

THE BLASPHEMY AGAINST THE HOLY SPIRIT¹

by
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In Matthew 12:31, Jesus says, “Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven.”³ This sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is commonly called the unpardonable sin. In Mark’s account of this same incident, Jesus says, “Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin” (3:29). What is this terrible sin from which there can be no redemption? This essay will attempt to decide that question while at the same time examining most of the solutions that have been proposed.⁴

HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

This section will attempt to survey the history of interpretation of the unpardonable sin in the Gospels. Though it is not possible to deal with everyone who has ever written on this subject, it is helpful to chronicle, where possible, the origin of different interpretations, as well as subsequent development and modification.

¹This essay is dedicated to my colleague of twenty-one years, Dr. Rolland D. McCune. I believe Dr. McCune was largely responsible for bringing me to Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary in 1983, and I have worked for him most of those years in which he served as the Seminary’s Dean, and later, President. But my greater appreciation for him is as a teacher and scholar of theology. He has taught me much over the years and strengthened my own convictions in many areas. Though we are happy to celebrate his seventieth birthday, I pray the Lord will give him many more years of effective ministry.

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³Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the NASB, 1995 edition.

⁴It is not possible to discuss all the interpretations of the sin since some are quite illogical and not worthy of serious consideration. For instance, an Adventist evangelist named D. E. Venden taught that refusal to observe Saturday as the Sabbath was the unpardonable sin (J. K. VanBaalen, *The Chaos of the Cults*, 4th ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962], p. 253).

Early Church

The various viewpoints expressed in the early church concerning the unpardonable sin can generally be subsumed in one of the following three categories.

Nonspecific Views

A number of church Fathers make only passing reference to the unpardonable sin. They may offer no explanation as to the nature of the sin; or, if they do, it is often so brief as to raise as many questions as it answers. Therefore, it seems best to place them in this category.

Possibly the earliest reference to the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is found in the *Didache*: “Also, do not test or evaluate any prophet who speaks in the spirit, for every sin will be forgiven, but this sin will not be forgiven.”⁵ Apparently, the Didachist connects the blasphemy against the Spirit with trying or judging prophets because prophecy is a function of the Spirit. However, the Didachist’s interpretation of Matthew 12:32 may be another example of reading his own meaning into the Gospel texts, a practice for which he is known to be guilty.⁶

Irenaeus (c. 130–c. 200) seems to connect the sin with a denial of the gift of prophecy, possibly similar to the *Didache*.⁷ However, Irenaeus may have considered any heretical teaching concerning the Holy Spirit to be unpardonable sin, as is the case with some later writers.

Tertullian (c. 160–c. 225) does not discuss the sin except to say that both Hymenaeus and Alexander in 1 Timothy 1:20 had committed it.⁸

Both Cyprian, bishop of Carthage from 248 to 258, and his opponent Novatian, a leading presbyter in the church at Rome during this period, connect the sin with a denial of the Christian faith, though the details are unclear.⁹ Novatian apparently believed that all those who had abandoned the Christian faith during the Decian persecution had committed the sin, while Cyprian rejected this extreme view.

⁵*Didache* 11.7, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2nd ed., trans. J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, ed. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), p. 156. Though the dating of the *Didache* is debated, most scholars seem to favor a date in the first or early second century (ibid., p. 146).

⁶I. Howard Marshall, “Hard Sayings—VII,” *Theology* 67 (February 1964): 66.

⁷*Against Heresies* 3.11.9.

⁸*On Modesty* 13.

⁹Cyprian’s view can be found in his *Treatises* 12.3.28. For Novatian’s view, see Jerome, *Letters* 42.1, 2.

Origen (c. 185–c. 254) does not identify the exact nature of the sin. However, he does insist that it can only be committed after salvation (baptism).¹⁰ This concept that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is a post-baptismal sin was apparently a popular interpretation among patristic writers after Origen.

A Generalized Sin

It appears that most of the patristic writers who do discuss the nature of the unpardonable sin in the Gospels take a more general approach to it. The tendency is to include a number of specific acts under the heading of blasphemy against the Spirit, any one of which would constitute violation of the sin. Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 315–c. 387), for example, says, “A man must often fear to say, either from ignorance or assumed reverence, what is improper about the Holy Spirit, and thereby come under this condemnation.”¹¹ Thus, according to Cyril, the sin is of a general nature and would include saying anything improper about the Holy Spirit. This same approach is followed by Basil (c. 330–79),¹² Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330–c. 395),¹³ and Ambrose (c. 339–97).¹⁴ For this group, almost any false assertion about the person of the Holy Spirit would be tantamount to blasphemy against the Spirit and thus render one guilty of the unpardonable sin.

A Specific Sin

Several Fathers understand the sin in a very specific sense. Interestingly, writers in this category generally offer the most detailed analysis of the sin.

In his homily on Matthew, Chrysostom (c. 347–407) asserts that the blasphemy against the Spirit was committed by Jews who said that Jesus cast out demons by the power of Satan.¹⁵ Chrysostom’s interpretation has usually been understood to mean that the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit could only be committed while Christ was on earth.¹⁶

¹⁰*Commentary on John 2.6.*

¹¹*Catecheses* 16.1. in vol. 2 of *The Works of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem*, trans. Leo P. McCauley and Anthony A. Stephenson, Fathers of the Church, ed. Bernard M. Peebles et al. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1970), p. 76.

¹²See his *Letter* 188.1; 251.4; and *The Morals* 35.1.

¹³See his *On the Holy Spirit*.

¹⁴See his *Concerning Repentance* 2.4.20–25; and *On the Holy Spirit* 1.3.54.

¹⁵*The Gospel of Matthew* 41.5.

¹⁶E.g., L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), p. 252.

Although Chrysostom does not actually make such a statement, it may be an accurate assessment of his view since he does not warn his audience to avoid committing this sin. He makes several admonitions to his audience, but none of them warns against the blasphemy against the Spirit.

Jerome (c. 345–420) seems to have held a similar view.¹⁷ He rejects the view of Novatian that those who deny their own Christian faith have committed the sin. Instead, Jerome argues, “It is obvious then, that this sin involves blasphemy, calling one Beelzebub for his actions, whose virtues prove him to be God.”¹⁸ It is difficult to determine if Jerome believed the sin could still be committed after the time of Christ since he does not address that point directly.

Athanasius (c. 296–373) believed that the sin against the Holy Spirit was not really against the Holy Spirit at all. He argued that the reference to the Holy Spirit actually designated the deity of Christ. To blaspheme the Son of Man (the humanity of Christ) was forgivable but to blaspheme the Holy Spirit (the deity of Christ) was not.¹⁹

Augustine (354–430), of all the writers in the early church, gives the fullest and most detailed analysis of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. He references it in several works, but his fullest treatment of the subject is found in his sermon on Matthew 12:32.²⁰ Augustine reasons that many people who blaspheme the Holy Spirit, in the sense of making false, improper, or sacrilegious statements about his person or work, later come to be forgiven and become part of the church, so obviously this cannot be what the Lord had reference to in Matthew 12:32. Thus the blasphemy against the Spirit in Matthew 12:32 must be a special kind of blasphemy. And since all sins are forgiven when one receives the gift of the Holy Spirit in salvation, the blasphemy against the Spirit for which there is no forgiveness must be impenitence, an unwillingness to repent and be forgiven. However, because one may still repent as long as he still lives, the blasphemy against the Spirit may be more properly defined as impenitence persisted in to the end of one’s life.²¹

¹⁷*Letters* 42.1, 2.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 42.2, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Ware, 2nd series, 14 vols. (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 6:56.

¹⁹*Letter to Serapion* 4.17, in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J. Migne, 26:664A.

²⁰*Sermons on New Testament Lessons* 21.

²¹*Ibid.* 21.21.

Summary

In the early church there was no consensus as to the meaning of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Some followed the lead of Origen and held that only Christians could commit the sin while others, like Augustine, made the sin only applicable to unbelievers. The view of Augustine became dominant in the Roman Catholic Church, but the other interpretations did not die out. Many of the theories that surfaced in the early church to explain the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit are still being argued today.

Middle Ages

The Middle Ages were not a time of detailed exposition of Scripture. Most of the work in this period was a clarification and development of the earlier Fathers. This is especially true of Scholasticism, which was dominant from the eleventh to fourteenth centuries. Two representatives of that system, Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas, illustrate the most important developments in the interpretation of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

Peter Lombard (c. 1100–60)

Lombard has been called the “father of systematic theology in the Catholic Church.”²² His *Four Books of Sentences* (*Libri Quatuor Sententiarum*) became the standard theological textbook until the seventeenth century. He did not deny the view of Augustine that final impenitence is *a* sin against the Holy Spirit; however, it was not, in his view, the only unpardonable sin against the Spirit. Like other medieval theologians, Lombard divided all sin into three categories: ignorance, weakness or passion, and deliberate malice (*certa malitia*).²³ Thus, he argued that the sin against the Holy Spirit is really a genus or category of sin of which Augustine’s final impenitence is only a species. Any sin committed through determined malice is sin against the Holy Spirit. In this category Lombard lists six unforgivable sins: despair, presumption, impenitence, obstinacy, resisting the known truth, and envy of another’s spiritual good.²⁴ None of these sins is in an absolute sense unpardonable but can be considered in that genus because they put such an obstacle in the way of forgiveness that it is often unattainable.

²²Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 5:631.

²³*Four Books of Sentences* 2.42.

²⁴*Ibid.*

Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–74)

The greatest Scholastic philosopher and theologian was Thomas Aquinas, who came on the scene a century after Peter Lombard. In his greatest work, *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas recognized three legitimate uses of the concept of sin against the Holy Spirit.²⁵ First, there was the sin of the Jews who ascribed to Satan the work that Christ did by the Spirit. Second, there is the idea of final impenitence taught by Augustine. Third, there is sin committed through certain malice. Here Aquinas adopts the same six species of sin as Peter Lombard. The first two uses are clearly unpardonable. The third, sin committed through certain malice, puts such an obstacle in the way of forgiveness that it is practically unpardonable. God can, by a miracle, overcome this, but he usually does not.

Summary

Both Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas agreed with Augustine that final impenitence is a sin against the Holy Spirit. However, like other medieval theologians, they extended the concept to include sins committed through deliberate malice. The primary impetus for this seems to have been the prevalent threefold classification of sins as arising from weakness and thus against the Father, or from ignorance and thus against the Son, or from deliberate malice and thus against the Spirit.²⁶

Reformation

With the Protestant Reformation came a renewed interest in the Bible. Numerous exegetical and theological problems, including the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, were reexamined in light of the Scriptures. Luther, Calvin, and Arminius all discussed the problem, and their interpretations had a profound effect upon subsequent interpreters.

