological human sinfulness focuses on all human behavior and interprets it as rooted in selfishness and depraved desire. The main difference between the two is that the latter, taking a selectively literal approach to scripture, locates evil inside of the human, while the former, abiding with modern values of objectivity, identifies it in certain acts exhibited by criminals and in places where these acts often take place. Nonetheless, notions of urban criminality, like

⁵⁶ David T. Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions: A Survey & Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 7.

the religious view, also absolutize evil in humans by defining offenders as criminals, or “dangerous criminals.”

Second, *both perspectives hold human beings responsible for evil in one form or another*. The concept of ontological human sinfulness presumes that all humans are guilty of lawlessness because they have broken God’s law and are born with a nature that is offensive to divine standards. The perspective of urban criminality assumes that people are guilty when legal authorities, or the data they provide, declare it. Both perspectives follow a pattern of legality, yet the religious one seems to be more rigid and less merciful because, according to its logic, one cannot be absolved from wrongful acts unless blood is spilled. Nevertheless, both perspectives use similar concepts of legality to hold humans responsible for evil and, as a result, the two almost inevitably combine. This was evident in the collaboration between the church ministers and Fresno police officers as they attempted to confront and hold the gang-members accountable for their violence.

Finally, *both perspectives interact in a complimentary way*. Notions of urban criminality reinforce the concept of ontological sinfulness by supplying it with empirical evidence. Apart from observable or measurable phenomena, the claim that sinfulness resides inside of the human is an untenable idea. On what tangible or empirical grounds can one make such a claim? In light of the malevolent behavior we usually see in human interaction, often documented in criminal records, it can be said that humans are sinful. But people holding the concept of ontological human sinfulness often capitalize on data depicting this type of phenomena and interpret it as evidence of inherent sinfulness. For example, one pastor, referring to the Ferguson protests, said, “When the men and women and young people were rioting... they were manifesting the natural depravity of their

hearts.”⁵⁷ In turn, notions of urban criminality gain religious adherents and those who predominantly shape these notions—the criminal justice system—gain moral validation, especially in their institutional suppression of criminalized people.

At first glance, the interaction between the two perspectives—ontological human sinfulness and urban criminality—may seem like two ideas that coincidentally parallel each other and are not necessarily problematic. The truth is that they are not innocent parallels; they do in fact interact in a very powerful and problematic way. This interaction not only creates a negative perception of the urban poor that causes evangelicals to engage the urban context with the four ineffective postures described earlier, but it also draws the mission of the church into an ideological bind with the criminal justice system. When police interrogate, beat, or kill a person from the urban context or when the courts incarcerate or execute the urban poor in overwhelming amounts, evangelicals do not usually look at the criminal justice system with suspicion. Instead, they tend to respond indifferently or supportively of the system. Influenced by the two perspectives, these evangelicals will find it difficult to speak prophetically to the system because their lenses cause them to perceive the urban poor as criminal-sinners and the system as an agent of God’s justice (Rom. 13:4). They may see themselves as “a voice” in the urban wilderness, calling people to salvation, but as soon as Wicked knocks their lenses off with his words, as he did to me, they will discover that they seem more like the religious voice of a lynch mob, calling the urban poor to recant or suffer institutional punishment.

⁵⁷ Stanford Murrell, “Ferguson, Missouri, and the Biblical Doctrine of Total Depravity,” *Redeeming Grace Ministries*, August 31, 2014, <http://stanmurrell.org/2014/08/31/ferguson-missouri-and-the-biblical-doctrine-of-total-depravity/>.

The Mythical-Ideological Bond

If Soja and Reiman, are correct—and I believe they are—that the criminal justice system’s exploitation and criminalization of the urban poor is part of an ideological strategy to strengthen the position of those at the centers of power, then the concept of ontological human sinfulness is bound to ideology. The fact of the matter is that this concept is susceptible to ideology because religious ideas and ideologies tend to share similar patterns of thought. Both address a problem in reality and both propose a solution dressed with promises of deliverance “from some fundamental evil” (ex: tyranny, oppression, anarchy, poverty, etc.).⁵⁸ For example, the pattern within the religious idea of the forensic-formula (to which the concept of ontological human sinfulness corresponds) is similar to the theoretical patterns of deliverance that ideologies tend to contain.

In addition to similarity, there is an intimate relationship between religious ideas and ideologies. The latter tend to develop out of sacred concepts—namely, myths—of the past, especially when those at the center of power are confronted with new obstacles that hinder their endeavors to further their hegemonic endeavors.⁵⁹ An excellent example of this is the Calvinist program for a “Puritan State,” the conviction that society could be molded into the image of God’s kingdom (presented in the previous chapter).⁶⁰ This religious idea eventually evolved into the socio-political ideology of manifest destiny as the early American settlers (the powerful) collided with native peoples (obstacles) in their westward expansion.⁶¹ Ideologies, therefore, are to some degree dependent on sacred concepts; it is difficult for the former to exist without the latter. The authority, narrative,

⁵⁸ Koyzis, *Political Visions*, 29.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶⁰ Herbert Darling Foster, “Calvin’s Programme for a Puritan State in Geneva, 1536-1541,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 1, no. 4 (1908): 391-434.

⁶¹ See chapter 3, pages 55-56.

and symbolism behind religious ideas provide ideologies with the interpretative lens necessary to support a particular agenda. Sacred articles and texts are thus “brought into the equation [of an ideology] and utilized to back a particular configuration of power... [in this way, battering] all opposition into submission.”⁶² Religious thought and ideology hence become relatively indistinguishable.

Conclusion

People who wear glasses typically view the world around them without consciously paying attention to the lenses they are wearing, nor critically assessing how their lenses shape the way they view the world; they just observe. Likewise, evangelicals are not always aware that they view the world through certain perspectives and they are not always keen to assess the ways in which their lenses affect the way they perceive the world; they simply observe. In regard to the concept of ontological human sinfulness and the perspective of urban criminality, evangelicals are generally oblivious to the fact that together these two lenses create the kind of perception which make the urban poor not only vulnerable to interpretations of moral inferiority and criminality, but also perfect targets for institutional scapegoating. For them, the perception is realistic, biblical, and theologically sound; it holds spiritual authority which cannot and, indeed, must not be questioned. For these reasons, it is nearly impossible for evangelicals to entertain the invitation to deconstruct these lenses, especially the concept of ontological human sinfulness. Doing so would put a Christian in danger of pushing what many consider the theological boundary of orthodoxy.

⁶²J. Andrew Kirk, “God is on our side: The anatomy of an ideology,” *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 27, iss. 4 (2007): 239-247, 240.

Evangelicals are ultimately unaware of the ideological dynamics behind their perspectives because the concept of ontological sinfulness absorbs notions of urban criminality into its own mythical narrative of sin and redemption. Just like the perspective of urban criminality directs the concept of ontological sinfulness to focus on the urban context in regard to moral matters, the latter absorbs the mundane dimensions of the former, transforming its mythical narrative of human evil and God's judgment into concrete reality. Hence the unseen nature of human sinfulness becomes visible, tangible, and measurable, and the story of God's judgment and redemption becomes real. For this reason, many evangelicals tend to perceive the urban poor in the same way that my minister friend perceived Wicked: criminal-sinners "in the hands of an angry God."

Chapter Five: Reinterpreting Human Nature

I began this thesis by recounting the demonstrations in Ferguson (Missouri) and the national movement for racial justice (viz. Black Lives Matter) they inspired, seeking to set our attention on the reality that in our American context, hostility generally highlights the relationship between the urban poor (viz., people of color who live in underprivileged metropolitan neighborhoods) and the criminal justice system. Pivoting our attention to the church, I asked the question: *Instead of being a prophetic voice and building peace between the two, why is there a tendency among evangelicals to side with the justice system and support its institutional mistreatment of the urban poor?* I have mostly answered this question epistemologically, arguing that this tendency typically results from the subtle fusion of two perspectives: ontological human sinfulness and urban criminality. I explained that evangelicals who hold both perspectives are usually unaware of the conceptual distinctions, intersectionality, and synthesis between the two. As a result, they often perceive the urban poor as types of criminal-sinners who perpetually threaten the divinely sanctioned, social order. Therefore, when the urban poor suffer at the hands of the justice system, evangelicals usually respond with indifference or approval, assuming that in accordance with the will of God, justice and order are being established in places where chaos and malevolence dwell.

