

## ARE PEOPLE BORN IN SIN? HOW IS SIN PASSED ON TO SUCCEEDING GENERATIONS?

### **Introduction**

The world is filled with corruption and immorality. It touches every human life and everyone has to wrestle with his own sin and being sinned against. But, how can this all too evident universality of sin be explained? Only the Christian worldview can satisfactorily account for it. For example, philosophical naturalism cannot account for the reality of sin because it denies the existence of anything but matter and energy. Eastern monism has a problem similar to that of naturalism because it asserts that all is “one.” But, if all is “one” then there is no way to distinguish between good and bad because good and bad too are “one.” Skepticism cannot make sense of sin because it has no way of knowing whether there is sin. Other “religions of revelation,” such as Mormonism and Islam, have problems of internal coherence. In the end, while every worldview has to grapple with the question of sin and its pervasiveness, Christianity alone can give a satisfactory answer. The question must therefore be answered in terms of the Christian worldview. That means the answer to this question is found on the pages of God’s inspired and perfect Word. The Bible teaches that Adam is the federal head of all who descend from him by natural generation, and all who are in him have the guilt of his sin imputed to them. As a result, everyone in Adam is cursed with a sinful and depraved nature that inevitably produces personal transgressions.

### **Basic Historical Theological Viewpoints**

However, throughout the history of the church, theologians have interpreted Scripture

variously. Broadly speaking, there are six major theological positions: Pelagianism, Augustinianism and Calvinism, Arminianism, Edwardianism and the Reformed position. Each of these will be treated briefly and separately.

Pelagius was a British theologian who worked in Rome during the early 400's. He was deeply committed to libertarian freedom, and believed that human sin was simply the inevitable bad use of freedom. Pelagius believed that Adam influenced humanity by setting a bad example, just as Christ set a good example. So, "free will," not "Adam" per se, explains sin's entrance and continuance in the world.<sup>1</sup> Pelagius vehemently denied that Adam's posterity could be held responsible for his first sin.<sup>2</sup>

Most people think that Augustine was a "realist." He is said to have believed that all of humanity "really" sinned when Adam sinned. According to "realism," humanity is not a collection of individuals; rather, it is "one," and so when Adam, the first man, sinned, all humanity sinned too. On Augustine's view, individual human beings have corrupt natures because they share the nature of Adam, and therefore they sin personally and are guilty of those personal sins as well. Calvin is said to have followed Augustine on the question of imputation.<sup>3</sup> John Murray, however, denies that Calvin and Augustine are properly termed "realists," since, according to Murray, their primary concern was to combat Pelagius, who said that Adam's sin merely set a bad example for his posterity. Calvin and Augustine were not dealing with the details of the disagreement between federalists and realists,<sup>4</sup> but were mainly concerned to affirm what both

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Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 36-36, 81-84.

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Theodore S. De Bruyn, "Pelagius's Interpretation of Rom. 5:12-21: Exegesis within the Limits of Polemic," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 4 (1988): 34.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen J. Wellum, "Theories of Original Sin" (classroom lecture notes, 27070 – Systematic Theology II, Spring 2004), 91-92.

<sup>4</sup>

The distinction between these two positions will be explained later.

groups affirm, namely, the transmission of a corrupt nature.<sup>5</sup>

The teaching of Arminianism is by no means monolithic. However, Arminius himself believed that human beings inherit a corrupt nature from Adam, but he denied that those who descend from Adam are guilty because of his first sin. Arminians in general deny that we are responsible for what Adam did in the garden, but they tend to affirm a connection between the fall and human corruption. So, Adam transmits “pollution” but not “guilt” to his posterity.<sup>6</sup>

Jonathan Edwards’ view of original sin<sup>7</sup> is not easy to understand. Driving his argument was a concern to defend the justice of God by explaining how He could be just while imputing sin to Adam’s descendants. Edwards was evidently a “realist;” so, he saw Adam and his posterity as an organic whole, much as the branches of a tree are organically related to its root. Even as the branches, before they were branches, existed in the root of the tree, so human beings existed in Adam before they were individuals. Accordingly, when Adam sinned, all sinned in him because all human beings were literally in him.<sup>8</sup> According to Edwards, the charge of guilt in human beings comes after their sin and not before it,<sup>9</sup> even though union with Adam is the source of both.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, God is not unjust to hold men and women responsible for Adam’s sin. In this way, Edwards denies that men and women are guilty for what they did not do.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Edwards

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John Murray, “The Imputation of Adam’s Sin,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 19 (1956): 32-34.