Martin Luther (1483–1546)

Like the Scholastics, Luther distinguished between sins of ignorance and those that are committed in deliberate violation of divine truth; and like them, he placed the sin against the Holy Spirit in this latter category. However, it is difficult to determine his exact view (if he had one) since he makes a number of seemingly incompatible statements about the sin in his writings. For example in one of his

²⁵2.2.14.

²⁶*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Sin Against the Holy Spirit," by C. Bernas and P. K. Meagher, 13:248.

replies to Zwingli and Oecolampadius concerning the Lord's Supper, Luther suggests that their refusal to accept his view of the real presence of Christ in the elements was the sin against the Holy Spirit.²⁷ However, this was written in the heat of controversy and, therefore, probably does not reflect Luther's actual view. In his commentary on 1 John 5:16, Luther describes the sin as "obstinacy in wickedness, an assault against the acknowledged truth, and impenitence to the end, of which Matt 13:22 speaks."²⁸ Here Luther includes Augustine's view of final impenitence as part of his own description of the sin. In another place he says that failure to believe in the forgiveness of sins is the sin against the Spirit.²⁹ Luther also preached a sermon on Matthew 12:31–32 in which he says that "sinning against the Holy Spirit is nothing else than blaspheming His work and *office*."³⁰

In spite of these somewhat differing explanations, some scholars have attempted to find a common thread that runs through Luther's statements. Von Loewenich summarizes Luther's view: "Resistance against the mercy of God is the only unpardonable sin."³¹ In a similar vein, Plass describes Luther's view of the sin as the blasphemous defiance of God's grace along with the "malicious rejection of the recognized truth."³² Plass points to the fact that in his sermon on Matthew 12:31–32, Luther says, "It is the nature of this sin against the Holy Ghost to resist what is known to be the plain truth."³³

Whether Luther's seemingly disparate statements about the sin can be harmonized, as Lutheran theologians are wont to do, is unclear. As to the question of whether Christians can commit the sin today, Luther does not explicitly say, though his writings seem to give that impression.³⁴ Later Lutheran theologians have been unanimous in believing that the regenerate can commit it.³⁵

²⁷Robert H. Fischer, ed., *Word and Sacrament*, vol. 3, in vol. 37 of *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961), p. 20.

²⁸Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *The Catholic Epistles*, in vol. 30 of *Luther's Works*, p. 325.

²⁹Theodore Bachmann, ed., *Word and Sacrament*, vol. 1, in vol. 35 of *Luther's Works*, p. 14.

³⁰Edward M. Plass, comp., *What Luther Says*, 3 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 3:1321.

³¹*Luther als Ausleger der Synopiker*, pp. 144–45, quoted in G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin*, trans. Philip C. Holtrop (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 350.

³²Plass, *What Luther Says*, 3:1321.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴Julius Köstlin, *The Theology of Luther*, trans. Charles E. Hay, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1897), 2:468.

³⁵Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and rev. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg,

John Calvin (1509–64)

Calvin rejected Augustine's view of the sin, which Calvin describes as "persistent stubbornness even to death, with distrust of pardon."³⁶ According to Calvin, this view is disproved by Christ's words that the sin is not to be forgiven in this age; and, thus, "either this is said in vain, or the unpardonable sin can be committed within the compass of this life."³⁷

Turning to his own interpretation of the sin, Calvin says that "they sin against the Holy Spirit who, with evil intention, resist God's truth, although by its brightness they are so touched that they cannot claim ignorance. Such resistance alone constitutes this sin."³⁸ Later he adds, "But they whose consciences, though convinced that what they repudiate and impugn is the Word of God, yet cease not to impugn it—these are said to blaspheme against the Spirit, since they strive against the illumination that is the work of the Holy Spirit."³⁹ The reason why the sin is not forgiven is because God hardens the hearts of those who commit the sin so that they never have any desire to repent.⁴⁰ For Calvin, the sin could only be committed by unbelievers.⁴¹ Thus, the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in the Gospels is basically the same sin as apostasy in Hebrews 6:4–6.⁴²

James Arminius (1560–1609)

Like Calvin, Arminius rejected Augustine's view, and for the same reasons. Arminius defines the sin as follows: "The sin against the Holy Ghost is the rejection and refusing of Jesus Christ through determined malice and hatred against Christ, who, through testifying of the Holy Spirit, has been assuredly acknowledged for the Son of God, (or, which is the same thing, the rejection and refusing of the acknowledged universal truth of the gospel,) against conscience and committed for this

1889), pp. 252, 256–57.

³⁶John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford L. Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:617.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid., 1:618.

⁴⁰John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3 vols., trans. William Pringle (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 2:77.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:616–17.

purpose—that a sinner may fulfill and gratify his desire of the apparent good which is by no means necessary, and may reject Christ.”⁴³

Unlike Calvin, Arminius believed the sin could be committed by believers as well as unbelievers.⁴⁴ This he concluded from his interpretation of Hebrews 6, which he held was also speaking of the blasphemy against the Spirit. The reason the sin is unpardonable is because those who commit it do not repent, and the reason they do not repent is because the sin is so heinous to God that he withholds the divine grace necessary for them to repent.⁴⁵

Summary

Luther, Calvin, and Arminius all rejected Augustine’s explanation of the sin against the Holy Spirit. Their own interpretations have much in common. They all agree that it is a sin that can be committed during a person’s life that will leave him without any hope of pardon. As to the nature of the sin, it is primarily a rejection of known truth that has been made clear by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it is not so much a sin against the person of the Spirit, but against his gracious acts. A major difference in their views involves who can commit the sin. Arminius and apparently Luther believed both the regenerate and unregenerate could commit it, while, of course, Calvin denied that genuine believers were capable of the sin. The views of these three men are still seen in Lutheran, Reformed, and Arminian theology today.

Modern Church

Since the Reformation and up until the present day, numerous views of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit have been propounded. Most of these are not new; many are developments and refinements of earlier ideas. Still, the variety of interpretations makes classification somewhat difficult; however, by looking at the views broadly, a four-fold categorization is possible and will be followed in this essay.

Denial of the Sin

The Gospel accounts notwithstanding, a few interpreters seek to deny the idea that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is an unpardonable sin. Rees, for example, believes that the idea of a sin that God will not pardon would mean the “abandonment of man to eternal

⁴³James Arminius, *Writings*, 3 vols., trans. James Nichols and W. R. Bagnall (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956), 2:528–29.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 2:523–24.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 2:531–32.

condemnation” and thus result in the defeat of God.⁴⁶ Since this is unacceptable, he calls the “kenotic theory” into service, suggesting that Christ was incorrect in his pronouncement that this sin was unpardonable.⁴⁷

A different approach is taken by McNeile. He appeals to several Old Testament Scriptures as well as a passage from Philo that, he suggests, show that in “Jewish phraseology serious sin was often spoken of as unpardonable.”⁴⁸ Therefore, Jesus “meant, and would be understood to mean, no more than that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, by those whose power He worked, was a terrible sin—more terrible than blasphemy against man.”⁴⁹

Finally, there are a number of interpreters who simply insist that the statements of Jesus concerning the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit are not authentic.⁵⁰ For various reasons they agree that Jesus could not or did not make any statement about blasphemy against the Spirit being unpardonable. Scrogg’s response is typical: “Whatever the original saying may have been, it can hardly be an authentic utterance of Jesus. The evidence is convincing that Jesus never spoke of the Spirit of God either as being connected with him or with the disciples (church).”⁵¹

⁴⁶*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1939 ed., s.v. “Blasphemy,” T. Rees, 1:486.

⁴⁷*Ibid.* Interestingly, the editors of the 1979 edition of the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* have retained Rees’s article except for the few sentences in which he says Jesus spoke out of ignorance.

⁴⁸Alan H. McNeile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), p. 179.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰Eugene M. Boring, “The Unforgivable Sin Logion Mark III 28–29/Matt XII 31–32/Luke XII 10: Formal Analysis and History of the Tradition,” *Novum Testamentum* 18 (October 1976): 276–77; B. Harvie Branscomb, *The Gospel of Mark*, Moffatt NT Commentary (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1937), p. 74; Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Weaver, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Scribner, 1993), pp. 51, 185, 337; A. J. B. Higgins, *The Son of Man in the Teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1980), p. 89; Arland J. Hultgren, *Jesus and His Adversaries* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979), p. 105; Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew*, trans. David E. Green (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975), p. 285; Robin Scroggs, “The Exaltation of the Spirit by Some Early Christians,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84 (December 1965): 361; H. E. Tödt, *The Son of Man in the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. Dorothea M. Barton (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), p. 119.

⁵¹Scroggs, “The Exaltation of the Spirit,” p. 361.

A Sin Committed at the End of One's Life

Although the view of Augustine became dominant in the Middle Ages, it has clearly lost ground since the Reformation. In fact, it is difficult to find an interpreter in the modern period who *definitely* identifies the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as final impenitence. The few that do are mostly in the Roman Catholic tradition.⁵² However, occasionally one will find a Protestant interpreter who thinks that Augustine was correct.⁵³

A Sin Committed During Jesus' Day

A number of interpreters believe that the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit could only be committed while Jesus was living on earth.⁵⁴ The reason for this is directly related to their understanding of the sin itself. Chafer explains,

It should be noted that this sin against the Holy Spirit consisted in asserting that Christ's works, which were wrought by the Holy Spirit, were accomplished on the contrary by Satan. Such a setting could not be found now since Christ is not in the world as He was then, nor is He undertaking in the same way to do works by the Holy Spirit. It is therefore impossible for this particular sin to be committed today.⁵⁵

Because the sin was limited to the time or *dispensation* that Christ was on earth, this interpretation is often called the dispensational view.⁵⁶ A similar interpretation has been advanced by Broadus. He understands the sin to consist in speaking against the miracle-working power of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁷ Since this miracle-working power was still

⁵²E.g., John P. Meier, *Matthew*, New Testament Message (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1980), pp. 135–36.

⁵³George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (reprint of 1889 ed., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), p. 220.

⁵⁴Lewis S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 7:48; Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), pp. 265–66; Barnard Franklin, "The Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 93 (April–June 1936): 232–33; Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Gospel of Matthew* (reprint ed., Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1961), p. 250; Robert Gromacki, *The Holy Spirit* (Nashville: Word, 1999), p. 133; J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), p. 207; Charles C. Ryrie, *The Holy Spirit*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997), p. 72.

