

**CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER**

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>The Heidelberg Catechism</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>77</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
<b>Text:</b>	<b>Romans 7:13; James 1:13-15</b>		
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**The Plague of Sin**

**Lords Day 44**

**Question 114. But can those who are converted to God perfectly keep these commandments?**

**Answer:** No: but even the holiest men, while in this life, have only a small beginning of this obedience; (a) yet so, that with a sincere resolution they begin to live, not only according to some, but all the commandments of God. (b)

(a) 1 John 1:8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. Rom.7:14 For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. Rom.7:15 For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. Eccl.7:20 For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not. 1 Cor.13:9 For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. (b) Rom.7:22 For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: Ps.1:2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night. James 2:10 For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.

**Question 115. Why will God then have the ten commandments so strictly preached, since no man in this life can keep them?**

**Answer:** First, that all our lifetime we may learn more and more to know (a) our sinful nature, and thus become the more earnest in seeking the remission of sin, and righteousness in Christ; (b) likewise, that we constantly endeavour and pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, that we may become more and more conformable to the image of God, till we arrive at the perfection proposed to us, in a life to come. (c)

(a) Rom.3:20 Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. 1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Ps.32:5 I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. Selah. (b) Matt.5:6 Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Rom.7:24 O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? Rom.7:25 I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin. (c) 1 Cor.9:24 Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. Philip.3:11 If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. Philip.3:12 Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Philip.3:13 Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, Philip.3:14 I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

*Honesty before God* What a strange statement – does He not know everything there is to know about us? Indeed he does but like prayer, we are not informing God about things He is unaware. Rather we are

acknowledging and unmasking ourselves before Him (cf. Hebrews 4:13). This honesty is necessary. As A.W. Pink has written, “The inward experience of a believer consists largely of growing discoveries of his own vileness and of God’s goodness, of his own excuseless failures and of God’s infinite forbearance, with a frequent alternation between gloom and joy, confession and thanksgiving.”<sup>1</sup> Phrases such as “nobody’s perfect” and “to err is human” are often used to excuse our moral failures. It is another way of minimizing our sin. David Wells observes, “The disappearance of sin in the modern world is not, of course, an actual disappearance. It is not sin that has vanished... What has been lost is our capacity to understand our life as being sinful.” So what has happened? We should begin by noting that this is not a problem of recent vintage. “By 1900,” Andrew Delbanco writes, “it was impossible to reattach the word ‘sin’ to its original sense, because the target of the violation – God – was gone.” He had ceased to be a reality to be reckoned with in the culture. Churches nevertheless continued to use the word, but in the windowless world in which the language was heard, it ceased to have meaning. Its use created the same kind of dilemma that a promissory note might today where the financial accounts of the person making the promise are discovered to be empty. The promissory situation has continued down to the present. While we deplore the fracturing of life, its robberies, and rapes, its abuses and cruelties, its assaults and catastrophes, we can no longer measure its darkness in the presence of God. All we do is weep. We cannot make confession. There is no one to whom to confess. We cannot bring our sin before God, because he is gone. In our failures, we are not able to penetrate the real character of our sin, because we cannot take its measure, see its nature, in relation to God. We cannot say, as did David after his adultery, “Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight, so that thou art justified in thy sentence and blameless in thy judgment” (Psalm 51:4). All we can do is wipe each other’s noses.<sup>2</sup> We need to recognize that sin is first and foremost, transgression of God’s standards, not society’s. The Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q. 14) captured it well. What is sin? A. Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God (I John 3:4).

The church-growth crowd long ago dispensed with the subject of sin because it was not very “user-friendly,” as John MacArthur pointed out, “An entire generation of believers is now virtually ignorant about sin. When they hear *any* mention of sin, they think it is harsh, unloving, ungracious. The trends toward user-friendly churches and seeker-sensitive ministry have only heightened this problem.”<sup>3</sup> Finally, theologians identified with “The Evangelical Mega-Shift” (Open-View Theism) have jettisoned not only classical theism, but as a consequence the doctrine of sin as well.<sup>4</sup> But as Scottish Evangelical theologian Donald Macleod has rightly noted, “The doctrine of sin is hardly the most attractive or popular of Christian tenets and yet as far as religion goes it is utterly fundamental. Unless we understand sin and its solemnity and the damage it has done to our human existence, we cannot hope to appreciate Evangelical doctrines as the Cross and the Person of Christ. Religion begins with a sense of sin because it is in conviction of sin that all perception of God’s Word and of the glory of Christ have their origin.”<sup>5</sup> The late British New Testament scholar Donald Guthrie wrote, “Undoubtedly of all the New Testament writers, Paul approaches nearest to working out what might be called a theology of sin.”<sup>6</sup> In 7:13, Paul uses the expression *KATH’ HYPERBOLEN HAMARTOLOS* that has been translated “utterly sinful” or “thoroughly sinful” or “exceedingly sinful.” The word *HYPERBOLEN* is used eight times in the New Testament and only by Paul (we derive our English word “hyperbole” directly from this Greek word.)<sup>7</sup>