<sup>6</sup> Wellum, “Theories of Original Sin,” 93.

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The term “original sin” refers primarily to original sinfulness of every human being at birth. The doctrine of “original sin” seeks to explain this original sinfulness, and often does so on the ground of Adam’s first sin. See Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Greenville: Ambassador-Emerald, 1988), 255-258.

<sup>8</sup>

Randall Otto, “The Solidarity of Mankind in Jonathan Edwards’ Doctrine of Original Sin,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 62 (1990): 206.

<sup>9</sup>

This does not necessarily imply that Edwards believed in “mediate” imputation, since human beings are guilty of Adam’s first sin because they sinned along with him in the garden.

<sup>10</sup>

Otto, “The Solidarity of Mankind,” 207.

<sup>11</sup>

*Ibid.*, 214.

makes a huge concession to those who insist that people can only be guilty for what they do. Edwards' justifies his view on the basis of his doctrine of continuous creation,<sup>12</sup> and as such, it is not biblically defensible because continuous creation is not a biblical teaching.

Liberal and moderate theology tends to be somewhat Pelagian or Arminian in its understanding of the transmission of sin. Liberalism was a syncretism that blended philosophical naturalism with Christianity. This meant the theory of evolution held a prominent status. Regarding the liberal theology of the early and mid 1900's, Smith says, "It viewed man as emerging from lower forms of life . . . [and] interpreted the fall as man's failure to answer the call of his higher nature."<sup>13</sup> Concerning the nature of the human disposition, Smith writes, "Human nature, at birth, consists of a mixture of tendencies toward both good and evil."<sup>14</sup> Recent Liberal Baptist theologian, Frank Stagg explained the sin of all humanity in terms of what he called "solidarity," but not in terms of Adam's first sin. He said that the sin of the whole human race could be explained as "mob action." Ultimately, humans are sinful because their environment is sinful, and every "man is guilty for his own sin," not for the sin of another.<sup>15</sup> Patricia Williams, a present day Liberal "theologian," concludes that science and its concomitant theory of evolution have finally undermined the doctrine of original sin, once and for all time. We now know that human patterns of behavior are best and most easily explained in terms of natural processes.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Liberal theology sought to demolish the notion that Adam's guilt and corruption are transmitted to his descendants.

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Samuel Storms, *Tragedy in Eden: Original Sin in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: University Press of America, 1985), 240.

<sup>13</sup> Shelton Smith, *Changing Conceptions of Original Sin* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 196.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>15</sup> Frank Stagg, *New Testament Theology* (Nashville: Broadman, 1962) 33-34.

<sup>16</sup>

Patricia Williams, *Doing Without Adam and Eve* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) 199-201.

The Reformed orthodoxy that developed in the wake of Theodore Beza's theology typically affirmed a "covenantal" or "federalist" understanding of the transmission of Adam's sin to his posterity. This view seems to accord best with Holy Scripture and will be defended more below. The "federalist" doctrine of imputation is quite different from the "realist" notion. John Murray discusses the difference, and says that the main point of disagreement between these two is not that everyone inherits a sinful nature from Adam because both views affirm that. However, only the "realists" explain the imputation of Adam's sin in terms of a humanity that was "specifically" and "numerically" one, which existed in Adam and fell with him.<sup>17</sup> Both "federalists" and "realists" agree that Adam is the "natural" head of humanity and that his descendants inherit their natural "pollution" from him. However, unlike realists, federalists explain the imputation of Adam's sin specifically in terms of Adam's representative headship. Adam acted instead of and on behalf of all humanity such that when he sinned, he was sinning for the rest of humanity, and therefore, his guilt is imputed to them "immediately." That is, people are guilty for what Adam did, and not merely for the sins that result from a sinful nature they inherited from him. According to the federal theology, the "specific ground" of imputation is federal headship, rather than natural headship.<sup>18</sup> In summary, the "federalist" viewpoint argues that Adam is both the "natural head" of humanity and the "federal head" of humanity. The sinful nature comes from Adam "mediated" through the human the race, while the guilt of Adam's sin is imputed "immediately" to everyone who is under his federal headship.<sup>19</sup>

### **Scriptural Teaching**

The Bible teaches the Reformed doctrine of the transmission of guilt and pollution as a

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<sup>17</sup>

Murray, "The Imputation of Adam's Sin," 30.