⁵⁵Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 7:48.

⁵⁶While it is true that most of the writers who argue for this view are also proponents of dispensational theology, none of them would actually divide Christ's ministry on earth into a separate dispensation.

⁵⁷John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, An American Commentary on the New Testament (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society,

going on in the apostolic age, the sin could have taken place during this period as well as during the ministry of Christ. Interestingly, John Wesley held a view almost identical to the “dispensational approach.”⁵⁸

An Unpardonable Sin That Can Be Committed Today

By far the largest group of interpreters understands the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit to be a sin that can be committed at some point in an individual’s life and as a result renders that person without any possibility of forgiveness. However, there is disagreement as to the exact nature of the sin and whether it can be committed by believers, unbelievers, or both.

Although he never mentions Athanasius, Albert Barnes has adopted the same view as the early church Father in that he understands the words “Holy Spirit” to refer to the divine nature of Christ.⁵⁹ Therefore, according to Barnes, the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not a sin against the third person of the Trinity but a “blasphemous attack on the Divine power and nature of Christ,” including a denial of his deity.⁶⁰

Many of the interpreters, if not most, from the Reformed camp have followed Calvin and espouse essentially his position—apostasy.⁶¹ An important characteristic of this view is the belief that Hebrews 6:4–6 and 1 John 5:16 are parallel to the blasphemy passages in the Gospels and are speaking of the same sin. Another characteristic is stated by Berkouwer: “The sin against the Spirit is not a particular sin and has no special reference to one of the commandments of God; nor can it be localized in a spectacular form.”⁶² The tendency of this view is to

1886), p. 272.

⁵⁸John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, 10th ed. (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1856), p. 44.

⁵⁹Albert Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes on the New Testament* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1962), p. 59.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 253–54; Berkouwer, *Sin*, pp. 347–49; *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. “Blasphemy,” by R. Laird Harris, p. 98; William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), pp. 528–29; Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 215–16; Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), pp. 608–12; Edwin H. Palmer, *The Person and Ministry of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), pp. 177–86. Others, who would probably not be normally classified as Reformed, also espouse this position. See, e.g., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Sin, Unpardonable,” by Gary M. Burge, p. 1108; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 508–9.

⁶²Berkouwer, *Sin*, pp. 343–44.

interpret the Gospel accounts according to the teaching of Hebrews 6:4–6. Therefore, the emphasis of the sin is upon one's rejection of the clear truth of Scripture that has been made understandable through the work of the Spirit. The advocates of this view deny that this sin can be committed by a genuine believer.

Another group of interpreters holds a view similar to the Reformed one. They also understand the sin as a willful rejection of known truth.⁶³ What distinguishes this group is their confining of the sin to the Gospel passages. They reject any suggestion that Hebrews 6:4–6 and 1 John 5:16 are describing the same sin.

Lutheran interpretations of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit have somewhat in common with the Reformed view. Like the Reformed, the Lutheran interpreters believe that Hebrews 6:4–6 and 1 John 5:16 are dealing with the same sin as the blasphemy passages in the Gospels.⁶⁴ However, there is not as much uniformity with regard to the exact nature of sin. Some, like Pieper, understand the essence of the sin to be the rejection of divine truth of which one has become convinced.⁶⁵ This is, of course, identical to the usual Reformed interpretation. However, others, like Müller, define it as "hatred of whatever is known to be divine and godlike."⁶⁶ The most significant difference between the Lutheran and Reformed views concerns who can commit the sin. While the latter insist only unbelievers can be guilty of the blasphemy against the Spirit, the former insist that it may also be committed by believers. In fact, some Lutherans insist that only genuine believers can commit it.⁶⁷

At least two scholars believe that the essence of the sin is what they call "apostasy."⁶⁸ By this is meant the departure of a genuine believer

⁶³*Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, s.v. "Blasphemy," 1:831; William Dale, "Discussions and Notes on the Unpardonable Sin," *Expository Times* 3 (February 1892): 215–17; Theodore H. Epp, *The Other Comforter* (Lincoln, NE: Back to the Bible Broadcast, 1966), pp. 225–30.

⁶⁴R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1943), p. 483; H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew*, 6th ed., trans. Peter Christie, rev. and ed. Frederick Crombie and William Stewart (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1884), p. 242; Julius Müller, *The Christian Doctrine of Sin*, trans. William Urwick, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1885), 2:423; Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950), 1:571–75.

⁶⁵Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:573.

⁶⁶Müller, *Christian Doctrine of Sin*, 2:422.

⁶⁷E.g., William F. Arndt, *The Gospel According to Luke* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), p. 313.

⁶⁸C. K. Barrett, *Holy Spirit and the Gospel Tradition* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), p. 106; Alan Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament*

from the Christian faith. This definition of apostasy should be distinguished from some Reformed interpreters who also characterize the sin with the term *apostasy* but use it to refer to professing (not genuine) Christians who depart from the faith.

Possibly the most widely held theory as to the nature of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit says that it is the deliberate labeling of good as evil.⁶⁹ As Guthrie explains, “this sin against the Spirit is the deliberate and malicious attempt to deny all true values—to see wrong as right and evil as good.”⁷⁰ This sin is unpardonable because it destroys one’s ability to distinguish between good and evil and thus makes repentance impossible.⁷¹

Several interpreters understand the nature of the sin to be connected with the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit.⁷² Buswell defines it as “the irrevocable rejection of the grace of God in the atoning work of Christ, offered to lost men in the *convicting* work of the Holy Spirit” and adds that the Jews in Mark’s account were guilty of the sin.⁷³ Therefore, it is committed only by unbelievers who over time fail to respond to the stirring of the Spirit.

Another group of interpreters attempt to understand the sin along the same lines as the dispensational view, but yet feel that it can still be

(New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), p. 108.

⁶⁹William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, rev. ed., 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 2:44; A. B. Bruce, “The Synoptic Gospels,” in vol. 1 of *The Expositor’s Greek Testament* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), p. 189; W. N. Clarke, *Commentary on the Gospel of Mark*, An American Commentary on the New Testament (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1881), p. 54; Donald Guthrie, *Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), p. 134; R. H. Malden, *The Promise of the Father* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), p. 202; R. E. Nixon, “Matthew,” in *The New Bible Commentary: Revised*, ed. D. Guthrie and J. A. Motyer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 832; Theodore H. Robinson, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Moffatt NT Commentary (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1928), p. 113; Henry B. Swete, *The Holy Spirit in the New Testament* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964), p. 117; R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), p. 128; Ernest T. Thompson, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Richmond: John Knox, 1954), p. 81.

⁷⁰Guthrie, *Jesus the Messiah*, p. 134.

⁷¹Malden, *Promise of the Father*, p. 202.

⁷²James O. Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963), 2:109; Wilson T. Hogue, *The Holy Spirit: A Study* (Chicago: Free Methodist Publishing House, 1932), p. 386; Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Life Without Limits: The Message of Mark’s Gospel* (Waco, TX: Word, 1975), p. 69; J. Oswald Sanders, *The Holy Spirit of Promise* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1940), p. 135; Ray Summers, *Commentary on Luke* (Waco, TX: Word, 1972), p. 154.

⁷³Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, 2:109.

committed today.⁷⁴ Robertson, for example, says that the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is committed by those who “ridicule the manifest work of God’s Spirit in men’s lives and attribute the Spirit’s work to the devil.”⁷⁵ Thus this view defines the sin as “attributing to Satan what is accomplished by the power of God.”⁷⁶ This view is actually similar to that which says the essence of the sin consists in the labeling of good as evil. However, in this case the good that is labeled as evil is some special work in the lives of men, particularly regeneration and subsequent sanctification.⁷⁷

Besides all of the aforementioned attempts to define the nature of the sin, there are some interpreters who appear to have their own individual views that are sufficiently distinct so as to warrant a separate classification. For example, Cox defines the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as a progressive sinning against one’s own conscience that can be committed by both believers and unbelievers.⁷⁸ Foster, on the other hand, believes that it is “a deliberate, vicious, continuous attack upon Christ and the Holy Spirit.”⁷⁹ It is not worthwhile at this point to make mention of all these unique interpretations.

Summary

As the preceding discussion has shown, there is an enormous diversity of opinion about the interpretation of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit; however, it should be noted that not all of the previously mentioned views are completely incompatible with one another. Some of previously discussed interpretations will be ruled out by the examination of the scriptural data that follows, while others will be addressed more directly later in the essay.

⁷⁴Charles J. Ellicott, ed., “The Gospel According to St. Matthew,” *Ellicott’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* (reprinted in 8 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 6:73; Owen E. Evans, “Expository Problems: The Unforgivable Sin,” *Expository Times* 68 (May 1957): 243; Herschel H. Hobbs, *An Exposition of the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), pp. 154–55; A. T. Robertson, “The Gospel According to Matthew,” *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6 vols. (Nashville: Broadman, 1930), 1:97; John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. 89.

⁷⁵“The Gospel According to Matthew,” 1:97.

⁷⁶Walvoord, *Matthew*, p. 89.

⁷⁷Hobbs, *Matthew*, pp. 154–55.

⁷⁸Samuel Cox, “Sin Against the Holy Spirit,” *Expositor* 3 (May 1882): 327–38.

⁷⁹R. C. Foster, *Studies in the Life of Christ* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971), pp. 554–55.

EXAMINATION OF SCRIPTURAL DATA

Matthew 12:22–32

This passage is part of the public ministry of Jesus Christ, which begins in 4:12. At that time Jesus commenced his ministry in Galilee. As time went on there was growing opposition to Jesus' ministry, and in chapter twelve that opposition became more serious. Matthew records a series of events showing the nature of the Pharisees' hostility toward Jesus. The first involves a controversy over the Sabbath (12:1–21), and the second (12:22–37) is the immediate context for Jesus' saying about the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

The Miracle of Jesus, vv. 22–23

²²Then a demon-possessed man *who was* blind and mute was brought to Jesus, and He healed him, so that the mute man spoke and saw. ²³All the crowds were amazed, and were saying, "This man cannot be the Son of David, can he?"