Rene Girard's anthropology, established in chapter two, provided the analytical framework for this thesis. Mimetic theory informed us of how patterns of a community's violence tend to converge upon social outcasts, and his perspective on myths—socio-foundational tales rising from, concealing, and reinforcing patterns of collective violence—shed light on how sacred articles have the power to pit the community against

them. Looking at some of my experiences through the lens of mimetic theory displayed that the culture of urban violence is more complex than the narrow view of many evangelicals; it is social and mimetic, not the product of ontological sinfulness. In chapter three, Girard's perspective on myth helped confirm that this concept of human sinfulness is unbiblical and mythical, functioning as a text of persecution which tends to conceal a mechanism for structural violence against social outcasts. Chapter four then demonstrated how in our American context this doctrine tends to foment evangelical participation in the criminal justice system's practices of scapegoating the urban poor.

This work has been done out of deep concern for the identity and mission of the church and not just for analysis and critique. As followers of Jesus Christ, we have a primary responsibility to the "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18-19).¹ To be faithful agents of this ministry, we must disentangle ourselves from the violent systems that divide and destroy the human community. We must imitate Jesus by prophetically confronting patterns of oppression and violence. As I have demonstrated, evangelicals have generally failed in this responsibility. Many have directly and indirectly participated in the institutional scapegoating of the urban poor because their theological anthropology has been subverted and manipulated by institutional ideology (Chapter 4). Liberation from this ideological bind will therefore, require that evangelicals redefine their perspective on human nature in a biblical and socially conscious way.

This thesis has thus far diagnosed the theological and social problems caused by evangelicalism's anthropology. In this chapter, I will offer an alternative perspective by building on the biblical doctrine of *Imago Dei*—i.e. humanity made in the divine image—again utilizing Girard's anthropology to develop a more constructive

¹ See chapter 1, page 2.

interpretation of human nature, without extenuating the evil nature of sin and violence. I call this perspective *mimetic malformity*, through which I will argue that humans are created in God's image with a mimetic ability to imitate God and a responsibility to reflect God's image to creation, yet they find it nearly impossible to fulfill this task because humans are visibly separated from God as a result of sin. Instead, they imitate each other, conform themselves to the wrong things, and drift away into the distorted, competitive, and violent patterns of human interaction. After delineating the concept of mimetic malformity, I will demonstrate how this concept reveals the ways in which the culture of violence in the urban context and the pattern of institutional violence as practiced by the criminal justice system resemble each other, ending with the assertion that evangelicals must stand between the two, confronting violence, seeking reconciliation, and calling people to be conformed to the image of God through the example of Jesus Christ.

The Biblical Concept of Imago Dei

If the Bible uses any absolutizing category for human beings, it is that they are made in God's image. This concept is traditionally known as the doctrine of *Imago Dei* (Lat.) and is derived from the first chapter of Genesis—what I call “the creation text”—which provides an account of how God created the universe.² The idea of *Imago Dei* is introduced in the unit containing verses 26 through 31, with emphasis on verse 27: “*God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*” At face value, this specific unit (v. 26-31) makes three simple points: (1) humans, both male and female, are physical creatures made in God's image;

² According to most Hebrew scholars, the literary structure of the text is intricate and characterized by an “elegant prose more akin to poetry” than to history, making it difficult to interpret the text in a literal way. See Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 29.

(2) humans are a unique creature, having the responsibility to lead the creation; and (3) humans, along with creation, are valuable to God.³ The narrative sequence in the creation text begins with God who joyfully engages the creative process and culminates with the formation and establishment of humanity as a significant part of the creation.⁴

Inquiring into the historical background of the creation text illumines its counter-cultural nature. The author and date are unknown. While some maintain the traditional belief that Moses authored Genesis during the Egyptian exodus, and others (most Old Testament scholars today) contend that it was authored by a group of Levitical priests during the Babylonian exile, all can agree that, in light of either time period, the creation text is subversive in nature: *it uses concepts and terms familiar to the ancient Near East, suggesting an intent to undermine the ideological teachings of the imperial myths and to cultivate the exiled Israelites' national, spiritual, and covenantal identity.*⁵

In his work, *Old Testament Theology*, Paul R. House sketches out some of the ways in which the structure of the creation text parallels and challenges the imperial myths: (1) the imperial gods are many, but the God of Israel is the only true God and Creator of the universe; (2) the gods are often mortal, the God of Israel is eternal; (3) the gods engage the process of creation violently, consider creation as inferior to the spiritual

³ Historically, doctrinal principles have been supposedly “mined” from these few verses. Walter Brueggemann is correct to point out that text does not contain theological principles but a message laden with meaning (*Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, and Advocacy* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997], 452-453).

⁴ Despite the centrality of God’s creatorship, the text is emphatic about the creation of humanity, but not at the expense of the creation. Karl Barth (1886-1968) eloquently states that the text is “concerned with man as set in the cosmos... belonging to heaven and earth, and equally bound and committed to both” (*Church Dogmatics*, Vol. III.2, § 43-44 of *The Doctrine of Creation*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance [New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2009], 2). Yet the human is exalted over creation as the only creature said to be created out of God’s self-reflection (Gen. 1:26: “*Let us make... our image...*”), marked with the divine image (v. 27), given a covenantal blessing and charge to reign over the earth (v. 28), and whose formation compelled God to regard the whole creation not just as “good” but “very good” (v. 31).

⁵ Arnold, *Genesis*, 30, 32.

realm, and regard humans as useless debris from divine battles, while God engages the creative process peacefully, regarding humans as superlatively valuable.⁶

Perhaps the most subversive element in the creation text is the declaration that humans are made in God's image. One commentator indicates that most Near Eastern traditions "speak of sons being in the image of their fathers [e.g. *Enuma Elish*] but do not speak of humans created in the image of God," unless they were royalty.⁷ This title, Bill T. Arnold indicates, was pertinent to the royal language of Egypt and Mesopotamia, "in which a king or pharaoh is [deemed] the "image of God."⁸ Interestingly, the term "image" (derived from Heb., *tselem*) was used synonymously with the word "statue" and often translated "idol" in the Hebrew Scriptures.⁹ This meaning is evident in the ancient practice "of kings setting up images of themselves in places where they" had authority.¹⁰ Gerhard Von Rad explains that "just as powerful earthly kings, to indicate their claim to dominion, erect an image of themselves in the provinces of their empire where they do not personally appear, so man is placed upon earth... as God's sovereign emblem."¹¹

The concept of *Imago Dei*, together with the creation text, is a counter-myth designed to challenge the deleterious myths of oppressive empires. It reminds God's people, who have been forced to serve a violent empire and venerate its pagan images,

⁶ Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1998).60. In one myth, typical of others, House explains that "a dispute among the gods [results] in a dead god's body being thrown from heaven. This body becomes planet earth and the drops of blood from other injured deities become individual persons" (Ibid). For insight on the *Atrahasis Epic*, see D.J. Wiseman in the *New Bible Dictionary*, page 240; Marshall, I. Howard, A.R. Millard, J.I. Packer, and D.J. Wiseman. *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1996. For the *Enuma Elish*, see Dennis Bratcher's translation: www.crivoice.org/enumaelish.html.

⁷ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavals, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2000), 29.

⁸ Arnold, *Genesis*, 45.

⁹ *Tselem* is translated "idol" in most passages of the Old Testament, namely after 1 Samuel 6:5.

¹⁰ John H. Walton, et al, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2000), 29.

¹¹ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks et al., rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 60.

that they are a “kingdom of priests, a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6) and that when they see a human person, they are seeing a *tselem* of the Creator, the King of kings.¹² Unfortunately, understanding the text in this way has generally been overlooked in the Protestant tradition, resulting in the misinterpretation of the *Imago Dei*.