## I. CONCEPTS OF SIN

As with so many other of Paul’s concepts, a wide variety of words are used to describe the nature of sin. We need to note these terms, but Paul’s doctrine of sin has a broader basis than his use of terminology. Indeed, the terminology gives only the general drift of his ideas, which are more fully explored in other ways. The word *HAMARTIA* is the general word for sinful acts and is used both in the plural and the singular. When used in the plural it frequently occurs in Old Testament citations (as e.g. Romans 4:7; 11:27; cf. also I Thessalonians 2:16 and I Corinthians 15:17). It also occurs in several statements linking Christ’s death with man’s sin as in the kerygmatic passage in I Corinthians 15:3. Where the phrase “remission of sins” is used by Paul (as in Colossians 1:14), or the idea of deliverance from sins (as in Galatians 1:4), the plural *HAMARTIAI* expresses the general accumulation of sins (cf. also Ephesians 2:1). When the word is used in the singular, it almost always describes not an individual act of sin, *but a state of sinfulness*. Hence Paul can speak of the power of sin (Romans 3:9), knowledge of sin (Romans

3:20), increase in sin (Romans 5:20), slaves of sin (Romans 6:16), wages of sin (Romans 6:23). With so great a variety of uses for the word it will be necessary to attempt some kind of classification of Paul's ideas. In addition to this general word for sin, Paul uses four others, which convey specific aspects of this doctrine. One is a derived form (HAMARTEMA), which means practically the same thing (cf. Romans 3:25; I Corinthians 6:18). Other words, however, have their own particular sense. One represents a trespass (PARAPTOMA), a word that means a false step in contrast to a true one. Examples of the use of this term are Romans 4:25 and Galatians 6:1. In one instance it is used linked with sins (i.e. HAMARTIAI), Ephesians 2:1, in which it gives a specific edge to the more general word. Another term, PARABASIS, conveys the idea of a stepping aside, i.e. a deviation from the true path, usually translated "transgression" (cf. Romans 2:23; 4:15; Galatians 3:19). Somewhat allied to this idea is the word ANOMIA, which means lawlessness or iniquity (e.g. II Corinthians 6:14; II Thessalonians 2:3). Common to all these words is the notion of failure to match up to what is required. In the Pauline epistles particularly, all the phases of sin are seen against righteousness (DIKAIOSYNE), which is not only the aim of salvation, but is also seen to be the original pattern.

- A. *Sin as debt.* We come now to think of the various aspects of sin, which find expression in Paul's letters, and we begin with the idea of debt. The idea of sin as debt implies a binding obligation on the one who has incurred the debt. The great medieval theologian Anselm developed this aspect of the atonement in his classic work *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Became Man). The very fact that much is made of the forgiveness of sins (APHESIS) (cf. Colossians 1:14; Ephesians 1:7) shows a sense of man's obligation, which he himself could not meet. In one passage, Colossians 2:14, Paul uses a word (CHEIROGRAPHON), which may refer to a "certificate of indebtedness." Paul is representing God as cancelling our debts through Christ.
- B. *Sin as deviation.* If we note the occasions when Paul uses the word PARABASIS (five times), we gain some impression of sin as a swerving from a straight path. Romans 2:23 makes clear that the Jews transgressed through breaking the law. The law had set a standard and the Jewish people had fallen short. Earlier in the same passage Paul had maintained that in some sense even Gentiles were conscious of a law which served as a standard by which the conscience could either accuse or excuse (Romans 2:14, 15). Indeed, so essential is a standard by which to judge, that Paul can say in Romans 4:15 that, "where there is no law there is no transgression" (cf. I John 3:4). This particular view of sin makes no sense unless there is a recognized objective standard by which the deviation can be measured. At the same time, the word is used of Adam's transgression (Romans 5:14), which was occasioned by a refusal to obey a divine prohibition. The same is said of Eve's sin (I Timothy 2:14). It was, therefore, as much a deviation from moral duty as a failure to observe the Mosaic Law. All the law could do in any case was to identify the transgressions (cf. Galatians 3:19). It could do nothing to check them.
- C. *Sin as lawlessness.* If sin is a deviation from a known path, it can degenerate into an attitude of lawlessness, as is seen especially in the use of ANOMIA. In Romans 6:19, Paul reminds his Christian readers that they once yielded their members to impurity and greater and greater iniquity (ANOMIA), as if it had an accumulating effect. Lawlessness leads to rebellion. In II Corinthians 6:14, ANOMIA is directly contrasted with righteousness, which is linked with the idea that believers are the temple of the living God. Anything, which contravenes God's rights, is lawlessness or iniquity. This idea of rebellion is brought out in various ways. In Romans 11:30, the Gentiles are declared to be "disobedient to God." Those who follow the prince of the power of the air are called "sons of disobedience" in Ephesians 2:2 (cf. Also Ephesians 5:6; Colossians 3:6, in some ancient texts). The cleavage between Christians and non-Christians in Paul's view is the difference between obedience and disobedience to God's demands. The best of men who are living according to their own efforts fall far short of the requirements of God. It is taken as axiomatic that men ought to obey the gospel, and those who fail to do so class themselves among the children of disobedience.