The incident that ultimately culminated in Jesus' pronouncement about the blasphemy against the Spirit was his healing of a demon-possessed man. This was another of Christ's many sign-miracles. Whitcomb has demonstrated that the primary purpose of Jesus' miracles was "to identify Himself as Israel's true Messiah and to confirm the new revelation He was bringing to the nation (John 20:20–31; Acts 2:22)."⁸⁰ In a similar vein, Warfield points toward the "inseparable connection of miracles with revelation."⁸¹ He goes on to add: "Miracles do not appear on the page of Scripture vagrantly, here, there, and elsewhere indifferently, without assignable reason. They belong to revelation periods, and appear only when God is speaking to His people through accredited messengers, declaring His gracious purposes."⁸²

The miracles of Christ and later of the apostles were for the purpose of authenticating them as God's spokesmen. Thus these signs would no longer be needed after the messengers had brought their message.⁸³ I share the view of Warfield and other cessationists that these sign-miracles were a part of the ministry of Jesus and His apostles but are not occurring today.

The crowd's amazement at Jesus' healing of the man prompted the

⁸⁰John C. Whitcomb, *Does God Want Christians to Perform Miracles Today?* (Winoona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1973), p. 6.

⁸¹Benjamin B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* (reprint ed., London: Banner of Truth, 1972), p. 25.

⁸²*Ibid.*, pp. 25–26.

⁸³Whitcomb, *Does God Want Christians to Perform Miracles Today?* p. 6.

question, “This man cannot be the Son of David, can he?” (μήτι οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱὸς Δαυίδ;). It is generally agreed that a question introduced by μήτι expects a negative answer, as reflected by the NASB translation. This English translation implies considerable doubt on the part of the crowd. However, this may not be true. Robertson suggests that “the shades of negative expectation and surprise vary very greatly. Each context supplies a slightly different tone.”⁸⁴ The translation of the NIV is probably to be preferred: “Could this be the Son of David?”⁸⁵ Thus it would appear that because Jesus was performing spectacular miracles, the crowd was prompted to consider him as a candidate for the Messiah, the Son of David.⁸⁶ However, the evidence seemed contradictory; since, apart from the miracles, Jesus seemed to correspond so little with what was commonly expected of the Messiah.

The Charge of the Pharisees, v. 24

But when the Pharisees heard *this*, they said, “This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons.”

In contrast to the view of the crowd that Jesus might be the Messiah, the Pharisees said, “This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons.” Clearly, the Pharisees were unable to deny that a notable miracle had been performed, but they still hoped to discredit Jesus by suggesting that it had been accomplished by Beelzebul. Jesus, they argued, was able to perform exorcisms because he was in league with Satan.⁸⁷ The attitude of the Pharisees who made this charge against Jesus is indefensible. They were willingly ignorant of the truth.

⁸⁴A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 4th ed. (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), p. 917.

⁸⁵Cf. also the NLT, “Could it be that Jesus is the Son of David, the Messiah?” and the NRSV, “Can this be the Son of David?” The suggestion of BDAG (s.v. “μήτι,” p. 649), that here and in John 4:29 μήτι could be translated “perhaps,” would make the crowd appear even less doubtful than even the NIV translation suggests.

⁸⁶W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew*, 3 vols., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988–97), 2:335; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), p. 202; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 314.

⁸⁷It is clear “the ruler of the demons,” Beelzebul, is Satan. In pseudepigraphical Judaism, Satan is clearly the leader of the demons, and they are subject to him (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “δαίμων, δαιμόνιον,” by Werner Foerster). A comparison of Matt 12:24 with vv. 26–27 shows that Jesus uses Beelzebul interchangeably with Satan.

The Refutation by Jesus, vv. 25–30

Jesus begins his refutation of the charge made by the Pharisees by showing in vv. 25 and 26 that it was absurd to suggest he was casting out demons by Beelzebul.⁸⁸

²⁵And knowing their thoughts Jesus said to them, “Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself will not stand. ²⁶If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand?”

Any kingdom that develops internal strife will destroy itself, Jesus argues. If Satan were to cast out his own demons, he would be casting out himself; he would be fighting against himself, which is exactly what Satan would be doing if Jesus is casting out demons by Beelzebul. How absurd!

In v. 27 Jesus demonstrates that the charge of the Pharisees was not only absurd, it was also inconsistent.⁸⁹

“If I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast *them* out? For this reason they will be your judges.”

If Jesus was only able to cast out demons because he was in league with Satan, then the Pharisees would have to logically conclude the same was true of their “sons,” their own followers,⁹⁰ who practiced exorcism. Exorcism was an accepted practice among Jews, and people claimed to exorcise demons in Jesus’ day (cf. Luke 9:49; Acts 19:13), just as they do today.⁹¹ Since the Pharisees would be unwilling to conclude that their “sons” are in league with Satan, they, the “sons,” demonstrate that the Pharisees charge of Jesus’ collusion with Satan is invalid. The final phrase, “they will be your judges,” is a Jewish expression in which the word “judges” denotes those whose conduct is made the standard for judging someone else and convicting that one of wrong.⁹² Thus,

⁸⁸Francis W. Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (San Francisco: Harper and Brothers, 1981), p. 278; Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), p. 117.

⁸⁹Hendriksen, *Matthew*, p. 525; James M. Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 1:213.

⁹⁰BDAG, s.v. “υἱός,” p. 1024; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:338; Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 230; Morris, *Matthew*, p. 316.

⁹¹Cf. Luke 9:49; Acts 19:13; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 8.2.5 and *Jewish War* 7.6.3, Tob 8:2–3; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue* 85.

⁹²*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “κρίνω,” by Friedrich Büchsel and Volkmar Hertrich, 3:943.

the thought would be, “They will convict you of wrongdoing.”⁹³

In v. 28 Jesus explains that the false charge of the Pharisees only obscures the truth.

“But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”

The actual facts are contrary (“but,” $\delta\epsilon$) to what they were saying. The logical and true explanation that the Pharisees should have concluded was that Jesus was casting out demons by the Spirit of God. Jesus’ exorcisms were genuine; the Pharisees never denied that. If they were genuine, then the only two options are that they are performed with the help of God or Satan.⁹⁴ Since Jesus has shown that a connection with Satan is impossible (vv. 25–27), the only conclusion that can be reached is that he is casting out demons “by the Spirit of God.”

In v. 29 Jesus gives an illustration to make clear and reinforce what he has said about his relationship to Satan.

“Or how can anyone enter the strong man’s house and carry off his property, unless he first binds the strong *man*? And then he will plunder his house.”

“Or,” Jesus says, meaning, “Let’s look at it another way.⁹⁵ I cannot enter the house of the strong man,” that is, Satan, “and carry away his possessions,” that is, those who are demon possessed, “unless I am stronger than Satan.” The fact that Jesus was casting out demons shows that he was not in league with Satan, but rather his enemy with whom he was locked in combat.

Finally, in v. 30 Jesus concludes his refutation of the Pharisees’ false charge with a general warning.

“He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters.”

In the great struggle between Christ and Satan, there can be no neutrality. Either men are with Jesus or they are with Satan. Although this saying may have served as a rebuke to the Pharisees, it was probably directed more as a warning to the questioning crowd that was present (cf. v. 23).

⁹³BDAG, s.v. “κρίσις,” p. 570.

⁹⁴Lenski, *Matthew*, p. 479.

⁹⁵Broadus, *Matthew*, p. 270; D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in vol. 8 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), p. 290.

The Charge of Blasphemy, vv. 31–32

³¹“Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. ³²Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the *age* to come.”

Verse 31 begins with “therefore” (διὰ τοῦτο). Jesus is inferring something from the previous context, not just v. 30, but the whole preceding argument.⁹⁶ The clear implication is that the accusation of the Pharisees was an instance of the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.⁹⁷ Having rebuked the Pharisees and warned the indifferent crowd in v. 30, Jesus appears to formally charge the Pharisees in v. 31 by suggesting that they were guilty of the most serious sin of all, the blasphemy against the Spirit, which will not be forgiven.

Verse 31 draws a distinction between sin in general and a very specific sin, the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. The addition of the words “and blasphemy” to those sins which will be forgiven serves to make even more specific the nature of the sin which will *not* be forgiven. “Any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people” except one specific form of blasphemy, the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Of course, it goes almost without saying that forgiveness for “any sin and blasphemy” is limited by the conditions of repentance etc., laid down elsewhere in Scripture.

The Greek noun βλασφημία, used twice in v. 31, can have a wider field of meaning than the English term *blasphemy*, which is generally restricted to acts of contempt or irreverence, specifically directed toward God.⁹⁸ In classical Greek βλασφημία means “abusive speech,” which may be directed toward God or men.⁹⁹ Both the weaker classical sense of slanderous language addressed to men and the more serious

⁹⁶Broadus, *Matthew*, p. 271; Bruce, “Synoptic Gospels,” p. 189; Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 237; Donald A Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1993), p. 346; Meyer, *Matthew*, p. 241.

⁹⁷Willoughby C. Allen, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Scribner’s, 1925), p. 136; R. T. France, *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 210; Gundry, *Matthew*, p. 237; Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, pp. 347–48; Meyer, *Matthew*, p. 241; Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew* (London: Robert Scott, 1915), p. 178; Morris, *Matthew*, p. 318.

⁹⁸*Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., s.v. “blasphemy,” p. 130.

⁹⁹*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “βλασφημέω,” by Hebert W. Beyer, 1:621.

offense toward God appear in the New Testament.¹⁰⁰ In its first occurrence in v. 31 (“any sin and blasphemy”), βλασφημία could be used in its more general sense of “abusive speech,” but more probably has reference to the narrower sense of extreme slander directed toward God, and thus is practically synonymous with our English word *blasphemy*.¹⁰¹ In support of this interpretation is the fact that this narrow sense is the only sense found in the Septuagint and also seems to prevail in the Gospels.¹⁰² So blasphemy itself is not the characteristic feature of the unpardonable sin. Blasphemy certainly is involved, but it is the nature of that blasphemy that holds the key to understanding the sin.¹⁰³

Jesus continues in v. 32 by drawing a distinction between blasphemy against the Son of Man and blasphemy against the Spirit: “Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him.” To “speak a word against” the Son of Man is a Semitism that is equivalent to blasphemy against the Son of Man.¹⁰⁴ This is evident from its usage in the next clause where to “speak against” the Holy Spirit is obviously equal to “blasphemy” against the Spirit in v. 31.