Misinterpretations of Imago Dei

One way that the *Imago Dei* in the creation text has been misunderstood results from a tendency to assume that the term “good” in verse 31 refers to moral uprightness. The Augustinian concept of *original righteousness* (traditionally embraced by Catholics and Protestants), the alleged perfect state of human nature which was supposedly lost after the original sin, is based on this kind of misunderstanding. In his work *Systematic Theology*, which was for a long time influential among Reformed Protestants, Charles Hodge (1797-1878) assumes like many others (e.g. John Calvin) that the text’s usage of the term “good” in reference to the human creature is an indication of humanity’s original, inherent righteousness.¹³ Following the logical sequence of this interpretation, Hodge (like many before and after him) concludes that humans, after the original sin, no longer possess the divine image. Assuming that original righteousness is contingent upon this image in humans, for Hodge, the loss of the former insinuates the loss of the latter.

While Genesis chapter three certainly indicates that humanity fell from an original state of innocence, this interpretation of the term “good” and its ensuing conclusions are erroneous. The statement in the creation text that humankind is “good” is not an indication of some kind of original righteousness in the human that is linked to the divine

¹² Wes Howard-Brook, “Come Out, My People!” *God’s Call Out of Empire in the Bible and Beyond* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011), 21.

¹³ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, abridged ed., ed. Edward N. Gross (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1988), 262-264.

image which the human bears. It is rather an *expression of divine value*. In other words, God considers humans a delightful thing, something of superlative value, and makes that very clear in the statement, “It is good.” Hodge, however, failed to accurately grasp the implications of the text and its portrayal of the human because he engaged the text with a presupposed dualistic cosmology and a moral understanding of the word “good.”

Another way that the *Imago Dei* has been misunderstood involves the terms *image* and *likeness* in the creation text. During the early patristic period, Christian thinkers from the Western tradition conceptualized the human being as a composite of body and soul as a result of the impact that Platonism, in many cases Gnosticism, had on western thought.¹⁴ The term “image” was generally associated with the *human person*, whose unique abilities of the mind (e.g. reason, conscience, will)—as opposed to those exhibited by animals—suggested that people belonged to a higher order in the created world. The term “likeness” was often linked to the *soul* and its potential to reflect God’s nature (e.g. morality, transcendence, immortality), attainable only through divine grace.¹⁵

This image-likeness dichotomy as an interpretive framework for the *Imago Dei* has become obsolete. Literary analysis reveals that for poetic purposes, the two terms function interchangeably. William A. Dyrness states that “the Protestant Reformers, armed with philological science and method, saw that ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ were to be taken as quasi-synonyms... [Unfortunately,] they chose to interpret the [moral-spiritual

¹⁴ Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 562.

¹⁵ How the terms “image” and “likeness” were interpreted differed from one thinker to another. Tertullian (160 AD -220) argued that humans retain the *image* (form) after the Fall, but must seek to attain the *likeness* (spiritual nature) through the sanctification of the Holy Spirit. Origen (184/185 AD - 253/254) associated the *image* with the human person and *likeness* with the perfected form of human nature as it would appear in the Last Day. Augustine claimed that the *image* (faculties) remains in the sinner while the *likeness* (viz. uprightness) was part of a process attainable through the grace of God. See Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 360- 361.

corruption] under these two words.”¹⁶ In other words, the idea of the divine image in humans, conveyed by the two terms, was interpreted through the lens of ontological sinfulness: sinfulness affects (corrupts or vanquishes) the *Imago Dei* in the human because sin becomes innate. Hence “Luther says of the ‘image of God’ that it is ‘almost completely lost’ (*paene amissa*)... Calvin can speak of the ‘relics’ of the ‘image of God’... Melancthon leaves [humans] with the [divine] capacity for ‘civil justice.’”¹⁷ Some, namely the early American revivalists, argued that the *Imago Dei* was lost.¹⁸ Others, however, disputing its permanency, claimed that the image is most evident in the human practices of institutional justice and the industrialization of land for the development of human civilization.¹⁹

This brief overview of some of the many interpretations of the *Imago Dei* demonstrates that there has never been a consistent interpretation of it in Western Christianity.²⁰ This point is important because although many evangelicals are dogmatic about their understanding of the human, which usually involve the interpretations above, the discordancy and mutability of these interpretations undermine the adamancy of evangelicals. Concepts of human sinfulness and the *Imago Dei* are logically inseparable

¹⁶ William A. Dyrness, *Global Dictionary of Theology*, ed. William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Karkkainen (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), s.v. “theological anthropology,” 43.

¹⁷ Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, 569.

¹⁸ Lutheran Reformer Matthias F. Illyricus (1520 – 1575) advocated this position, often conflicting with other Reformers, especially during the development of the Formula of Concord (1577). See Richard A. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), e-book ed., 51.

¹⁹ Those using the concept of the *Imago Dei* to justify institutional retribution or capital punishment have often referenced Gen. 9:6, “Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man.” See pages 43 to 54 of the following work: Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*, (Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000). Using this concept to exploit the earth gained momentum in 18th century, “at the very time,” Wolfhart Pannenberg shares, “when modern humanity in its self-understanding was cutting its ties with the creator God of the Bible” and experiencing industrial, technological, and educational progress (*Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, Trans. Matthew J. O’Connell [Phillidelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1985], 76-78).

²⁰ J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005). Kindle ed., chap. 1.

because both seek to interpret the human; defining one demarcates the other. So then, if the interpretations upon which evangelicals stand are found transient in nature, will not their anthropology become unreliable and their dogmatism exorbitant? Nevertheless, various interpretive methods have been taken and many faulty anthropologies have been produced because many “turn to extra-biblical, usually philosophical, sources... and end up reading contemporaneous conceptions of being human back into the Genesis text,” typically using “categories not likely to have occurred to the author of Genesis.”²¹

A simple reading of the creation text is sufficient for a basic understanding of the human: the human is a special creature having as a primary responsibility ruling over the creation in such a way that it reflects the image of God. Apart from this, the text neither describes the spiritual constitution of God and humans, nor does it explain how the divine image interrelates with human nature. What the text clearly demonstrates, however, is that the biblical concept of the *Imago Dei* must be the interpretive starting-point for any theological anthropology. In other words, the meaning of the human must be interpreted, understood, and perceived from the standpoint of God’s image.

Throughout the Bible, God is considered an incomprehensible being and therefore we must embrace the fact that the essence of God’s nature is inscrutable. Apart from God’s self-disclosure through the person and life of Jesus, the incarnation of the divine (Phil. 2:6), God is mysterious, knowable mostly by way of analogy. Likewise, human beings which resemble God are relatively abstruse. The most we can theologically say about the essence of the human is that in some recondite way it bears the enigmatic image of God, and that the “ground of existence” and the supreme worth of human beings is

²¹ Ibid.

rooted in God's declaration, "It is good."²² Any kind of absolutist language, totalizing concept, or reductionist category used to exhaustively explain the essence of God and people is an audacious and irrational act of arrogance. Here, the simple and the scholarly reach a stalemate and the ardently dogmatic become fools for replacing the impenetrable image "of the infinite God" with a comprehensible one for finite minds (Rom. 1:22-23).

The Basis for an Interdisciplinary Approach

The essence of God and the essence of human nature may be incomprehensible, but this does not mean that the two are not apprehensible. We must acknowledge the limits of the human mind, yet explore theological ways to talk intelligently about the human. While the hermeneutical error of the past was to interpret the human dualistically and metaphysically, the error of many today, especially among evangelical Protestants, is characterized by either of two reactionary responses: (1) an absolute reliance on the secular sciences for anthropological insight or (2) a preference to abstain from extra-biblical resources and "remain submerged in the textual and linguistic minutiae of their discipline."²³ Consequently, theological anthropology has become limited in scope (i.e. historically antiquated, non-theological, or culturally irrelevant) so that the evangelical church in general has found it increasingly difficult to understand and respond to the patterns of human violence and suffering in a modern context.²⁴ J. Richard Middleton therefore calls for an interdisciplinary approach, one which will inform the people of God in "developing an ethics of power rooted in a theological model of the self as empowered agent of compassion... serviceable for the Christian community in envisioning its calling

²² Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1939), 98-99.

²³ Middleton, *The Liberating Image*. Kindle ed., chap. 1.

²⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Vol.III.2, § 43-44, 17-20.

in an increasingly violent and brutal world.”²⁵ Having wrestled with these convictions myself, I have decided to take this call to an interdisciplinary approach seriously.

