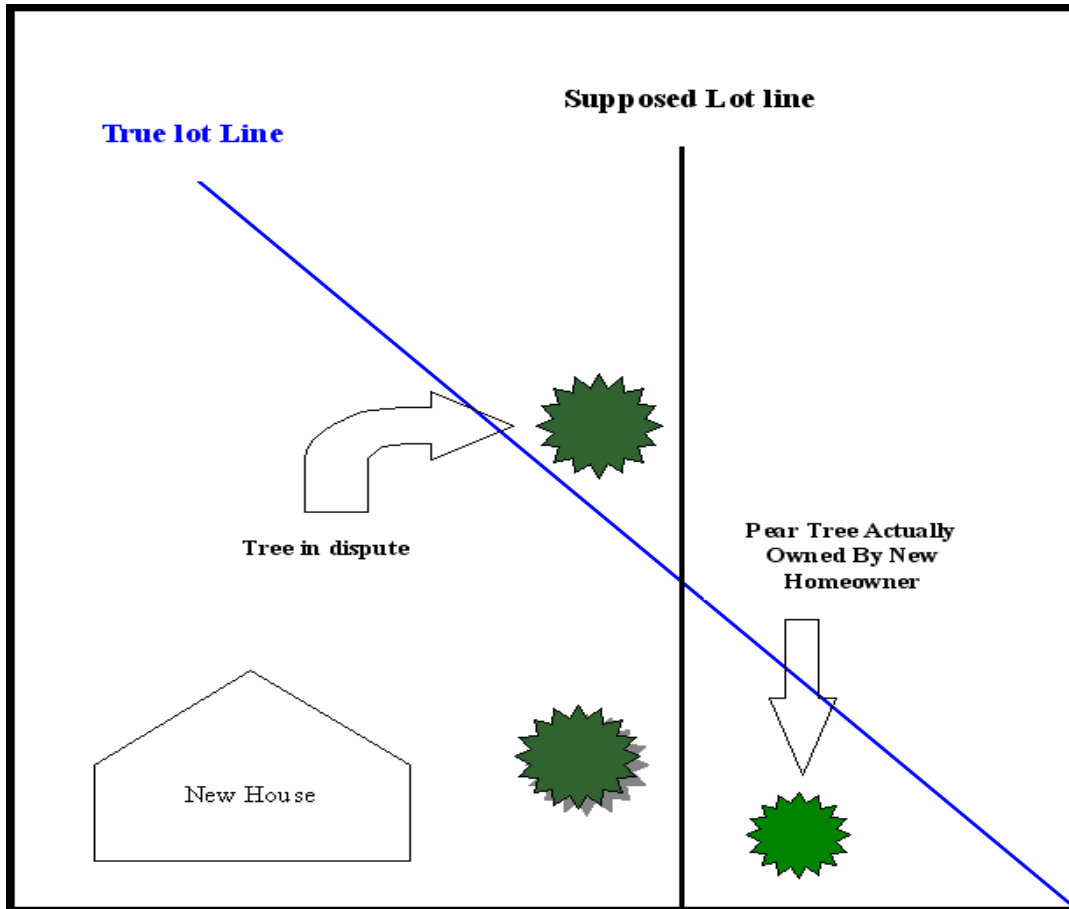


## Sin in the Wesleyan Tradition

It is helpful to understand how sin is defined in the Wesleyan tradition. Those of you who are Catholic might recognize a *slight* similarity to this in the Catholic understanding of mortal and venial sins. Sin, per Wesley, is a *willful violation of a known law of God*. This is confirmed in [James 4:17](#). Sin, properly so called, per Wesley, is not honest mistakes, misunderstandings, or shortcomings. It involves an act of the will. The following diagram will help to clarify this (*from volume 3 of Profiles In Wesleyan Theology*, Leslie D. Wilcox, 3:166, Schmull Publishing Company, Inc., Salem, OH. 1985).



### Situation #1

"A man buys a house and property. According to his understanding, the property line goes straight back from his house. On what he believes to be his land is a fruit tree (the tree in dispute), so he picks and takes the fruit. The neighbor sees this, and comes out of his house furious and screaming, accusing his new neighbor of being a thief for stealing his fruit! Unbeknown to the new neighbor, the property line goes at an angle, and the fruit tree is clearly in the neighbor's yard. The question is: **Did he sin?** .....

According to Wesley's definition *he did not* (in the sense of an act of rebellion), for it did not carry the essential elements. First, *he did not know* he was doing wrong. Secondly, *he did not willfully* violate his neighbor, but yet, to all rights and appearances, the new neighbor broke the law and stole what was rightfully his neighbor's. Now, once he was informed of the fact that he violated the law, then he owed his neighbor restitution for his loss.

## **Situation #2**

But what if the new neighbor was sneaking around and taking pears from the tree that was on his property (bottom right tree), but he *thought* they were on his neighbor's property? **Did he sin by taking fruit that was his property? .....**

Yes! Sin is a matter of the heart and intent, not necessarily the result of what occurred. If he thought that he was stealing his neighbor's pears, he was committing a sin in his own heart, a willful transgression of a known law of God. This illustration helps us to rightfully differentiate between a mistake, an act of ignorance, and a willful act of sin ."

In the example above it might take time and study to determine if sin had occurred. For example, a surveyor may have had to come out and survey the property. Property records might have had to be checked at the county courthouse. It may have taken time to verify the actual location of the property line. If the records were in dispute litigation may have been needed to resolve where the actual property line was. Only when both owners had agreed where the line was could they then determine who was at fault.