It is also clear that the distinction drawn by Jesus is in fact between himself and the third person of the Trinity—the Holy Spirit. Contrary to the assertion of Barnes, the “Holy Spirit” does not refer to the divine nature of Christ.¹⁰⁵ There is, of course, no other place in the New Testament where the words πνεῦμα ἁγίου refer to the divine nature of Christ, but in every other instance *always* have reference to the Holy Spirit. Jesus refers to himself as “the Son of Man,” which is in fact his favorite designation for himself—in the Gospels it is found only on his lips.¹⁰⁶ Most probably the background for the title is found in Daniel 7. Jesus apparently chose the term as a way to refer to himself as the

¹⁰⁰BDAG, s.v. “βλασφημία,” p. 178.

¹⁰¹*Evangelical Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “βλασφημία, βλασφημέω, βλάσφημος,” by O. Hofius, 1: 220; Benjamin B. Warfield, “Misconception of Jesus, and Blasphemy of the Son of Man,” *Princeton Theological Review* 12 (July 1914): 399.

¹⁰²*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “βλασφημέω,” 1:621.

¹⁰³Berkouwer, *Sin*, p. 328.

¹⁰⁴Matthew Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 195. Cf. BDAG, s.v. “λόγος,” p. 599; Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, p. 347.

¹⁰⁵Barnes’ *Notes on the New Testament*, p. 59.

¹⁰⁶Luke 24:7 and John 12:34 are not really exceptions since they are both simply quotations of Jesus’ own words.

Messiah, but, because of the ambiguity of the term, he was able to interpret that messianic office in his own way.¹⁰⁷ “Son of Man” is actually a title of dignity. “That it is possible to blaspheme the Son of Man, itself means that the Son of Man is divine.”¹⁰⁸

Thus, the purpose of v. 32 is to advance the thought of v. 31, bringing it to a sharper point. Warfield explains,

What follows is not merely an illustration of the general principle or a consequence from it. The “and” has an ascensive force and introduces what is in effect a climax.... It is not merely *an* instance which is adduced; but *the* instance, which will illustrate above every other instance the incredible reach of forgiveness that is extended, and which will therefore supply the best background up against which may be thrown the heinousness of blasphemy against the Spirit which cannot be forgiven.¹⁰⁹

Blasphemy against the Son of Man is the extremity of blasphemy that can be forgiven.

But how would it be possible to distinguish between the blasphemy against the Son of Man and blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, since it was by the power of the Spirit that Jesus was casting out demons? Admittedly, in the present incident it would be impossible to distinguish between the two because the Pharisees had blasphemed both. However, not everything Jesus said or did involved the miraculous display of the Spirit’s power, as was true of this exorcism. In his general teaching ministry, it would be possible to blaspheme Jesus and not the Holy Spirit. The title Son of Man refers to the Messiah in his humiliation, a man who could easily be misunderstood and at whom people might easily take offense. This was deplorable, but it was forgivable.¹¹⁰ The reason why the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is unforgivable is ultimately related to the nature of the sin itself, which will be taken up later.

¹⁰⁷Carson, “Matthew,” pp. 209–13; *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, s.v. “Son of Man,” by I. Howard Marshall, pp. 775–81; Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), pp. 270–82; George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 2nd ed., rev. Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 143–57; Morris, *Matthew*, p. 319.

¹⁰⁸Warfield, “Misconception of Jesus,” p. 397.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, p. 400.

¹¹⁰France, *Matthew*, p. 210; Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, p. 347; Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, p. 153; Morris, *Matthew*, p. 319; H. N. Ridderbos, *Matthew*, trans. Ray Togtman, Bible Student’s Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), p. 241.

Mark 3:22–30

It is widely recognized that Mark is describing the same incident previously discussed in Matthew 12:22–32, and both passages can be easily harmonized. Therefore, we will not take time to analyze the entire passage; but, instead, will concentrate on the charge of blasphemy (vv. 28–29) and Mark’s explanatory comment (v. 30).

The Charge of Blasphemy, vv. 28–29

²⁸“Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; ²⁹but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”—

The charge of blasphemy is quite similar to that found in Matthew’s account. The difference is that Mark chose not to bring up the specific case of blasphemy against the Son of Man, possibly because he considered it to be already sufficiently covered in the declaration that all blasphemies against the “sons of men” would be forgiven—the “Son of Man” being one of the “sons of men.”¹¹¹ “The sons of men” is simply a Semitic way of saying “men.”¹¹²

The one exception to the universality of God’s mercy and forgiveness pronounced in v. 28 is the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit—“but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness” (v. 29) The next clause, “but is guilty of an eternal sin,” is not in contrast to what has just been said in spite of the fact it begins with a “but” (ἀλλά). Here ἀλλά does not indicate a contrast but is “confirmatory and continuative.”¹¹³ It amplifies what it means to never have forgiveness, bringing it to a climax, probably better translated “indeed” or “rather”—“but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness; indeed, he is guilty of an eternal sin.”¹¹⁴ It is eternal because there is no forgiveness granted for it. It will never be expiated or remitted in all of eternity. Thus, it is commonly called “the unpardonable sin.”

¹¹¹Henry E. Turlington, “Mark,” in *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969), p. 293; Warfield, “Misconception of Jesus,” pp. 393–94.

¹¹²BDAG, s.v. “υἱός,” p. 1024; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 176; Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1989), p. 178.

¹¹³Robertson, *Grammar*, p. 1185; cf. BDAG, p. 45.

¹¹⁴Robert H. Gundry, *Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 176. The NIV conveys a similar idea by omitting the conjunction: “But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin.” The last clause is apparently to be understood in an explanatory sense.

Mark's Explanatory Comment, v. 30

because they were saying, "He has an unclean spirit."

This is obviously an editorial comment made by Mark. However, it is elliptical; something must be supplied, as in the NIV translation: "He said this because they were saying, 'He has an evil spirit.'"¹¹⁵ The statement, "He has an unclean spirit," points back to v. 22: "The scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, 'He is possessed by Beelzebul,' and 'He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons.'"¹¹⁶ Thus, "He has an unclean spirit" is equal to the scribes' charge in v. 22: "He is possessed by Beelzebul." The question is, What is the antecedent of "this"?—"He said *this* because they were saying." That is, to what exactly does v. 30 logically connect?—clearly vv. 28–29. Mark obviously identifies Jesus' pronouncement about the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in vv. 28–29 with the charge that "He has an unclean spirit," in other words, that Jesus' exorcism was accomplished by Satan's power. John Wesley's comments on Mark 3:30 are worth repeating: "Is it not astonishing, that men who have ever read these words, should doubt, what is the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost: Can any words declare more plainly, that it is 'the ascribing those miracles to the power of the devil which Christ wrought by the power of the Holy Ghost.'"¹¹⁷

Verse 30, then, gives the reason (causal ὅτι) why Jesus said what he did about the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.¹¹⁸ The reason Jesus issues his solemn pronouncement in vv. 28–29 is because of the blasphemous accusation of the scribes that he was performing his exorcisms by the power of Satan.¹¹⁹ This is certainly a strong indication that the scribes were in fact guilty of the unpardonable sin.

Luke 12:10

This verse is another warning about the blasphemy against the

¹¹⁵Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan, 1957), p. 244.

¹¹⁶Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of Mark* (London: United Bible Societies, 1961), p. 124; Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, p. 180; Gundry, *Mark*, p. 177.

¹¹⁷*Explanatory Notes*, p. 105.

¹¹⁸Gundry, *Mark*, p. 177.

¹¹⁹Hugh Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark*, New Century Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 124; Bratcher and Nida, *Mark*, p. 124; Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, p. 180; Gundry, *Mark*, p. 177.

Holy Spirit.

“And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him.”

However, Luke 12:10 is a different incident than Matthew 12 and Mark 3. This can be seen from the fact that the context is completely different from the other Synoptics. Also, this verse falls within a section of Luke’s Gospel that is chronologically later in the ministry of Jesus. Matthew 12 and Mark 3 take place during Jesus’ Galilean ministry, but Luke 12:10 is part of a long section in Luke’s Gospel, beginning in 9:51, that is somewhat unique to Luke, often called the “central section,” that describes events that take place after Jesus’ Galilean ministry during his journey to Jerusalem.¹²⁰ Thus, in Luke 12:10 we have another statement about the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit by Jesus in words similar to Matthew 12:32, but on a different occasion, sometime later, after the incident of Matthew 12 and Mark 3.

Chapter 12 of Luke begins with Jesus speaking primarily to his disciples both to encourage and exhort them.

¹Under these circumstances, after so many thousands of people had gathered together that they were stepping on one another, He began saying to His disciples first *of all*, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. ²But there is nothing covered up that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known. ³Accordingly, whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in the inner rooms will be proclaimed upon the housetops. ⁴I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. ⁵But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him! ⁶Are not five sparrows sold for two cents? *Yet* not one of them is forgotten before God. ⁷Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows. ⁸And I say to you, everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man will confess him also before the angels of God; ⁹but he who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God. ¹⁰And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him.”

It is critical to a proper interpretation of this passage to note the distinction between *to* whom Jesus is speaking and *about* whom he is

¹²⁰Broadus, *Matthew*, p. 267; F. Godet, *A Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke*, 2nd ed., trans. E. W. Shalders and M. D. Cusin (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1887), pp. 283–88; Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry, *A Harmony of the Gospels* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), p. 139; Warfield, “Misconception of Jesus,” p. 394.

speaking. In vv. 1–8 Jesus is speaking *to* his disciples and also *about* them. In v. 1 he says, “Beware (lit. “guard *yourselves* [προσέχετε ἑαυτοῖς])” of the leaven of the Pharisees.” Verse 3, “Whatever *you* have said in the dark will be heard.” Verse 4, “I say to *you*, My friends, do not be afraid.” Verse 7, “the very hairs of *your* head are all numbered.” But beginning in v. 8, Jesus continues to speak *to* his disciples, but not *about* them. Before v. 8 Jesus uses the second person *you*, but in vv. 8–10, the third person, “everyone,” v. 8; “he who” v. 9; “everyone,” v. 10. In vv. 8–10 Jesus is speaking about nondisciples.¹²¹ There is no reason to think that the disciples needed to be warned about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, no reason to think they would or could commit the sin.¹²² Instead, in vv. 8–10, Jesus is informing his disciples about the kinds of reactions to their own ministries they may experience as the Holy Spirit witnesses to unbelievers through them. Verse 11 continues, “When they bring you before the synagogues....”