Bringing the concept of *Imago Dei* and mimetic theory into dialogue in the pages that follow will demonstrate that *the problem of human nature is not innate sinfulness nor the loss of God’s image, but rather, a tendency to imitate other things besides God; it is the mimetic malformity of the person, not a sin mechanism hidden in the soul.*

The fact that the anthropological perspective of mimetic malformity draws from social theory and that the term itself is extra-biblical does not mean that the concept is unbiblical or that it will repeat the errors of the approaches identified above. Barth notes that the social sciences can provide “precise information and relevant data” for assessing human behavior and for developing techniques that address certain activity. Theology, he says, ultimately bears the “responsibility to make the claim of truth... interpreting [the human], it is concerned with the relation of this creature to God, and therefore with his inner reality and wholeness... something which the anthropology of exact science cannot do.”²⁶ As long as this interdisciplinary approach is engaged meticulously with an awareness that social theory can inform theological anthropology, and as long as the former “remains within its limits, and does not attempt to be more or less than exact science, it is a good work... our differentiation from it need not imply opposition... [unless it] becomes axiomatic, dogmatic and speculative.”²⁷ Social theory can supplement theological anthropology but the latter must ultimately rely on scripture, namely on the

²⁵ Middleton, *The Liberating Image*. Kindle ed., chap. 1.

²⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol.III.2, § 43-44, 22.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

humanity of Jesus because through his life, the meaning of the human and the image of God are manifest (Heb. 1:3; cf. Col. 1:15). He is *Emmanuel*: “God with us” (Mat. 1:23).²⁸

The Human Condition as Mimetic Malformity

The basic argument of *mimetic malformity* is that humans were made in the image of God with a responsibility to imitate and reflect God’s image to creation, but because they have sinned and separated themselves from God, they now imitate each other and conform themselves to the wrong things, resulting in the patterns of hatred and violence. This perspective is in some ways consistent with and in other ways diametrically opposed to the theological anthropology of many evangelicals. In terms of consistency, the concept of mimetic malformity takes the problem of human sinfulness seriously: it does not deny the biblical claim that humans have a responsibility to live for God but have chosen sin instead, nor does it disregard the reality that the human community tends to spiral into patterns of depravity and violence. In terms of antithesis, the concept of mimetic malformity rejects the idea that human beings are ontologically sinful and that the divine image in humans is consequently damaged or extinguished. Apart from these comparisons, we must ask the question: Is the concept of mimetic malformity consistent with the testimony of scripture? In the following, I will answer this question by briefly outlining four of its major components.

The first component of this perspective establishes the premise that human beings are permanently designed in God’s image (Gen. 1:27). The divine image is not lost because of sin nor does it pertain only to the soul rather than the body because the flesh is

²⁸ Barth bluntly states, “We cannot start with the assumption that there is a known and accepted picture of man and humanity... No, in theological anthropology what man is, [must] be decided by the primary text,” i.e., the man Jesus (*Church Dogmatics*, Vol. III.2. § 45-46, 23).

supposedly corrupted.²⁹ That the divine image somehow involves every aspect of the human, physical and spiritual, is evident in the fact that the whole human, what scripture calls a “living *nephesh*” (Heb. “soul”) made from “water” and “earth” and the Creator’s “breath” (3:6-7), is said to bear the Creator’s image.³⁰ We must not say more about the spiritual composition, the metaphysical components, or the essence of the human! Not even the biblical writers attempted an explanation but allowed the mystery of this heavenly-yet-earthly creature to baffle them, like the Psalmist who sang, “When I consider your heavens... what is humankind that you are mindful of them; human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels [yet] crowned them with glory and honor” (Ps. 8:3-5). God treasures humans more than anything else in the universe and unlike anything else in the universe, only human beings possess the Creator’s image. Many may claim that the divine image in humans is damaged or lost, but God is later shown—even after the creation text and the story of the original sin—condemning murder on the basis that humans resemble God (9:6), a point of view that even the Apostles took for granted (Jam. 3:9).

The second component pertaining to the perspective of mimetic malformity establishes that human beings have a teleological responsibility to imitate and reflect God’s image. The *Imago Dei* is more than just an aspect of the human, it is also an ultimate end; it is a divinely mandated responsibility which humans are called to live out

²⁹ Barth eloquently states that “even the sinful man who denies his humanity and in a blatant or more refined way turns his back on his fellows stands in the light” of God’s image which all humans bear and which Jesus himself revealed in his own humanity. “Even as he denies it...he can only shame his nature and himself” (*Church Dogmatics*, III.2, § 45-46, 24-25).

³⁰ This passage should not be understood in dualistic terms, as though the so-called immortal soul proceeded from God’s breath, containing the divine image, and was somehow, as Anderson states, “temporarily encased in a mortal body” (Ray S. Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982], 43). This idea, which was derived from Greek philosophy despite the fact that it was found offensive to the Hebrews, was integrated into a Christian understanding of the human, ultimately distorting the original meaning of the text.

in their lives and communities. This is evident by the fact that God's blessing and command to rule the earth (Gen. 1:28) follows the declaration that humans are made in the image of God (v. 27). In other words, as humans engage the world, they must remember not only that they are made in the image of a loving Creator, but that they are also called to reflect God's image to the world. Humans unconditionally possess the image of God, yet have a responsibility to reflect the divine image. In addition to this responsibility, it is my contention that by wisdom and grace, God has designed human beings for the effective engagement of this responsibility. God did not simply create humanity, take a step back, and say, "All right people! You were made in my image, now go live it out." Instead, God created humanity with a mimetic instinct for the purpose of aiding people in their teleological task: the imitation of *Imago Dei*.

According to Girard, there is an overwhelming amount of evidence to suggest that the human brain is a kind of imitation machine.³¹ Why it is designed this way, science is uncertain. What is certain, however, is that mimesis plays an important and necessary role in the formation of human memory, culture, and identity. Girardian theologian James Alison explains that it is primarily from this instinct that humans are enabled to "articulate sounds and make gestures... to repeat sounds which [leads] to the formation of memory, and thence to language, since there is no language without memory."³² For example, the first things that a child learns are derived from the imitative interaction that takes place with its own parents. From this kind of interaction, the child learns to smile, to utter, to move, and then, later, to name things and have conversations that shape the

³¹ Rene Girard, *Things Hidden From the Foundation of the World*, Trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1978), 7.

³² James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 18.

child's personal development. At a collective level, this interaction leads communities in the formation of language, ideas, and patterns of interaction which shape cultural identity. "If human beings suddenly ceased imitating," Girard says, "culture would vanish."³³

This teleological aspect of the *Imago Dei* is evident in the life of Jesus, since he himself often states that his actions were faithful emulations of the Father. For example, responding to his religious persecutors for healing on the Sabbath, he said, "My Father is working until now, and I myself am working" (Jn. 5:18). To express how strongly he was compelled to imitate God, Jesus said, "The Son can do nothing of himself, unless it is something he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner" (Jn. 5:18-19). Moreover, Jesus imitated the Father in such a way that he was confident enough not only to declare that the Father's image was observable through him (Jn. 14:7, 9), but also that people should follow him and imitate "the example" he had set for them (Jn. 13:15). But what exactly is being imitated? Some kind of mysterious or abstract image of the Creator? No, rather, what is being imitated is a simple life characterized by love—love of God and love of neighbor (Lk. 10:27)—since God, and the image he manifests in Jesus, is love (1 Jn. 4:8). It is a lifestyle characterized by what Justo Gonzalez described as a gentle and assertive "for other-ness," that is, a primary concern and inclination to embrace others, caring and advocating for them, especially if they are social outcasts.³⁴ It is a lifestyle through which God reveals the meaning of the divine image and hence the meaning of what it means to be human.

Through the humanity of Jesus, therefore, God manifests the reality that we have been designed with a responsibility to imitate the Creator and rule the earth in a way that

³³ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 7.

³⁴ Justo Gonzalez, *Mañana: Christian Theology From A Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 151.

is very different from what we see in our world. Through Jesus, we not only get a glimpse of the mimetic activity involved in reflecting the *Imago Dei* but considering the fact that the mimesis is part of human nature, we must theologically conclude that humans have been designed with this ability for the purpose of emulating God. Unfortunately, humans have ultimately failed this responsibility.