Likewise, for Christians seeking to follow Christ, we must learn through prayer and bible study what God's will is for our lives. Once we become aware that we are falling short in some area either through sin of omission or commission we are then morally accountable for it. Even here it may take time for us to either learn to act in new ways or learn how to stop acting in old ways.

## **Some clarifications here...**

When we make mistakes due to lack of knowledge .. while this is not 'sin properly so called' it still needs to be covered by the grace of God . Since none of us are perfect, we need to realize that God's grace is covering us for those times that we fail .. I am simply making distinction here between willfully shaking my fist at God and acting out of ignorance or lack of knowledge.

The doctrine above is not a license to keep on sinning by pretending we don't know what God wants ... remember .. God knows our hearts ... if our hearts do not condemn us we have confidence before god.

The biblical discussion below.. may be helpful for those not familiar with Wesleyean theology..

I would also recommend this web page ... [http://biblical-theology.net/what\\_is\\_sin.htm](http://biblical-theology.net/what_is_sin.htm) (Note .. I am **not** recommending the entire content of this website .. only this page)

The below discussion is also found on GCN at the following address...

<http://www.gaychristian.net/community/showtopic.php?tid/13862304/>

Scripture really talks about two kinds of sin (actually there is a third kind – our inherited sin nature but lets save that for another discussion). Just to make it easy I will refer to them as “sin” (with a little ‘s’ ) and Sin (with a capital ‘S’).

### **Here is a description of the first kind of sin (little 's')..from Hebrews 9: 1-7...**

*1 Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. 2 tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand, the table and the consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place. 3 Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, 4 which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. 5 Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now.*

*6 When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry.*

*7 But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and **for the sins the people had committed in ignorance.***

We see here that in the original Old Testament covenant there was a yearly sacrifice for sins committed in ignorance. Ignorance here means “not knowing”. These were for sins that were committed by individuals who either did not know or did not realize they had sinned. The sacrifice is general, not specific and was once a year

### **Known sins or willful sinning ... Sin with a capital S**

They also had a rather complex sacrificial system for known sins. I will not get into that here. If you are curious read the entire book of Leviticus. These specific sacrifices point to the second kind of Sin. This is the kind James is talking about here in James 4:17

*17 Anyone, then, who **knows** the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.*

This is different than sin committed in ignorance. This is when you personally **know** and are **convicted** of something and **choose** to do it anyway. This kind of Sin is not a mistake or shortcoming as a sin of ignorance would be. In this case you know that you know that you know that something is right or wrong to do and you choose to do the wrong.

Coming further into the New Testament we no longer need to use the sacrificial system of the Old Testament. But the two kinds of sin remain....

1. sins of ignorance
2. Sins of commission or omission committed on purpose with full knowledge and conviction

### **Conclusion...**

Now let's relate this to what we have been talking about. The property line(s) reflect where one might biblically draw the boundary line for sexual activity between people of the same sex.

Many on Side A have studied the scriptures and believe that same sex sex is affirmed by God. Thus they believe that same sex sex between people who have made a lifelong commitment (marriage) is within the

boundaries of God's will. Thus they are not willfully sinning (in the capital **S** sense of the word anyway). (This would look like situation #1 from the viewpoint of those who are Side B)

Now there may be others who are Side A that know that same sex sex is out of bounds but do it anyway. This would be **willfull** sin (capital **S**) and rebellion **regardless** of where the true boundary line is. Sin is a matter of the heart. (Those who are Side A would view this as situation #2.)

Side B on the other hand believes that ALL same sex sex is out of bounds. Thus for Side B to cross this boundary line is sin. It is important to understand here that in this case it is sin **regardless** of where someone else may believe the boundary line actually lies. Sin is a matter of the heart. (This also would look like situation #2 to those who are Side A.)

This is why it is wrong to coerce someone into crossing a boundary line that they, in their heart of hearts, believe exists. To do so is to wound their conscience and encourage them to ignore their inner voice of right and wrong, (See [1 Corinthians 8:1-13](#) and [10:25-32](#) ) Instead we must allow God to work in their lives and let them be led by the Holy Spirit.

On the other side of this I personally believe it is not helpful to accuse people who are sincerely following their Side A beliefs of sinning. In their heart of hearts they are not sinning. I have good friendships with people who do not believe as I do on many issues. It would not do either of us any good to point to the other and call them a sinner. We do not do that in those situations and I see no reason to do this here. All that does is put up defensive barriers with an '*I'm right .. your wrong*' type of attitude. The issue here is knowledge, interpretation and mutual respect.

Now before I get accused of moral relativism here let me say that God is the one who ultimately knows where the boundary line is. But God is also the **ONLY** one that knows where an individual's heart is on this issue. So we leave judgment to God (See [Romans 14](#) and the earlier Corinthians reference) A basic summary of these passages is that we are not to judge another man's (God's) servant. God will do the judging. (Also note that I interpret *weak conscience* in the passage as a '*different conscience*'. Paul's concern is that we do not tempt someone to go against their conscience (or their faith). The specific situation Paul was referring to had to do with O.T. food restrictions. But our issue has two theological arguments (Side A and Side B) about which even scholars disagree.

The heart of the matter is not which side you are on (though I obviously believe the sides are important). The heart of the matter is the heart itself. Is your heart right with God. So.. whatever side you believe yourself to be on .. or even if you don't know which side .. I would encourage you to submit completely to God and let Him direct your path.