Luke 12:10 draws the same distinction between the blasphemy against the Son of Man versus that which is against the Holy Spirit that we saw in Matthew 12:32. The slight difference in wording between these two verses is not significant. The meaning of the verses is identical. In the context of Luke 12, the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not actually being committed, and Jesus offers no explanation of the exact nature of the sin. Therefore, one must look to the other Synoptics for the historical situation in which the sin was actually being committed in order to determine more precisely the nature of the sin. However, there is one important fact that this passage would seem to imply strongly: The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit was not limited to just the ministry of Jesus but could also be committed in connection with the ministry of Jesus’ disciples.

POSSIBLE PARALLELS OUTSIDE THE GOSPELS

It is commonly asserted by a number of interpreters that other New Testament passages outside of the Synoptic Gospels make reference to the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Hebrews 6:4–6 and 1 John 5:16 are the two passages that are most often cited as parallel with the Synoptic accounts.¹²³ This connection is not immediately

¹²¹Gundry, *Matthew*, p. 238.

¹²²H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospels of Mark and Luke*, trans. Robert E. Walls, rev. and ed. William P. Dickson, 5th ed. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884), p. 415.

¹²³E.g., Berkouwer, *Sin*, pp. 334–37; Hughes, *Hebrews*, p. 215; Roger Nicole, “Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4–6 and the Doctrine of the Perseverance of God with the Saints,” in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, ed. Gerald F.

obvious since neither passage makes specific reference to the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Both Hebrews 6:4–6 and 1 John 5:16 will be examined briefly in order to determine if there is any genuine connection with the Gospel accounts of the sin.

Hebrews 6:4–6

⁴For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶and *then* have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.

According to v. 6, it is “impossible to renew again to repentance” a certain group of people who are described in vv. 4–6 as “those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partners of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come,” and “have fallen away.” The fact that these people cannot experience repentance because they have “fallen away” suggests that they are in a state without any hope of recovery. If it is impossible for them to repent, then they must remain in their fallen state with no hope of forgiveness and restoration. Thus, a parallel is drawn by some interpreters between these who have no possibility of forgiveness and those who commit the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, who also have no hope of forgiveness.

Whether or not one accepts this parallel depends to some degree upon how one understands the spiritual condition of those described in Hebrews 6:4–6. If it is decided that this is a description of truly regenerate people, there is usually no parallel drawn with the Gospels. This is especially true of for those who take the hypothetical view, which says that the “falling away” could not possibly occur.¹²⁴ If Hebrews 6:4–6 describes an impossible sin (one that could never be committed), it obviously has no relationship to the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. No one, at the very least, denies that the latter sin could have been committed at some point in time.

Others believe that the writer of Hebrews has regenerate people in view and that the “falling away” is possible. The result of such a view is

Hawthorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 362.

¹²⁴Donald Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 145; Thomas Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), pp. 110–11; Homer A. Kent, Jr. *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), pp. 113–14; Charles C. Ryrie, ed., *The Ryrie Study Bible: New American Standard Translation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), p. 1843.

either to argue that the truly regenerate can fall away from salvation,¹²⁵ or to interpret the falling away, not as from salvation, but from Christian commitment.¹²⁶ In either case, as long as one understands the people in question to be truly regenerate, the situation described in Hebrews 6:4–6 and the Gospel accounts of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit would seem to be quite different. By no stretch of the imagination can the Pharisees who made the blasphemous attack against Jesus be considered regenerate.

It is usually those who believe that Hebrews 6:4–6 describes the sin of apostasy (the falling away or rejection of unregenerate people who at one time professed to be believers) who argue that blasphemy against the Spirit is the same sin.¹²⁷ However, there are serious differences between the sin in the Gospels and the one in Hebrews. Those described in Hebrews 6:4–6 are professing believers who seem to have been accepted as part of the Christian community and who initially gave signs of genuine conversion. But then they apostatize, make a 180-degree about-face. This is far different from the Pharisees in the Gospels who gave no indication of conversion and whose blasphemy marks the last stage in a growing hatred of Jesus.

Thus, it is my view that the sin in Hebrews 6 is not the same as the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in the Gospels. This will become even clearer when the exact nature of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is delineated later in this essay.

1 John 5:16

If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not *leading* to death, he shall ask and *God* will for him give life to those who commit sin not *leading* to death. There is a sin *leading* to death; I do not say that he should make request for this.

Some interpreters who believe that Hebrews 6:4–6 is to be equated with the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in the Gospels are more

¹²⁵William L. Lane, *Hebrews*, 2 vols., Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1991), pp. 141–43; Scot McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions,” *Trinity Journal* 13 (Spring 1992): 24–25. Grant R. Osborne, “Soteriology in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975), pp. 148–50.

¹²⁶Rodney J. Decker, “The Warning of Hebrews Six,” *The Journal of Ministry & Theology* 5 (Fall 2001): 26–48; Zane C. Hodges, “Hebrews,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983), p. 795; Thomas K. Oberholtzer, “The Thorn-Infested Ground in Hebrews 6:4–12,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (July–September 1988): 319–28.

¹²⁷Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 509; Hughes, *Hebrews*, pp. 215–16; Nicole, “Comments on Hebrews 6:4–6,” p. 362; Palmer, *Holy Spirit*, pp. 177–83;

cautious when it comes to a possible connection with 1 John 5:16.¹²⁸ This is partly due to the difficulty in interpreting John's meaning. John simply describes a "sin *leading* to death," without any further elaboration. Practically speaking, this verse has almost no bearing on the interpretation of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit since even if John were referring to the sin in the Gospels, this verse would add nothing to the understanding of that sin. It would not help in explaining the exact nature of the sin. However, one might argue that John's reference would at least prove the sin is committed by a believer. However, this is not certain since, contrary to popular belief, John does not explicitly say that the sin leading to death is committed by a "brother." John says that a "brother" commits "sin not *leading* to death," but with regard to "sin *leading* to death," John only declares that such a thing exists, not who may commit it. Even if it is assumed that it is a "brother" who commits the "sin *leading* to death," John can apparently use "brother" to refer to a professing Christian (cf. 3:15)—an unbeliever.¹²⁹ Therefore, since 1 John 5:16 can provide no definitive data on the nature of the sin in the Gospels, it will be excluded from further discussion.

INTERPRETATION OF THE SIN

Having surveyed the history of interpretation and investigated the relevant scriptural data, we will now move to a fresh analysis of the sin. The major areas of debate can conveniently be put in the form of four questions.

What Is the Precise Nature of the Sin?

Denial of the Sin

Although they are very different, several interpretations of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit lead to the same result, a denial of the concept of an unforgivable sin. For some, the concept of an unpardonable sin is one that they simply refuse to accept. Rees, for example, believes that it would conflict with "God's saving grace."¹³⁰ Contrary to Rees, there is no conflict, but that point will not be debated here. Rees solves the conflict created for him by Jesus' words by resorting to the "kenotic theory," suggesting that Christ was incorrect in his

¹²⁸Berkouwer, *Sin*, pp. 333–34; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 509.

¹²⁹Irvin A. Busenitz, "The Sin unto Death," *Master's Seminary Journal* 1 (Spring 1990): 26; Randall K. J. Tan, "Should We Pray for Straying Brethren? John's Confidence in 1 John 5:16–17," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 (December 2002): 601–3.

¹³⁰*ISBE*, 1939 ed., s.v. "Blasphemy," 1:486.

pronouncement that this sin was unpardonable. But the kenosis does not demand that Jesus was involved in error, and any kenotic theory that suggests that was the case must be rejected. If Jesus could have erred about the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, then any or all of his other teachings are subject to the same error, including those which proclaimed “God’s saving grace.” Rees’s objection to Jesus’ words is totally unfounded.

Another group of interpreters deny the reality of the sin, not by calling into question the veracity of Jesus, but the Gospel writers themselves. They believe that Jesus did not actually utter any such saying about blasphemy; instead, it was a formulation of the early church that the Gospel writers attributed to Jesus.¹³¹ This view must also be rejected. There is no compelling evidence to suggest that the Gospel writers did not accurately report Jesus’ statements about the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit or anything else he said. There is even less reason to believe they would have fabricated historical situations in order to portray Jesus as the originator of theological concepts which were actually a later development of the church. This view requires error on the part of the Gospel writers, and this essay presupposes the truthfulness of the Gospel accounts.

Finally, there are some who accept the accuracy of the Gospel records but whose interpretations still result in a practical denial of the sin because they claim Jesus was only speaking hyperbolically.¹³² McNeile, for example, appeals to Numbers 15:30ff., 1 Samuel 3:14, and Isaiah 22:14 as instances where Jewish phraseology uses hyperbole in describing serious sin as though it were unpardonable. The consensus of scholars has always rejected this view. It is doubtful if any of the Old Testament examples cited by McNeile are really examples of hyperbole.¹³³ Even if they were, there is nothing in the context of Jesus’ statements to suggest that he is only speaking figuratively. Cranfield reminds us that there is no reason to attempt to tone down the severity of Jesus’ statement because this kind of solemn warning is not uncommon in the teaching of Jesus (e.g., Matt 25:41–46 and Mark

¹³¹Boring, “The Unforgivable Sin Logion,” pp. 276–77; Branscomb, *Mark*, p. 74; Higgins, *The Son of Man in the Teaching of Jesus*, p. 89; Funk, Weaver, et al., *The Five Gospels*, pp. 51, 185, 337; Hultgren, *Jesus and His Adversaries*, p. 105; Schweizer, *Matthew*, p. 285; Scroggs, “The Exaltation of the Spirit,” p. 361; Tödt, *The Son of Man in the Synoptic Tradition*, p. 119.

¹³²McNeile, *Matthew*, p. 179; H. K. Luce, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, Cambridge Greek Testament (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1949), p. 228.

¹³³Taylor, *Mark*, p. 244. A random check of a number of Old Testament commentaries on these passages failed to locate any support for McNeile’s interpretation of them.

9:42–48).¹³⁴

A Generalized Sin

As we have previously noted, most of the patristic writers took a broad view of the sin. The tendency of these writers was to suggest that almost any false assertion about the person or work of the Holy Spirit would qualify as the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Cyril of Jerusalem went so far as to say that false statements made in ignorance could render one guilty.¹³⁵ This view is totally discounted today. It simply generalizes a sin that is obviously referring to something more specific. This understanding of the sin would seem to require a distinction between members of the Godhead. It flirts with the suggestion that the Holy Spirit is somehow more holy or more divine than Christ, and so one must guard what is said about the Spirit.