The third component pertaining to the idea of mimetic malformity is that the human-divine relationship has been disrupted. Genesis three, “the disruption text,” narrates the point of disruption in the human-divine relationship. Being deceived by a serpent, who “set before Adam and Eve the possibility of a heightened knowledge [it] claimed God had maliciously” kept secret, the first humans questioned God’s goodness, ate fruit from the tree that God had forbidden them, and “through this act... destroyed the fellowship with God, each other, and creation... [introducing enmity and death] into a creation that had only known harmony [and life].”³⁵ Though humans resemble the creator, this text reveals that they live in a world where the human-divine relationship has been broken.

Something has happened to us; we do not walk with God in gardens of fellowship anymore. Despite the fact that we, Christians, are taught that God can be known through creation, Jesus, and the church, humanity finds itself in a world where the Creator is not visibly present in creation. Unlike the Garden of Eden, we live in a world where the landscape of the created order has been reconfigured by the domination of concrete infrastructure which has relegated nature to the outskirts of the city and has replaced gardens of joy with the industry of empire. We live in a world where the land, the

³⁵ Stanley Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 92.

animals, and humanity itself do not see people for who they are—*Imago Dei*—but fears them for what they have become: tyrants and insurgents, industrialist and laborers, merchants and consumers, citizens and criminals; rivals who violently compete for the possession of land and things formed out of the natural resources that have been excavated from the carcass of Mother Nature.³⁶ Living in the sequel of the Genesis story, we gaze beyond the horizon to behold the paradise of Eden, where the ancient text claims that people once walked and reigned with the Creator, but we do not see it. What we see is the confused world we live in: a world where God is not visible but pain, exploitation, and violence are; a reality that is not predicated upon God-like reign but on the domination of a lost and deranged human creature.

What has caused this universal alienation and confusion? The technical answer is sin, but in terms of what actually happened in the Garden of Eden is difficult to discern since the narrative in the disruption text is shrouded in a myth-like literary structure.³⁷ What is certain, however, is that, apart from God's presence through Jesus (incarnation of God) and the church (the body of Christ), the human-divine disruption is real and most obvious in the physical invisibility of the Creator. It is true that God is omnipresent, immanent, and "not far from each one of us; for in him we live and move and exist" (Act. 17:27-28), yet as Christians, we embrace these ideas almost exclusively by faith. But for those who are not in relationship with Jesus, God often seems absent from the world. If we are honest with ourselves, this idea is in some ways correct because the human-divine separation is empirically evident; it is concrete, physical, and visible. And despite the fact

³⁶ For more on these thoughts, I recommend the following work: Jaques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, Trans. Dennis Pardee (Vancouver: Eerdsman's Publishing Company, 1993).

³⁷ The disruption text, like the creation text, is also chiasmic, poetic, and mythical in nature. See note 2 in this chapter.

that God is invisible to the naked eye, the sacred text declares that imitating the divine image is everyone's responsibility.

But can people reflect the image of a God who tends to be invisible? Apart from Jesus, it is nearly impossible; however, according to the text, it is absolutely imperative. This is indeed a challenging responsibility because imitating that which is invisible will nearly always result in the imitation of something else that is visible. People may know something about God through the created order and are thus inexcusable (Rom. 1:20), but because the relational divide is overwhelmingly real and because the Creator is not experienced as perpetually present, people will tend to exchange the true image of the invisible God for visible images of things constructed by the human imagination (Rom. 1:22-23).³⁸ And even if God momentarily appears or is revealed in a theophany, as often occurred with the Hebrew patriarchs, people will tend to fail at imitating God, not only because they need God's perpetual presence but also because the constantly present human community into which people are born has been in many ways conformed to a god-less (i.e. "without God") reality. Thus the prophets and apostles exhort God's people to "come out from their midst... be separate" (2 Cor. 6:17) and "do not conform to the patterns of this world" (Rom. 12:2). Sin has powerfully separated humanity from God and this separation exacerbates sin in the world.

Finally, the fourth component of the proposed perspective establishes the conclusion that the sinful condition of the human being is one of mimetic malformity. Rather than being conformed to the divine image, humans become by way of mimetic desire conformed to everything except God. Sinfulness is not something inherent to human nature, as if some kind of "sin mechanism" was embedded in the human

³⁸ Paraphrased in present-tense.

constitution, nor is it an ontological aspect of human nature, as if the whole being of the human was corrupted. If there is anything theological to be said about the human constitution, it is that humans are made in God's image (as scripture declares), and if there is any mechanism inherent in human nature, it is the mimetic instinct (as socio-analysis suggests). Unfortunately, these things have generally been overlooked, namely by evangelical Protestants. Being influenced by the idea that humans are innately sinful, many have mistaken the mimetic instinct of the human being with what appears to be a "totally depraved human-will." In other words, the irresistible impulse of mimesis playing itself out in one's patterns of immorality, especially violence, has been interpreted as the outworking of depravity in the human will. However, as this thesis has already established, this interpretation is no longer adequate for a biblically based, theological anthropology. Humans are not essentially evil or good, but created in God's image; they do not have a "totally depraved will" but a tendency to mimic god-lessness.

If sinfulness, or sin, is not ontological, then what is it? From a biblical standpoint, "sinfulness" refers to relational brokenness and "sin" refers to relationally damaging behavior; the latter indicates action, the former a condition, both being relational in nature. Biblical theologian Elmer A. Martens indicates that in all of the forms that this word appears in the Bible, especially in the Hebrew Scriptures (*iniquities, transgression, sins*), sin—literally meaning "missing the mark"—is a concept denoting "failure... not of a person over against a code, but of a person-to-person relationship."³⁹ Biblically speaking, sin is the failure of not honoring the divine-human covenantal bond.

"Sinfulness" is a term we use to describe the moral quality of things like actions (e.g. "the

³⁹ Elmer A. Martens, *God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology*, 3rd ed. (North Richland Hills: BIBAL Press, 1998), 51-52.

sinfulness of murder”), objects (e.g. “the sinfulness of money”), and people (e.g. “the sinful man”), largely depending on how these things impact relationships.⁴⁰ The term “sin” therefore focuses on *actions* and *behavior*, while the term “sinfulness” focuses on relational *conditions*. This is a distinction that the concept of ontological human sinfulness has failed to make, confusing action with condition, behavior with ontology, and concluding that humans not only behave sinfully but are inherently sinful, an idea that is foreign to the scriptures.

Sinfulness is a relational and spatial condition that affects human beings deeply. Sinfulness is spatial, literally “everywhere around the human,” because humans live in a spatial reality divorced from God’s visible interaction; everyone “misses the mark” of interacting with God in a personal way. This “everywhere” is a relational and spatial condition because there is an unexplainable chasm between God’s sphere of visibility and the human sphere of interaction. This condition deeply affects a person’s psyche because, being designed to mimic God but not being able to, leaves the person with an unexplainable sense of aimlessness. People often ask themselves, “Who am I? Is there a purpose for my existence? If so, what is it?” Not knowing, many have experienced a profound sense of meaninglessness, sometimes internal confliction leading to depression. This experience is what Augustine alluded to when he wrote, “You [oh God] have made us for yourself and our hearts are [restless] until they [find their] rest in you.”⁴¹ Seeking to resolve this existential crisis, the person wanders through life, consciously and unconsciously imitating this and that, good and bad, conforming to things that seem desirable but ultimately failing to fulfill one’s thirst for meaning. Sinfulness is therefore

⁴⁰ “Sinfulness” is a word not necessarily existing in the original languages of the scriptures but appearing in English translations (though rarely; e.g. Ps. 36:1, NIV).

⁴¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), 21.

spatial because it is observable in a geo-physical way; it is personal because it affects people's identity; and it is relational because all relationships, vertical (with God) and horizontal (with humans), are affected by it.

