

This is an excerpt from the article written by Father Richard Losch, Rector of St James' Parish, Livingston, Alabama, which appeared in the Summer 2010 issue of "The Anglican Digest."

Commonly Misunderstood Christian Terms

In all areas of interest there are a large number of words and phrases that are misused, and religion probably has the majority of them. These are a few that particularly peeve me.

Original Sin

Original sin is a doctrine that some Protestants rejected at the Reformation. I often hear it used to mean the first sin, that of Adam and Eve when they ate the forbidden fruit. While Biblical literalists may consider this the origin of mankind's sinfulness, this is not what Original Sin means.

Another seriously incorrect interpretation of Original Sin is that each of us was conceived in sin because we were conceived sexually. Sex has absolutely nothing to do with Original Sin. The Christian Faith does teach that sexual intimacy belongs only within the context of monogamous heterosexual marriage; and that sex outside this context is immoral. It is a beautiful thing, however, and was created by God as the deepest possible expression of love. As such it can be sinful only when it is abused.

In man's character there is a basic flaw called concupiscence that leads him to sin. There is a point—"the age of discretion"—at which he is capable of understanding that certain things are right or wrong not just because they are rewarded or punished, but because they are objectively right or wrong. Because of concupiscence, the basic flaw in human character, as soon as a child is capable of sin he will from time to time consciously choose to sin. That flaw we call Original Sin.

God does not condemn us for a flaw that we did not choose and which we cannot voluntarily remove. We can choose to resist sin, but because of Original Sin we cannot be free of temptation. The Sacrament of Holy Baptism removes from us the responsibility for Original Sin. When we are Baptised we are no longer responsible for the fact that we sin, but only for the sins that we actually commit. Thus Baptism frees us from Original Sin.

The doctrine of Original Sin was rejected by many Protestant reformers because it teaches that human nature is essentially good, but is corrupted. They taught that human nature is essentially evil [e.g. Calvin's "Total Depravity of Man"]. This is the opposite of the teaching of the Catholic Churches (including ours), which teach that as a creature of God, man is essentially good but has a broken relationship with God.

The Immaculate Conception

Especially during the Christmas season, we hear people speak of the “Immaculate Conception of Jesus,” referring to the teaching that the Holy Spirit descended upon the Virgin Mary and brought about the conception of Jesus in her womb. There is no such thing as the Immaculate Conception of Jesus. What people mean when they use the phrase in that context is the miraculous conception of Jesus, that the Incarnate Son of God was conceived in the womb of a virgin.

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception refers to Mary, not to Jesus. Early Christians, recognizing that Jesus was not only human but also divine, believed that it was inappropriate for the divine Son of God to be born of a woman who was flawed with Original Sin. Baptism, the Sacrament that frees us from Original Sin, would not be instituted until decades later by Jesus. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception teaches that in order to make her a worthy vessel to bear the Son of God, the Holy Spirit granted Mary the grace of Baptism at the moment she was conceived in the womb of her mother St Anne.

Christians have believed the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary since the earliest times. In 2005 the official Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) issued a joint Agreed Statement on all the Marian doctrines including the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. Historically Protestants have rejected it, in most cases because they reject its basic premise, Original Sin, but many Muslims accept it.*

Mary, Mother of God

This phrase sets many Protestants to screaming and tearing their hair, primarily because they misunderstand the term. “How can the Creator of all things have a mother?” they cry. The answer is simple—He doesn’t. Mary is not the mother of God the Holy Trinity or even of God the Son. She is the mother of Jesus Christ, who is the incarnation of God the Son. The term becomes quite reasonable if we accept a couple of simple lemmas: Mary is the mother of Jesus; Jesus is God; therefore Mary is the Mother of God—not of the Almighty Deity, but of His incarnation, the human being whom He became for our salvation.

In A.D. 431 the Council of Ephesus identified Mary as *Theotokos*, literally “God-bearer.” In the Western tradition this is more often translated “Mother of God.” This represented the almost universal belief of the undivided Church at that time.

Most Christian church bodies venerate the Blessed Virgin—any concept of worship of her is universally condemned as heretical. She is the greatest of the Saints, but she is not divine. Theologically the terms are *dulia* and *latria*. *Dulia* is honor and veneration, such as is afforded all the Saints; *latria* is the worship that is afforded only to God. The Anglican, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Old Catholic Churches place a greater emphasis on veneration of Mary than do the Protestant bodies, but all honor her as the vessel chosen to bear the Incarnate Son of God.

* Muslims venerate Jesus (Isa) as the second greatest prophet, behind only Muhammad. They also revere Mary (Miriam) as the virgin mother of Jesus (Qur’an 19.16ff).