Iniquity or lawlessness is a habit of mind from which we can be released only through Christ's act of redemption (Titus 2:14).

- D. *Sin as both external acts and internal attitudes.* Paul shares with the contemporary Hellenistic world a fondness for producing lists of sins, in which there is a mixture of both acts and attitudes. This shows the breadth of his interpretation of sin. The list in Romans 1:29-31 well illustrates the external and internal combination. Some items in the list are acts which can be objectively verified, such as murder, strife, gossiping. But others like envy, foolishness, faithlessness, heartlessness, ruthlessness, are attitudes rather than acts, although they undoubtedly found expression in acts. Other lists of a similar kind are to be found in Romans 13:13; I Corinthians 5:10f.; 6:9f.; II Corinthians 12:20f.; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 4:31; 5:3-5; Colossians 3:5-8; I Timothy 1:9f.; II Timothy 3:2ff.; Titus 3:3. It is abundantly clear that Paul wished to show the true nature of sin in specific terms. He was also concerned to demonstrate that no essential difference existed between the wide range of sins stretching from extreme criminal acts like murder to attitudes of mind like jealousy or hatred. This clearly shows that for him, sin was interpreted far more widely than in merely forensic terms. The inward nature of sin may not always be easily detected by man, but God knows and judges the inward desire as well as the outward act. It is because of this that he pours out his wrath (Colossians 3:6). The slaves of sin are contrasted with the slaves of obedience, which suggests that here also sin is thought of in terms of deliberate disobedience to God. In the same vein is Paul's exhortation to Christians not to let sin reign over them (Romans 6:12, 14). For the believer, sin ceases to have any rights, and if it continues to exert dominion, it must be regarded as a usurper. In this sense sin seems to be personified, as it is in other cases to be considered below.
- E. *Sin as falsehood.* Although there is not in Paul the same sharp antithesis between truth and error as in the Johannine writings, it is nonetheless present. In Romans 1:18, wickedness is defined in terms of suppression of the truth. Many Evangelicals today (especially those associated with The Emergent Church) have bought into the post-modern concept of the truth. One chronicler of postmodernism, Walter Truett Anderson, explains it this way: "Post-modernity challenges the view that the truth is – as Isaiah Berlin put it – one and undivided, the same for all men everywhere at all times. The newer view regards any truth as socially constructed, contingent, inseparable from the particular needs and preferences of certain people in a certain time and place. This notion has many implications – it leaves no value, custom, belief, or eternal verity totally untouched."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the wicked have exchanged the truth about God for a lie and have worshipped the creature rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25). When speaking of the putting off of the old nature, Paul draws special attention to the putting away of falsehood (Ephesians 4:25). In the prediction of the coming of the lawless one, he points out how easily some will be deceived "because they refused to love the truth" (II Thessalonians 2:10). Indeed God sends them a strong delusion to make them believe what is false (II Thessalonians 2:11-12).
- F. *Sin personified.* When Paul personifies sin, he draws vivid attention to its dangerous qualities. This comes out strongly in the passage in Romans 7, although it also occurs elsewhere. We have already noted sin portrayed as a tyrant. In addition, sin pays wages, i.e. death (Romans 6:23). Paul can speak of the body as if it had become the possession of sin (Romans 6:6). Sin in the singular is therefore a more potent factor than acts of sin. In fact, the distinction is between sinfulness as an active principle and sin as a specific act against a known standard. In Romans 7:8, Paul speaks on sin finding opportunity in the commandment, as if sin were scheming to take advantage in order to produce "covetousness." The commandment awakened desire for mental acts of sinfulness. In addition, sin works death in man (Romans 7:11, 13). Since sin deceives, it effects death while purporting to give life. The further expression "sold under sin" (Romans 7:14) shows in a commercial role, exploiting its dupes. The apostle is deeply conscious of the power of sin. He mentions almost incidentally in I