The sinful condition of mimetic malformity is inevitable. People are not born with a sin mechanism inside the soul, as the doctrine of total depravity claims, but are rather inevitably born into a "sinful world." *Every person is sinful because everyone "misses the mark" from birth, being born into a spatial reality characterized by divine-relational separation (sinfulness) with the instinct of mimetic desire.* They have a responsibility to desire and imitate God—the ultimate object of desire and the ultimate model of mimesis—but they cannot. Instead, they desire what they should not desire and imitate what they should not imitate. They steer their mimetic impulse toward god-less models and conform themselves to things that are not godlike, and thus not human, subjecting themselves to the patterns of hatred, rivalry, and violence, ultimately obscuring their intended resemblance: the *Imago Dei*. Even if they do not engage in atrocious acts, human sinfulness resides in the fact that people are naturally separated from God and inevitably imitate god-less things. From this standpoint, it can be argued that humans are born "in sin," "under the power of sin," or "into a sinful condition." As it is written, "There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands... none who seeks for God; all have turned aside... there is none who does good... not even one" (Rom. 3:10-18).

The Mimetic Malformity of the Urban Context

When we consider the culture of urban violence through the lens of mimetic malformity, we understand that violence is sin because it resembles something other than

God, and that the culture of urban violence is thus sinful: it is a manifestation of mimetic malformity. But our analysis must not end in this way. Rather it must be concretely contextualized in order to create frameworks for strategic action. As I end this thesis, I will briefly respond to the question: *If the culture of urban violence is a manifestation of mimetic malformity, whose violence people are imitating, why exactly are they emulating that model, and can that model be regarded sinful as well?* I contend that the urban poor who participate in the culture of urban violence are essentially emulating the institutional violence of the criminal justice system in an effort to establish what the system defines as justice. Through this imitation, the culture of violence not only manifests its own sinfulness and mimetic malformity but also the sinfulness of the criminal justice system. Let me unpack this further.

In the previous chapter, I argued that as a society we have unwisely allowed the criminal justice system to absolutize the nature of urban neighborhoods with criminal categories, resulting in a general misperception of the urban poor. Here I argue that, in a similar way, we have allowed the system to define justice for us, which has contributed to the prevailing assumption that true justice is retributive in nature and that true justice can only be accessed through the system. The system defines justice in retributive terms not restorative terms.⁴² If someone steals from another, this definition demands that the person be punished, not brought face to face with the victim for reconciliation and restitution. The system thus uses a retributive approach to resolving conflict, and because it authoritatively facilitates the official means through which the American public can access or execute justice against wrongdoers, it tends to hold a kind of monopoly on

⁴² See chapter 1 (Introduction), note 13.

conflict-resolution.⁴³ If someone breaks the law, they must be delivered to the legal authorities to face the consequences. They must be afflicted in some way, whether the affliction is monetary, as in paying a court-mandated fee; social expulsion, as in a criminal conviction that may entail incarceration, but will certainly entail a criminal record that stigmatizes a person for a long time; or the ultimate expulsion: capital punishment.⁴⁴ Because the system defines justice authoritatively and models conflict resolution for society in these ways, when people suffer harm, they often desire that the offender “pay for the crime” through the institutional affliction of the justice system.

There are many others however, that do not trust the criminal justice system.⁴⁵ This is especially true of the urban poor. Many are not only hesitant to appeal to the justice system when they experience injury from others, but have completely abandoned their reliance on the system for the provision of justice. There are four main reasons for this. *One, the urban poor generally fear being labeled a snitch* (informant for the police). In chapter two, I indicated that this label stigmatizes people because it makes them vulnerable to the violence of those involved in criminal networks and to being shunned by those in the broader community who fear being associated with snitches because they also fear being hurt. *Two, the urban poor often experience disappointment with legal processes.* A crime victim files a report but feels that the problem was not adequately

⁴³ In some ways, this process acts “as a kind of rite of passage [through] which offenders are excluded” from society (Ross London, *Crime, Punishment, and Restorative Justice: A Framework for Restoring Trust* [Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011], 143).

⁴⁴ While justice as punishment tends to be the common way the criminal justice system deals with criminal acts, white collar crime is not met with the punishment of *confinement* or *capital punishment*. It is only met with *monetary* punishment. Reiman argues that this is enough evidence to suggest that the system is ultimately biased against the poor, having a preferential option for the rich and powerful (*The Rich Get Richer*, Kindle ed., chap. 3).

⁴⁵ According one report: “Nearly half of young American voters do not have confidence in the justice system... The poll of 18-29 year olds released Wednesday by Harvard’s Institute of Politics (IOP) found an even 49%-49% split among the age group on the question of the system’s “ability to fairly judge people without bias for race and ethnicity” (Zeke J. Miller, “Poll: Millennials Distrust Justice System, Soften on Democrats,” [2015]: 1).

resolved. Or, as a court defendant, one is provided a public defender but becomes part of an assembly line of indigent clients who get shuffled through several attorneys who are overworked. In the end, this process becomes unreasonably expensive for both the victim and the offender (e.g. loss of work, court fees, transportation); they already have a difficult time paying the bills.⁴⁶ *Three, the urban poor often experience mistreatment by the justice system.* Law enforcement often patrol and monitor urban neighborhoods as if they were warzones, interrogating and arresting not just criminals, but sometimes innocent people as well.⁴⁷ Considering that the urban poor are generally perceived as criminally inclined and dangerous, the chances of an officer beating or killing an innocent person should not be underestimated, especially if an intense altercation occurs.⁴⁸ And because the courts generally fail to provide adequate representation for the poor, the latter are often sentenced unfairly, usually through plea bargains, and relegated to violent correctional institutions which tend to be overpopulated with poor people of color.⁴⁹

Trust between the urban poor and the criminal justice system is frail. The latter promises justice for everyone, but this is not always the experience of the former. As

⁴⁶ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*. 84-86. Alexander estimates that “approximately 80 percent of criminal defendants are indigent and thus unable to hire a lawyer” (85).

⁴⁷ Studies have shown that this police approach has affected mostly the Latino/Hispanic and African American communities. For Hispanic immigrants, especially those who have experienced tyranny and police abuse in their homelands or live in the U.S. without legal residency, this police practice revives fear and suspicion, emotions that are often shared with family members or the broader community. See Jill Theresa Messing, David Becerra, Allison Ward-Lasher, David K. Affilia Androff. “Latinas' Perceptions of Law Enforcement: Fear of Deportation, Crime Reporting, and Trust in the System,” *Journal of Women & Social Work* 30, iss. 3 (2015): 328-340. African Americans, on the other hand, have a history of unresolved conflict with the law. They are routinely interrogated and frisked by police as primary suspects in mistaken criminal profiling situations. See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*.

⁴⁸ Rion Amalcar Scott. “The Etiquette of Police Brutality,” *Crisis* (2015): 12-17.

⁴⁹ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*. 87. Alexander declares that “nearly all criminal cases are resolved through plea bargaining—a guilty plea by the defendant in exchange for some form of leniency by the prosecutor,” an offer that no one desires but many accept under a form of duress. Alexander explains: “When prosecutors offer ‘only’ three years in prison when the penalties defendants could receive if they took their case to trial would be five, ten, or twenty years—or life imprisonment—only extremely courageous (or foolish) defendants turn the offer down” (87).

chapter four revealed, the urban poor are often treated not as the recipients of justice but as suspects of criminality upon whom retribution is readily administered. They certainly desire justice, like most people do, but they do not feel that they can rely on the system for it. I call this internal struggle *the paradox of desire and distrust*. This paradox of desiring an end but distrusting the system, which is supposed to provide that end, is precisely what according to most sociologists produces the temptation for socially marginalized people “to bypass legitimate [venues] and take to illegitimate [ones] instead.”⁵⁰ If retributive justice is the object of desire for the urban poor but the justice system fails to provide it for them, then the urban poor will be tempted to attain justice in other ways that resemble the justice as defined and modeled by the system. A young man I once mentored explained to me why he usually carried a gun. He said, “If someone tries to do me dirty or pops me, ain’t no one got my back but this steel.” In other words, because he did not trust the police in providing the security and justice he needed in the streets, he carried a firearm in case someone threatened, injured, or tried to injure him.

The paradox of desire and distrust produces in a person the temptation to take retributive justice into one’s own hands, what others call “vengeance.”⁵¹ This paradox however does not itself trigger the violence. There are many people who experience this paradox yet do not resort to violence. They may desire it or even fantasize about it, but they remain passive or seek non-violent forms of vengeance. If the paradox of desiring retributive justice but distrusting the criminal justice system only creates the temptation, then what exactly triggers violence in a person? Robert Brennenman, who spent several

⁵⁰ Paul Rock, “Sociological Theories of Crime,” *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology*, ed. Mike Maguire, Rod Morgan, and Robert Reiner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 10.