Medieval theologians made the sin even more general than the early Fathers. This was done primarily on the basis of two false premises. Previously, patristic writers had usually generalized the sin by extending the meaning of blasphemy against the Spirit to include any serious sin that even remotely could be considered to be against the Spirit. Later, Scholastic scholars like Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas took a different approach. Having first made the equation that the blasphemy against the Spirit is an unpardonable sin, they dispensed with the concept of a sin against the Holy Spirit and carried on their discussions under the broader heading of the unpardonable sin. This allowed them to include sins that they believed to be unpardonable but which could not be even remotely tied to blasphemy against the Spirit. The second premise that allowed a more general approach to the sin to be taken was the belief that all sins committed out of deliberate malice were somehow especially directed toward the Holy Spirit. Clearly, any view that makes the sin of despair an unpardonable sin (e.g., Peter Lombard) is patently false.

Rejection of Clear Truth

The usual Reformed view of the sin is that it is apostasy, the falling away or rejection of unregenerate people who at one time professed to be believers. They can be said to blaspheme the Spirit because they reject the truth of Christianity that was made known to them through the ministry of the Spirit. The essence of the sin is generally pinpointed to be a rejection of clear truth. The problem with this interpretation is that, although it is a good explanation of Hebrews 6:4–6,

¹³⁴C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary (Cambridge: At the University Press), p. 142.

¹³⁵*Catecheses* 16:1.

it fails to deal with the distinctive features of the Gospel passages. It is characteristic of this view to ignore the situation in the Gospel accounts and to explain the sin entirely in terms of Hebrews 6:4–6.¹³⁶ It has already been argued that Hebrews 6 is not referring to the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in the Gospels. There is no indication in the Gospel passages that the Pharisees were partakers of the tremendous spiritual experiences described in Hebrews. The Pharisees were not apostates; they never professed to believe in Christ.

Most Lutherans and a few other interpreters also identify the essence of the sin as rejection of clear truth, that is, the truth of Christianity.¹³⁷ They also use the word *apostasy* to denote their interpretation; however, they believe the sin can be committed by believers as well as unbelievers. They also explain the sin in terms of Hebrews 6:4–6. Thus, this interpretation is subject to the same objections raised against the Reformed view, not to speak of the theological error of genuine Christians being capable of apostasy.

Labeling Good as Evil

Judged by the number of commentators who support it, this is the most popular opinion of the nature of the sin.¹³⁸ Despite its popularity, this understanding of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit must be rejected. First, it is simply too broad a description of the sin. It is undoubtedly true that the Pharisees were guilty of calling good evil, but that in and of itself is not unpardonable. To blaspheme the Son of Man is also to call good evil, but Jesus specifically notes that such an act is not unpardonable. Second, this view is not so much an

¹³⁶Palmer's discussion is a good example of this. After first discussing what the sin is not, he explains the nature of the sin using a six-point outline. Each point is one of the participles in Heb 6:4–6 (*Holy Spirit*, pp. 181–83).

¹³⁷Lenski, *Matthew*, p. 483; Meyer, *Matthew*, p. 242; Müller, *Christian Doctrine of Sin*, 2:423; Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:571–75. Lutherans tend to be a little broader in their description of the sin than Reformed theologians. Müller, for example, speaks more of a hatred of the truth than a rejection of it, but the result is the same (2:422). Non-Lutherans who espouse the same view include Barrett (*Holy Spirit and the Gospel Tradition*, p. 106) and Richardson (*Theology of the New Testament*, p. 108).

¹³⁸Barclay, *Matthew*, 2:44; Bruce, "Synoptic Gospels," p. 189; Clarke, *Mark*, p. 54; *A Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. "Blasphemy," by J. Massie, 1:305; Frederick C. Grant and Halford E. Luccock, "The Gospel According to St. Mark," in vol. 7 of *Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1951), p. 693; Guthrie, *Jesus the Messiah*, p. 134; D. Edmond Hiebert, *Mark: A Portrait of a Servant* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. 94; Malden, *Promise of the Father*, p. 202; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 231; Nixon, "Matthew," p. 832; Robinson, *Matthew*, p. 113; Swete, *Holy Spirit in the New Testament*, p. 117; Tasker, *Matthew*, p. 128; Thompson, *Mark*, p. 81.

explanation of the nature of the sin but of the nature of the person who commits it. This can be seen from explanations given by the advocates of this interpretation. Massie, for example, says, “Any man who, with such demonstration before his eyes, declared this power to be immoral (Mark 3:30), openly denouncing as evil that which was plainly good, exhibited a state of heart which was hopeless and beyond the scope of divine influence.”¹³⁹ In other words, calling good evil is really more of an indicator that may be used to identify someone who has committed the sin.

Probably what makes this explanation of the sin so popular is that it offers what appears to be a logical answer to the question of why there can be no forgiveness for the sin. Something has happened inside the sinner, spiritually or psychologically, which has rendered him incapable of repentance; he confuses good and evil.¹⁴⁰ This particular explanation will be discussed thoroughly later in the essay. What is important to note here is that this view of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit has gained its popularity by skillfully moving attention away from the question of the sin’s essence to a logical explanation of another difficult question, Why is the sin unpardonable?

Rejection of the Convicting Work of the Spirit

A number of interpreters believe that the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is committed by unbelievers who resist and reject the working of the Holy Spirit to bring them to salvation.¹⁴¹ The chief difficulty for this viewpoint is that it has little correspondence with the historical situation in the Gospels. There is no reference in the Gospel accounts to the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit, nor any clear evidence that the Pharisees were experiencing this ministry. If the Pharisees were in fact rejecting the working of the Spirit in their lives, one might expect to hear Jesus say something similar to Stephen’s statement: “You men...are always resisting the Holy Spirit” (Acts 7:51). More important, it seems difficult to imagine Jesus using the

¹³⁹*Dictionary of the Bible*, “Blasphemy,” 1:305.

¹⁴⁰Robinson, *Matthew*, p. 113.

¹⁴¹Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, 2:109; R. Alan Cole, *Mark*, 2nd ed., Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 142; Hogue, *Holy Spirit*, p. 386; Fred D. Howard, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Shield Bible Study Series (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964), p. 48; Homer A. Kent, Jr., “Matthew,” in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), p. 950; Mounce, *Matthew*, p. 117; Ogilvie, *Life Without Limits*, p. 69; Sanders, *Holy Spirit of Promise*, p. 135; Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), p. 349; Summers, *Luke*, p. 154; Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), p. 449; Richard Wolf, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Contemporary Commentaries (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1969), p. 30.

word blasphemy to describe such a sin. Resisting the convicting ministry of the Spirit hardly falls within the semantic range of the word *blasphemy*.

Another group of interpreters can also be considered under this category. Although they describe the sin differently, their view is similar. For example, Moore says that “the sin against the Holy Ghost, as it has been called, is the sin of deliberate and persistent rejection of Jesus Christ.”¹⁴² MacArthur explains that the sin “not only reflected unbelief, but determined unbelief—the refusal, after having seen all the evidence necessary to complete understanding, even to consider believing in Christ.”¹⁴³ This view emphasizes the rejection of the salvation message, whereas the previous view emphasized rejection of the working of the Holy Spirit who is pressing home the message. Both views amount to the same thing and both are subject to the same objections.

Most of the interpreters whose views have been assigned to this category imply that they believe it is possible for the sin to be committed during one’s life so that after that point in time he is in a hopeless state. However, since one can never know if a person has reached that point, this view often becomes synonymous with Augustine’s interpretation of the sin, impenitence persisted in to the end of one’s life. This is because the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit is often viewed as being made available to all unbelievers. Therefore, since all unbelievers end up rejecting the convicting ministry of the Spirit, all unbelievers also become guilty of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ statement is thus stripped of all its solemnity and becomes only another way of stating the obvious truism, “no repentance, no forgiveness.”¹⁴⁴

Attacking the Divine Power and Nature of Christ

Contrary to all other interpretations of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, this view suggests that the sin really has nothing to do with the Holy Spirit at all. By the expression “Holy Spirit,” Jesus actually was referring to his own divine nature. The sin is thus an attack on and the denial of the deity of Christ. This view was held by Athanasius

¹⁴²D. Moore, “Discussions and Notes on the Unpardonable Sin,” *Expository Times* 3 (February 1892): 219.

¹⁴³John MacArthur, *Matthew 8–15* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), p. 313. So also Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker 1996), pp. 1142–43; Craig A. Evans, *Luke*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), p. 195.

¹⁴⁴Amazingly, Cox believes that this was all Jesus meant to say (“Sin against the Holy Spirit,” pp. 324–25).

in the early church and in modern times by Albert Barnes.¹⁴⁵ The main support for this interpretation is its reasonable explanation of the distinction between blasphemy against the Son of Man and blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in Matthew 12:32 and Luke 12:10. The former is pardonable because it is an attack upon the humanity of Jesus while the latter is unpardonable because it is an attack upon his deity. The insurmountable objection to this view is the impossibility of understanding the phrase “Holy Spirit” as a reference to Christ’s divine nature.

Attributing the Spirit’s Work to Satan

All of the other interpretations of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit that have been discussed and rejected so far have a common weakness. They do not pay enough attention to the historical context in the Gospels. That cannot be said for this view.¹⁴⁶ The Pharisees were clearly attributing the Spirit’s work to Satan. However, this view still suffers from a serious flaw. It is not specific enough as to the nature of the Spirit’s work which, when attributed to Satan, would make one guilty of this sin. The advocates of this view realize that the Holy Spirit is not performing the same kind of miracles today that he did during the first century, but they believe that the “miracle” of the new birth and the Spirit’s subsequent work in sanctification are both situations in which the Spirit may be blasphemed and the sin committed today. Broadus nicely frames the problem for this view:

Can any other divine work, as, for instance, the conversion of a friend, or a general revival of spirituality, be so unquestionably and unmistakably the work of God, that a person ascribing it to Satan is guilty, not merely of sin, but of that flagrant and deeply malignant blasphemy against God which is unpardonable? This is the question to be decided; and it can hardly be decided in the affirmative.¹⁴⁷

Regeneration and subsequent sanctification are not sign-miracles.¹⁴⁸ Whereas sign-miracles are undeniable, there is nothing compelling about the effects of regeneration or sanctification that require one to admit that they are works of God.¹⁴⁹ These experiences

¹⁴⁵Barnes’ *Notes on the New Testament*, p. 59.

¹⁴⁶See, e.g., Ellicott, “Matthew,” 6:73; Evans, “Expository Problems,” p. 243; Hobbs, *Matthew*, pp. 154–55; Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 1:97; Walvoord, *Matthew*, p. 89.