Corinthians 15:56 that the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. In Romans 7:17, he seems to set the power of sin over against the importance of the self.

**CONCLUSION:** John Piper recently wrote, "The human heart hates a vacuum. We never merely leave God because we value him little; we always exchange God for what we value more.

"We see this in Romans 1:22-23: 'Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images.' They became fools. This is the ultimate foolishness. This is the most foundational meaning of sin: exchanging the glory of the immortal God for substitutes – anything we value more than God. We look at the Creator and then exchange him for something he created.

"Underneath all the misuses of money, sex, and power is this sinful heart-condition – this depravity. My definition of sin is this: any feeling or thought or action that comes from a heart that does not treasure God over all other things. The bottom of sin, the root of all sins, is such a heart – a heart prefers anything above God; a heart that doesn't treasure God over everything else, and everyone else.

"Sin is the deepest, strongest, and most pervasive problem in the human race. In fact, once Paul has made clear the essence or root of sin (Romans 1-2), he goes on to make clear in the following chapters the magnitude of its power in us. He speaks of sin reigning like a king in death (5:21); holding dominion like a lord (6:14); enslaving like a slavemaster (6:6, 16-17, 20) to whom we've been sold (7:14); as a force that produces other sins (7:8); as a power that seizes the law and kills (7:11); as a hostile occupying tenant who dwells in us (7:17, 20); and as a law that takes us captive (7:23).

"Against this bleak description of the root of our problem when handling of money, sex, and power, what also becomes clear is that this distortion of our souls isn't what we were made to be. We were meant to know God and to glorify and thank him (Romans 1:19-21). We were meant to see him and, by seeing him, reflect his beauty. We were meant to do that not by exchanging him for something, but by preferring him over everything. We were to glorify God by treasuring him over all treasures, enjoying him over all pleasures, desiring him over all desires, prizing him over all prizes, wanting him over all wants.

"This deep, strong, pervasive reality of sin in us defines us until we are born again. That miracle must happen, or the deep antagonism toward God will go on controlling and directing us forever. Jesus put it this way: 'That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, "You must be born again"' (John 3:6-7). By virtue of our first birth, we are merely flesh – devoid of God's Spirit and life. But when we're 'born of the Spirit,' God's Spirit gives us spiritual life and moves into us, and we have life in him forever.

"That life comes with the light of truth. 'Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life"' (John 8:12). Eternal life and true light are always together. We 'live in the light' when the Spirit gives us life.

"To underline the serious bondage we're in before this new birth, Paul goes on to say, 'Nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh' (Romans 7:18). What we are apart from new birth – new creation by the Spirit of God because of Christ – is the embodiment of resistance to God. 'The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot' (8:7). Why can't it? Because it doesn't want to. We disapprove of God as supreme (1:28). We exchange him, because we prefer other things more.

"So we must lay to rest forever the notion that sin is mainly what we *do*. It's not: it is mainly who we *are* – until we are a new creature in Christ. And even then, it's an ever-present, indwelling enemy to be put to death every day by the Spirit (7:17, 20, 23; 8:13).

"Before Christ, sin isn't an alien power in us. Sin is our preference for anything over God. Sin is our disapproval of God. Sin is our exchange of his glory for substitutes. Sin is our suppression of his truth. Sin is our heart's hostility to him. It's who we are to the bottom of our hearts. Until Christ.

"The mark of the true Christian isn't that sin never gets the upper hand – not that our desires are flawlessly Godward. The mark of the Christian is that at the root of our lives is this new treasuring of Christ over all things. He has assumed a place in our hearts that pulls us back again and again to renew our devotion to him as supreme. Christians have discovered that the indwelling Spirit magnifies the worth of Jesus above all things, and moves us to repentance when we fail to feel that worth as we ought. 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' (I John 1:9)."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A.W. Pink, *The Life of David II* (rpt. Reiner Publications, 1974), p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> As cited by D.F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Eerdmans, 1998), p. 181.