⁵¹ According to Girard, the acts of violence that people personally engage in and the kind of justice that the system practices both have violent punishment as a common denominator (Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 17).

years in Central America exploring the sociological dimensions of gang-culture, answers this question by pointing to the experience of shame. He states that when a person is shamed by another, especially a rival exhibiting a higher degree of power or status, the former may try to conceal the shame “through acts of conjured bravado... [resulting in] a ‘spiral of shame’ in which the individual (or group) experiencing shame develops a chronic sense of shame and attempts to hide or ‘mask’ this shame by attempting to shame others.”⁵² The experience of shame progresses and exaggerates one’s insecurities, often effecting a defense reflex which impels people to violently shame others in an attempt to eclipse one’s own shame.⁵³

By emphasizing the role of the emotions, namely the experience of shame and the anger that shame effects, Brenneman rightfully reveals that behind acts of violent vengeance, “far from being [exclusively] a neurotic obsession” or a sociological phenomenon (e.g. mimesis), “is rooted in a thoroughly human desire to escape shame and access [dignity].”⁵⁴ Yet I must point out that the idea of inflicting violence on someone as a means to conceal shame or restore dignity does not originate with the experience of shame itself but arises out of the conviction that violence resolves problems, a conviction that contains a kind of logic predicated upon the notion of redemptive violence. Sudden emotions can trigger violence, such as when a person responds aggressively out of survival instinct during an attacker’s assault, but the idea that violence can restore dignity or make things right is an acquired concept.⁵⁵ Therefore, I contend that (1) the paradox of

⁵² Robert Brenneman, *Homies and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 88-89.

⁵³ London, *Crime*, 88.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁵⁵ Some cultures are unfamiliar with the idea that violence resolves the problem of shame. Laura Mirsky outlines several ways in which Native Americans and other indigenous people of the Americas have traditionally practiced a form of what restorative justice advocates call “Peace Circles.” See Laura

desire and distrust creates the temptation for violent vengeance, (2) the experience of shame exacerbates that temptation, sometimes *activating* it, but (3) the violent act itself is fundamentally mimetic: it appropriates the logic of retributive justice.⁵⁶

As senseless as street violence may seem, there is certain logic to it: if one is harmed, disrespected, or shamed, the offender must be punished. Almost every person that I have encountered in the context of urban ministry who engaged in street violence justified themselves using this logic, saying, “I did what I did because they disrespected me,” “did this to my family,” or “hurt my friend.” In other words, “Justice had to be established because wrong was inflicted.” I once had a neighbor who slapped his girlfriend and instead of calling the police, she called her brothers who interpreted the act as an insult to the whole family. They rammed through the door and into the house, dragged the boyfriend out into the street and beat him. Having felt that the brothers’ beating him was shameful and unwarranted, the boyfriend later returned with a group of male family members and friends seeking vengeance, or what he believed was “justice.”

Many in the urban context engage violence in this way, seeking justice outside of the criminal justice system in an effort to recover their dignity. While these acts often involve random occurrences of personal conflict, there tends to be a much more established structure generally existing in the urban context which offers security and justice for many, especially those who do not trust the system. In chapter two, I identified this structure as the criminal street gang. This urban structure stands as the most vivid

Mirsky, “Restorative Justice Practices of Native American, First Nation, and Other Indigenous People of North America: Part One,” *International Institute for Restorative Practices*, 27 April 2004, http://www.iirp.edu/article_detail.php?article_id=NDA1.

⁵⁶ During an interview with Brenneman, former gang-member Pancho said, “I wanted to sow in other people what other people had sown in me since I was little.” Though he was directly referencing his desire to shame and intimidate others violently as a way of regaining his dignity, it was clear that this desire was imitative; it was modeled to him (*Homies and Hermanos*, 69).

example of how the culture of urban violence mimics the system.⁵⁷ Considering the thousands of different kinds of gangs that exist in the U.S., I will only mention that in regard to the implementation of violence, the structure arranged by gangs in general tends to resemble the system by conceptualizing justice in retributive terms and by also functioning as a kind of facilitator of retribution in the communities they dominate. Let me illustrate this in the following story.

In 2001, my friend Danny was jumped by a group of *Sureños*.⁵⁸ During this time, I was very involved in the Bulldog gang. Danny was not a gang-member but he did hang out with us quite often. He was younger than we were; most of us were around 18 while he was only 15. When he told us what happened to him, we became angry. We cared about Danny. We felt that it wasn't right for him to get jumped by our enemies. Mostly, we were angry that the *Sureños* had trespassed into our gang's territory, crossing a line of "jurisdiction," so to speak. The *Sureños* had no right entering our community and hurting our neighbor. Analogous to a court setting, my crew gathered around Danny and listened to him explain the incident. After hearing the *case*, we concluded that *respect* (i.e. justice) needed to be established. I recruited a few of my friends and drove around looking for the *culprits*. Eventually, we found a group of *suspects*. I was not sure which ones were truly responsible but I did not care; justice had to be served. So I jumped out my car and assaulted the group with a weapon, executing what I considered "justice." However, like a boomerang that is flung only to return again, the justice that I hurled at the men came right back to strike me at a much greater velocity. The *Sureños* vandalized my home and

⁵⁷ Girardian anthropologist Elena Zilberg provides helpful insight into this pattern by demonstrating the ways in which Central American (viz. El Salvador) gang-members mimetically mirror the patterns of institutional and military violence ("Gangster in guerilla face: A transnational mirror of production between the USA and El Salvador," *Anthropological Theory* 7, iss. 1 [2007]: pp. 37-57).

⁵⁸ For a definition of *Sureño*, see chapter 2, page 19.

later shot my friend Patrick in the back. After the police arrested me, the court system sentenced me to eight years in prison, a place where retribution reigns.⁵⁹ During a visit, my mother asked me why I resorted to violence rather than calling the police? Looking her straight in the eye, I answered that I was not a snitch. Then I reminded her of the time when I was fourteen and was excessively beaten by police. She became silent and wept. Then I wept with her.

The problem with the culture of urban violence is the problem of mimetic malformity. People who participate in these structures of vengeance have unknowingly emulated and conformed themselves to an image that resembles the retributive behavior of the criminal justice system. They emulate its patterns of retribution in an effort to regain dignity and attain what they believe is justice, refusing to appeal to the system because it has been regarded a rival and oppressor. Not tolerating unconventional forms of retributive justice, the system responds by centering its retributive rod on the urban context, intending to establish order and to deter the urban poor from supplanting the system's role.⁶⁰ This bellicose disposition, however, perpetuates the paradox of desire and distrust among the urban poor and not just among those who participate in crime, thus fueling the culture of urban violence which then reinforces the justice system's retributive focus on the urban context. What this cyclical interaction ultimately reveals is that the former and the latter are mimetic doubles: both are caught in a double bind,

⁵⁹ Regarding my arrest and charges, see chapter 2, note 37.

⁶⁰ There are many examples of how the criminal justice system tends to validate its own retributive form of justice in direct contradistinction to the practices of violent vengeance that often takes place in urban neighborhoods. One example is a murder case—which took place across the street from my home—that is now undergoing the trial process in Fresno (CA), in which a couple “was accused of using ‘street justice’ in the killing of a man who had sexually assaulted a woman.” A local news article reports that during the opening statements of the trial, the prosecutor told the jury that “street justice is not real justice.” See Pablo Lopez, “Murder trial begins in bizarre Fresno killing,” *Fresno Bee*, 5 Oct. 2015, www.fresnobee.com/news/local/crime/article37892526.html#storylink=cpy.

reciprocating hostility and propaganda as they grasp after justice, the object of desire, sometimes clashing in violent melees as they did during the Ferguson demonstrations.⁶¹

Conclusion: The Church's Prophetic Mission

For too long evangelicals have compromised their mission to be agents of *biblical reconciliation* within the polarity of hostility between the urban context and the criminal justice system.⁶² Rather than engaging this double bind prophetically and calling people on both sides—not just the urban poor—to renounce violence and build peace, most evangelicals have apathetically condoned or sanctimoniously supported the latter. Why this occurs is largely due to the fact that their insidious doctrines of ontological human sinfulness tend to coalesce with stereotypes of urban criminality, obscuring the reality that most of the violence occurring in the urban context is but a mere reflection of the justice system's philosophy and practice of justice. Some, wanting to stand with the poor but not being aware of this double bind, have oscillated toward the opposite pole, criticizing and antagonizing the justice system, sometimes dismissing or excusing the culture of urban violence. This response, however, is not adequate either; it intensifies rivalry rather than cultivating peace. Like their counterparts, these Christians have also

⁶¹For a further analysis of the racial-justice demonstrations/riots using mimetic theory, I recommend reading (1) Lindsey Paris-Lopez, "From Japan To Ferguson: Sacrificing Our Justifications For Violence," *The Raven Foundation*, 13 Aug. 2015, <https://www.ravenfoundation.org/sheep-goats-division-judgment-ferguson-beyond/>; (2) Suzanne Ross, "The Shooting Death of Michael Brown: A Necessary Evil or Just Plain Murder?," *Patheos*, 28 Nov. 2014. 4, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/teachingnonviolentatonement/2014/11/the-shooting-death-of-michael-brown-a-necessary-evil-or-just-plain-murder/>.

