

Walter White's many sins

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [October 16, 2013](#) issue



In the nearly six-year run of AMC's *Breaking Bad*, Walter White (portrayed by Bryan Cranston) has amassed a long catalog of sins. Where to start?

Walt is a high school chemistry teacher who has lured and cajoled a former student, Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul), into a life of high crime. Jesse was already a junkie and a ne'er-do-well, but Mr. White—as he is always addressed by Jesse—turns Jesse into a fellow cooker of methamphetamine. Before long Walt has talked Jesse into committing murder.

Walt has also had occasion to watch Jesse's girlfriend choking due to a drug overdose. He could have saved her easily enough, but it would not have served his purposes of more easily manipulating Jesse, so he watched her die. He has never mentioned this to Jesse.

What Jesse and Walt both do know is that the girlfriend's father was an air traffic controller who went to work in the midst of his shock and grief—which led to the collision of two airliners. So Walt is responsible for the deaths of hundreds of airplane passengers.

In addition, Walt has run down and shot two drug dealers, cold-bloodedly ordered the assassinations of nine prison inmates, bombed a nursing home and killed one of his main competitors, and shot to death a former colleague in crime. He has robbed a train and poisoned to sickness, if not death, a young boy (the son of another one of Jesse's girlfriends).

Along the way Walt has shamelessly and habitually lied to his wife and teenaged son. Making Machiavelli look like an amateur, he has repeatedly manipulated his wife—drawing her into his drug business—and son, who suffers from cerebral palsy. There are no human connections that Walt will not use in his criminal pursuits. Adding to the suspense, and to Walt's perfidy, is the duplicity he practices on his loving in-laws, Marie and Hank (and Hank happens to be an agent of the Drug Enforcement Administration).

Other television shows have featured antiheroes, not least the infamous Tony Soprano. But no other show has started out with a basically good guy and so vividly shown his devolution into a truly evil character.

Breaking Bad began with Walter White teaching high school and doting over his wife and son (later a newborn, Holly, is added to the family). He is slightly chubby (Cranston put on an extra ten pounds to play the character), somewhat feckless, something of an underachiever.

Then came a diagnosis of terminal lung cancer. Given a year or two to live, Walt became determined to provide for his family upon his death, so he put his knowledge of chemistry to work cooking meth.

Though the show is not explicitly theological, it serves as a meditation on how we are all prone to sin and how destructive and precipitous the wages of sin can be. I am reminded of G. K. Chesterton's stories about a priest detective, Father Brown. In one of the stories, Father Brown explains his crime-solving method. He sympathizes with crooks by being aware of his own propensity to sin and crime.

"No man's really any good till he knows how bad he is," the sleuth says. None of us is all that different from actual criminals, and our only hope is "somehow or other to have captured one criminal, and kept him safe under [our own] hat."

Walter White is a (relatively) decent man who has broken bad and failed to keep others and himself safe from the criminal under his own hat.

The show touches on another theological theme. Walt justifies his crime as part of his effort to see that his family will be financially secure after his death. Thinking he is about to be captured, he leaves a videotaped confession in which he professes love for his wife and son, then declares, "There are going to be some things that you'll come to learn about me in the next few days. I just want you to know that no

matter how it may look, I only had you in my heart.”

His long litany of crime and manipulation was for the sake of his family. To his list of sins we may add idolatry of family. Jesus, in his words about “hating” fathers and mothers, spoke explicitly against putting family ahead of everything, including God.

One episode of *Breaking Bad* remains to be shown. It’s not clear whether or not Walt will violently lose his life. It is bitter irony and justice that he will almost certainly lose his family.