<sup>3</sup> J. MacArthur, *The Vanishing Conscience* (Word, 1994), p. 204.

<sup>4</sup> Clark Pinnock and Robert Brow contend that the traditional understanding of sin being a violation of God's Law – (disobedience) is a legal and thus an inadequate framework for understanding the human problem. Rather, they argue, sin should be understood relationally i.e., sin is seen as spurning the love of God and frustrating God's purpose for a relationship. Cf. *Unbounded Love: A Good News Theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (IVP, 1994), pp. 57-66. Pinnock and Brow are committed to a radical form of Arminianism that is closer to Pelagianism than Arminianism. Pinnock and Brow despise all things Reformed so render themselves all the more malnourished. The great Reformed theologian John Murray could have helped them, but they are blind to the light from this source. Murray wrote, "The law that sin violates is the law of God. The categorical imperative binds, demands and commands because it proceeds from the authority of God, and the authority of God inheres in his being and nature as God. The law of God is simply the expression or transcript of his moral perfection for the regulation of thought and life consonant with his perfection. It is not the law of cosmos, nor the law of reason; it is the law that expresses the nature and will of the supreme personality who has authority over us and propriety in us, to whom we owe complete submission and absolute devotion. We are bound to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and strength and mind, and such love is the fulfilling of the law. Herein appears the perverseness of the idea that the moral law may be abrogated and is superseded by love. Law for us is the correlate of the nature of God, in us and to us the correlate of the divine perfection. Love is the fulfilling of the law. But love is not an autonomous, self-instructing and self-directing principle. Love does not excogitate the norms by which it is regulated. Love fulfills the law but love itself is not the law. Sin is therefore the violation of the law which love fulfills. Abrogate law and we abrogate sin, and we make love an emotion abstracted from all activity and meaning. Sin is ANOMIA and because so it is CULPA, blame and blameworthy. The law of God extends to all relations of life. This is so because we are never removed from the obligation to love and serve God. We are amoral. We owe devotion to God in every phase and department of life. It is this principle of all-inclusive obligations to God, and of the all-pervasive relevance of the law of God, that gives sanctity to all of our obligations and relations." *Collected Writings II* (Banner of Truth, 1977), p. 78.

<sup>5</sup> D. Macleod, *A Faith to Live By: Christian Teaching That Makes a Difference* (Mentor Books, 1998), p. 78.

<sup>6</sup> D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (IVP, 1981), p. 200. I have adopted and modified the following section from Guthrie, pp. 200-208.

<sup>7</sup> "Sin," wrote the Puritan Thomas Goodwin, "it is so evil, as it cannot have a worse epithet given it than itself; and therefore the apostle, when he would speak his worst of it, and wind up his expression highest, USQUE AD HYPERBOLEM, calls it by its own name, sinful sin, HAMARTOLOS HAMATIA, Rom. 7:13, that as in God being the greatest good, QUICQUID EST IN DEO EST DEUS IPSE, therefore his attributes and names are but himself, IDEM PRAEDICATUR DE SEIPSO; so it is with sin, QUICQUID EST IN PECCATO, PECCATUM EST, &C., he can call it no worse than by its own name, 'sinful sin.'" *The Works of Thomas Goodwin IV* (rpt. Tanski Publications, 1996), p. 158.

<sup>8</sup> As cited by Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (IVP, 2000), p. 20. Groothuis goes on to add, "Truth decay insinuates itself even into churches, seminaries and Christian colleges. During a somewhat heated debate on the nature of truth at a conference on postmodernism at which I had spoken, a man who teaches philosophy at a Christian college told me that objective knowledge is impossible and that he rejects the claim that our ideas can correspond to an external reality. When I asked him if the law of gravity would be true if no one were on earth at the time, he replied, 'No. Truth is limited to our language.'" Philip Kenneson, a professor at a Milligan college (an Evangelical institution), also propounds that notion that "there is no such thing as objective truth, and it's a good thing, too." Cf. his chapter by that title in *Christian Apologetics In the Postmodern World* eds. T.R. Phillips and D.L. Okholm (IVP, 1995). William Willimon, another self-proclaimed Evangelical stated in an article in *Christianity Today* (March 4, 1996) that "Christians who argue for the 'objective' truth of Jesus are making a tactical error," because, "Jesus did not arrive among us enunciating a set of propositions that we are to affirm."

<sup>9</sup> John Piper, *Your Sin Is Not What You Think*, DesiringGod.com (May 18, 2016).