⁶² I use the term "biblical reconciliation" in contrast to the kind of reconciliation that is often characterized by the stipulations and demands of authoritarian structures. Bishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu explains: "Christian reconciliation is radical reconciliation": i.e., it is not satisfied until relationships are established on a kind of mutual bond, reflecting familial love. Without this kind of reconciliation, "our process and practices of [peace building] cannot avoid the temptation (or trap, if you will) of cheap grace, on the one hand, and political expediency, on the other... reconciliation should be more than just political accommodation, the result of successful negotiation, or the achievement of an equilibrium of interests." (*Radical Reconciliation*, Kindle ed., forward).

been misled, perhaps bound to a different kind of ideology.⁶³ But what false doctrine and ideology have done, the testimony of Scripture can undo. Rooted in this testimony, the concept of mimetic malformity can liberate evangelicals from ideological influences and empower them to faithfully engage their mission as prophetic agents of reconciliation.

First of all, because the concept of mimetic malformity has as a primary lens of the biblical doctrine of *Imago Dei*, it has power to undermine the ideological bind that generally characterizes the relationship between evangelicals and the criminal justice system. As was explained earlier in this chapter, the doctrine of *Imago Dei* is fundamentally a subversive concept, designed to challenge the ideological and anthropological perspectives of imperial regimes, including the oppressive systems of today. In many ways, the justice system participates in ideology, namely an ideology of domination, as this thesis has demonstrated. The justice system may classify urban neighborhoods as malevolent; the public may assume that black and brown skin means criminally inclined; and Christians may infer that the urban poor are sinful. But when the church stands on the conviction that everyone, harmless or dangerous, bears the Creator's image and that God values them and has established them on earth to reign together in the ways of their loving Creator, sin is confronted, ideology is subverted, absolutizing categories are demolished, and the church again establishes its prophetic role.

This past summer, a gang-related murder occurred in our vicinity. In less than twenty-four hours, a vigil was coordinated around the crime scene by a group of Christians who live in my neighborhood and who embrace the idea that every human is made in God's image. The news reporters, astounded that these Christians would honor

⁶³ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). 17.

the death of an active “criminal” gang-member who was not even part of their church, asked them why they would honor such a person, and the response was that he was a neighbor, a fellow human being. “We carry a burden for this neighborhood,” one of them shared, “because we know that it's better than this. It's better than the violence. It's better than the death... We see the beauty in the people where others may only see bad.”⁶⁴

People rooted in the notion of *Imago Dei* can thwart misanthropic ideologies.

Second, because the concept of mimetic malformity acknowledges that humans are designed to mimic God but have trouble doing so since God is invisible, it challenges the church to become the tangible space in society where God's presence can become visible. Jesus has bridged the human-divine and spatial-relational separation, and through the Holy Spirit, the church—the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27)—has inherited this role. This implies that the church, namely local churches, must compassionately and authoritatively confront the double bind that characterizes the relationship between the urban context and the criminal justice system, while also creating spaces, either in its congregation or building, for peace-making.

There are many ways the church can engage this task. For example, through strategic forms of community organizing, advocacy work, and policy change, faith-based organizations, like PICO National Network, rally Christians in cities across the nation to confront this kind of double bind.⁶⁵ Some churches, having captured this mission and call to build peace, have collaborated to create spaces for building peace between residents

⁶⁴ Rick Montanez, “Prayer group calling for end to violence after latest Fresno murder,” *ABC Local News Fresno*, 11 June 2015, <http://abc30.com/news/prayer-group-calling-for-end-to-violence-after-latest-fresno-murder/779830/>.

⁶⁵ A lot of the activism that PICO engages is contextual, which makes a great partner for the local church in addressing the patterns of violence in their own context. PICO National Network, 2015, <http://www.piconetwork.org/campaigns>.

and authorities. For about twenty years, a network of churches in Fresno have come together quarterly to engage in a community meal with civic authorities and residents. They call this gathering *No-Name Fellowship* because people “come together as a community without titles,” discussing ways to transform the city.⁶⁶

Third, because there is an emphasis on the fact that humans are responsible for reflecting the divine image, and since Jesus is considered the manifestation of God, the concept of mimetic malformity implicitly challenges Christians to radically imitate Jesus. By conforming themselves to the likeness Jesus (Rom. 8:29), Christians must establish themselves as “images” of God in the palaces of the powerful and in the ghettos of the poor. They must remind people in every sector of society that they are human beings, created for fellowship, challenging rivalry by building peace between those in conflict.

VORP (Victim Offender Reconciliation Program), active in Fresno County and many other places, is one example of this. This organization creates networks between churches and the local justice system in an effort to create spaces for healing and reconciliation, focusing on those affected by crime.⁶⁷ Through the facilitation of a trained mediator, victims and offenders personally interact, discussing the offense and the emotional experience on both sides, negotiating healthy resolutions that bring healing.⁶⁸ Through this process, not only is peace established, but Christians—who tend to be the major pool of volunteers—grow in their identity and mission, reflecting a powerful image

⁶⁶ No-Name Fellowship, 2015, <https://nonamefellowship.wordpress.com/>

⁶⁷ VORP, Victim Offender Reconciliation Program of the Central Valley, Inc., Last modified 2015, <http://vorp.org/>.

⁶⁸ Ibid, see “Agency Description.” Through restorative justice mediation, “the person responsible for the crime is held accountable for their actions and given an opportunity to make things right. Victims have their questions answered and their restitution and emotional needs met. Both parties have a significant voice in how the crime is addressed to meet their unique personal needs and concerns.” Moreover, mediation often involves family members to ensure that “the community takes on the significant civic responsibility of ensuring that justice is done.”

of hope that challenges the patterns of retribution inherent in the culture of urban violence and in the practices of the criminal justice system.

Finally, because the concept of mimetic malformity exposes the reality that the culture of urban violence and the criminal justice system are mimetic doubles, it compels evangelicals to relinquish their approval of institutional retribution and to confront it. Most evangelicals agree that urban violence is sinful, but through the lens of mimetic malformity, it becomes evident that its violence merely resembles the principles of retribution upheld by the criminal justice system. The violence of the former reflects the violence of the latter. Thus the vengeance of one cannot be condemned while the retribution of the other is justified. “Either the principle [of retribution] is just, and justice is therefore inherent in the idea of vengeance, or there is no justice to be found anywhere.”⁶⁹ In other words, the practice of retributive justice is just in every form or sinful in every form; it cannot be just in one place while sinful in another. By supporting one or the other, Christians participate in the double bind, revealing their own sin and mimetic malformity. But Christians are not called to mimetic malformity; they are rather called to “cristo-formity”: that is, to be conformed to the image of Jesus, the reconciler.

As followers of Jesus, therefore, we must change the way we think about the urban context and the criminal justice system. Both mirror each other’s violence. We must abandon the false ways we have been taught to think about humans and embrace what God has said: they are images of God. We must follow Jesus and reflect God’s love, being subversive in our evangelism by prophetically calling people to repentance and reconciliation, with confidence, echoing Saint Paul’s words, “Imitate me as I imitate Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1).

⁶⁹ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*. 17.

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