¹⁴⁷Broadus, *Matthew*, p. 272.

¹⁴⁸John C. Whitcomb, Jr., “The Limitations and Values of Christian Evidences,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135 (January–March 1978): 25–26.

¹⁴⁹*Ibid.*; Whitcomb, *Does God Want Christians to Perform Miracles Today?* p. 9.

are sometimes counterfeited by false professors. No human being can infallibly decide whether or not the conversion experience of another person is genuine. Unbelievers can easily (and often do) misinterpret and ridicule the salvation experience of others out of ignorance. This is not the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. The unpardonable sin is not committed out of ignorance, a point that will be developed shortly.

Attributing the Miracles of Christ to Satan

This interpretation of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is almost identical to the previous view, which says that the sin consisted in attributing the Spirit's work to Satan. But in the present view the Spirit's work is limited to the miracles that Christ was performing through the power of the Holy Spirit during his earthly ministry. Therefore, those who espouse this view believe that the sin could only have been committed while Jesus was on earth. Those interpreters who advocate this view are primarily dispensationalists.¹⁵⁰

As with the previous interpretation of the sin, this one also has much to commend it. It has correctly interpreted the historical situation, for the Pharisees were certainly attributing the miracles of Christ to Satan. However, it is incorrect to limit the sin to the ministry of Christ. First, it does not appear from Jesus' own words in Matthew 12:32 and Luke 12:10 that his presence was necessary for the sin to be committed. He identifies the sin as the blasphemy against the *Holy Spirit*, not blasphemy against himself. In fact, Jesus makes a special point of the fact that the sin is *not* a sin against himself. Second, the discussion of Luke 12:10 above has shown that Jesus informed his disciples that the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit could also be committed during their own ministries.

Blaspheming the Miracle-Working Power of the Spirit

I believe that this is the correct interpretation of what Jesus meant by the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Not only does it fit the historical situation in the Gospels, but it also stands up to the objections raised against all the previously discussed interpretations. The Pharisees were indeed blaspheming the miracle-working power of the Spirit by their accusation that Jesus' miracles were accomplished by Satan's power rather than the Holy Spirit's. Mark's ὅτι clause ("because they

¹⁵⁰Louis A. Barbieri, Jr., "Matthew," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983), p. 47; Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 7:48; Franklin, "Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit," p. 232–33; Gaebelin, *Matthew*, p. 250; Gromacki, *Holy Spirit*, p. 133; Pentecost, *Words and Works of Jesus*, p. 207; Ryrie, *Holy Spirit*, p. 72.

were saying, ‘He has an unclean spirit’) in 3:30, which probably corresponds to Matthew’s “therefore” (διὰ τοῦτο, 12:31), seems to clearly equate the accusation of the Pharisees with the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

What can be said about the nature of this sin? First, it is not a one-time act, not simply an impulsive unguarded remark that is never repeated again. A slip of the tongue or any other accidental saying of the words would not make one guilty of the sin. Müller wisely explains, “It is impossible for a man, as if by mere magic of certain words, which do not spring from the depth of his heart, to commit the very worst of all sins, and to abandon himself irremediably to eternal ruin.”¹⁵¹ Mark’s use of the imperfect tense in 3:22 (“The scribes...were saying”) and 3:30 (“they were saying”) may indicate that the blasphemous charges of the religious leaders were made a number of times. The same charges were made earlier in Jesus’ ministry (Matt 9:34) as well as after the incident in Matthew 12 and Mark 3 (cf. Luke 11:15; John 7:20; 8:48, 52; 10:20).

Second, the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not a sin of ignorance. The charges made by the Pharisees were not the accusations of well-intentioned men. They had not simply gotten their facts mixed up and made a mistake. Jesus’ refutation of the charges made by the Pharisees, as recorded by both Matthew (12:25–26) and Mark (3:23–26), pointedly demonstrated how ridiculous and absurd the Pharisees’ charges were. These men were not misinformed; they were willingly ignorant of the truth. Whitcomb has observed that supernatural sign-miracles, such as Jesus was performing, “were presented to human minds with such force and clarity, that no one was able to deny them.”¹⁵² The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is an attempt to dispute the indisputable. It is a conscious effort to deny the undeniable. The one who commits this sin is fully aware of what he is doing.

Why Is the Sin Unpardonable?

As a first step toward answering this question, we can state the obvious: the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is unpardonable because the person who commits it never repents of the sin. Everyone would agree that genuine repentance brings forgiveness. The person who commits the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit does not seek forgiveness. The concept of a sinner seeking for God’s pardon and yet being refused that pardon is contrary to the whole tenor of Scripture. The person who commits this sin never finds forgiveness because he has no

¹⁵¹*Christian Doctrine of Sin*, 2:419.

¹⁵²“Limitations and Values of Christian Evidences,” p. 25.

desire for forgiveness.

But why would someone who has committed the sin not seek forgiveness? It is not enough to say that they simply refuse to seek forgiveness for some unexplained reason. No rational person would logically permit his own doom. The reason for not seeking forgiveness is that the person is unable to do so. The sin is unpardonable because of some inability in the sinner.

A common view of this inability is that it is produced by the one who commits the sin. That is, in the commission of the sin, the individual does something to himself that inhibits him from seeking forgiveness.¹⁵³ What happens, according to Howard, is that the one who commits the sin “loses his ability to discern spiritual truth.”¹⁵⁴ Similarly, Morris says, “This kind of sinner no longer has the capacity to repent and believe.”¹⁵⁵ According to Clarke, “if any sin is unpardonable, it is so because of its effect upon the sinner’s heart, rendering him incapable of receiving pardon.”¹⁵⁶ This view can also be explained in purely psychological terms.¹⁵⁷ The problem with this explanation of the inability is that it ignores or denies the total depravity of man, which is the real source of the inability. The unsaved Pharisees did not have the ability to discern spiritual truth (1 Cor 2:14). They did not have the capacity within themselves to repent and believe even before they committed the sin (John 6:44, 65; Rom 3:10–11).¹⁵⁸

The reason why those who commit the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit do not repent and find forgiveness is due to their own depravity. Their inability is the result of their depravity. The unpardonable sin or, for that matter, any other sin does not change man’s nature—he does not become more depraved. The blasphemy against the Spirit does nothing to man’s nature that renders God impotent. No amount or quality of sin can make a person unsusceptible to the work of God’s Spirit if *He* so chooses. Ultimately then, the reason why the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is unpardonable is because God

¹⁵³Clarke, *Mark*, p. 55; Evans, “Expository Problems,” p. 244; Grant and Luccock, “Mark,” p. 693; Hiebert, *Mark*, p. 94; Howard, *Matthew*, p. 48; Malden, *Promise of the Father*, p. 202; Morris, *Luke*, p. 231; Nixon, “Matthew,” p. 832; Ogilvie, *Life Without Limits*, p. 70; Robinson, *Matthew*, p. 113.

¹⁵⁴*Matthew*, p. 48.

¹⁵⁵*Luke*, p. 231.

¹⁵⁶*Mark*, p. 55.

¹⁵⁷Grant and Luccock, “Mark,” p. 693.

¹⁵⁸It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the issues of total depravity and total inability. See, e.g., Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 494–498; Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), pp. 450–56.

chooses to allow the one who commits the sin to remain in his own depraved condition. God does not grant that person the grace necessary to repent.

All of this naturally leads to the most important question: why this particular sin? Apparently, the answer is related to the nature of the sin itself. The Gospel accounts clearly demonstrate that the Pharisees were willingly ignorant of the truth. Both Matthew and Mark indicate that the first step taken by Jesus in his refutation of the false charges against him made by the Pharisees was to show that the charges were totally absurd. There was absolutely no reason for them to conclude that his exorcisms were accomplished by the power of Satan. The one who commits this sin seeks to deny the undeniable miraculous power of the Holy Spirit. He attempts to dispute the indisputable. Whitcomb says that sign-miracles “were presented to human minds with such force and clarity that no one was able to deny them.”¹⁵⁹ Nevertheless, the Pharisees wanted, for their own sinful reasons, to deny the undeniable—that Jesus’ miracles had been accomplished by the power of the Spirit. Although they knew the truth, they insisted on attributing the miracle to Satan’s power. This is the unpardonable blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

Who Can Commit the Sin?

The question to be decided is whether the sin can be committed by unbelievers, unbelievers and believers, or simply believers. Generally, speaking, it is only when the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in the Gospel accounts is equated with passages such as Hebrews 6:4–6 and 1 John 5:16 that the sin is seen as possibly pertaining to believers. But it has been previously demonstrated that these equations are invalid.

It is clear from the accounts in Matthew 12 and Mark 3 that Jesus’ charge of blasphemy was directed toward the unbelieving Pharisees. If the sin could be committed by believers, it would be an exception to the doctrine of the eternal security of the believer (John 5:24; 6:37; 10:27–30; etc.). Truly, only the unregenerate can commit the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

Can the Sin Be Committed Today?

The answer to this question depends, of course, on the interpretation of the sin itself. It has been shown that the sin is best understood as the blasphemy of the miracle-working power of the Holy Spirit. Since this is the case, then obviously the sin could only be committed

¹⁵⁹Whitcomb, “Limitations and Values of Christian Evidences,” p. 25.

during a period of supernatural sign-miracles. As I have previously argued, sign miracles are not occurring today; they ceased at the end of the first century. Therefore, the sin could not be committed in this age. However, I believe the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit could have been committed during Jesus' ministry as well as during the ministries of his apostles, who also performed the same kind of supernatural sign-miracles (cf. Acts 3:1–11; 8:5–7; 9:32–42; and 19:11–12). It also appears that the sin can be committed in the future tribulation period during the ministry of God's two witnesses in Revelation 11:3–6. These two individuals will also apparently be given the power to perform supernatural sign-miracles.

CONCLUSION

What is the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? It is the sin of blaspheming the miracle-working power of the Holy Spirit. It was committed by the Pharisees who were saying that the miracles of Jesus were being accomplished by Satan's power. It is not a flippant act or slip of the tongue, but one that can be characterized as a positive speaking of the heart. Also, it is not a sin of ignorance but is done in full knowledge of the truth. It is an attempt to deny the undeniable. This sin is unpardonable because the person who commits it never seeks forgiveness. Instead, God permits such a person to remain in his own depravity. Obviously, such a sin could only be committed by an unbeliever, but since the Holy Spirit is not producing sign-miracles in this age, the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit cannot be committed by anyone today.