<sup>18</sup>

Ibid., 40.

<sup>19</sup>

Wellum, "Theories of Original Sin," 92.

result of Adam's first sin. Both the Old and New Testaments record the effect of Adam's sin upon the rest of humanity.

### **The Old Testament**

The Old Testament teaches that human beings are grossly sinful (Psa 14:3), that they are sinful from birth (Psa 51:5; 58:3), and that none can stand before God in judgment (Psa 130:4). The human condition finds its basis in the first chapters of the book of Genesis. Genesis may not explain how sinfulness and sin are passed down from Adam, but it clearly teaches that the transfer takes place. Wenham writes, "Von Rad describes the plot of Genesis 2-11 more than one as the progressive power of sin engulfing humanity in an 'avalanche.' . . . From Adam and Eve to the Tower of Babel, Genesis portrays sin as laying waste ever larger areas of human activity."<sup>20</sup> Clearly this is born out by the facts of the text itself. Adam and Eve sin and God curses the human race. Then Cain follows in the footsteps of his father. Commenting on the parallels between Adam's sin and the sin of Cain, Wenham remarks, "These similarities between Chapters 3 and 4 confirm that the former should be read as a paradigm of human sin."<sup>21</sup> The literary structure of the passage shows that the author wants us to see Adam's sin as paradigmatic for his posterity. It establishes a clear link between Adam and the sin of those who follow him.

Genesis chapter 6 begins with an episode of total decadence, which prompts God to make one of the most negative assessments of human nature in the Bible, "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth and that every intent of the thoughts of his hearts was only evil continually" (Gen 6:5). God then destroys the world in a flood, but God's judgment does not correct the human sin problem. This becomes evident when Noah gets drunk

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<sup>20</sup>

Gordon Wenham, "Original Sin in Genesis 1-11," *Churchman* 104 (1990): 311.

<sup>21</sup>

*Ibid.*, 319.

and shamefully exposes himself immediately after he comes out of the ark.<sup>22</sup> Even in God's promise never to destroy the world again by water, He says, "man's heart is evil from his youth" (Gen 8:21). In making the covenant with Noah, God warns not to commit the sin of murder (Gen 9:6), which was the sin of Cain and his descendants. The fact that sin moves through the generations of the human race is shown in Genesis 9:25-27 where Canaan, Ham's son is cursed for the sin of Ham.

The remainder of Genesis continues in like manner with human arrogance in the tower of Babel (chapter 11) and the sin and selfishness in the family of Abraham. Wenham says, "a close reading of these chapters does suggest that the author of Genesis would have been in general sympathy with the interpretation of St. Paul and St. Augustine."<sup>23</sup> According to Genesis, sin is the effect of Adam's sin in the garden.

One objection to this reading is that in some places the Old Testament says God does not hold people responsible for the sins of their fathers (Deut 24:16; Jer 31:29-30; Ezek 18:20). However, these texts refer to God's justice and the sins men commit as individuals. They do not refer to the source and origin of human sin in Adam's fall. Adam's sin is a special case, since he was the first man, and since he acted as our federal head.<sup>24</sup>

## **The New Testament**

From the very first page of the New Testament, Scripture assumes the problem of human sin and offers Christ as the solution to that problem (Matt 1:21; Mark 1:4; Luke 2:10-14; Jn 1:29). While the Gospels suppose human sin, Paul specifically affirms that it has its origins in Adam. "For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in

<sup>22</sup>

Wenham, "Original Sin," 312.

<sup>23</sup>

Ibid., 326.

<sup>24</sup>

Stephen J. Wellum, "Federal Headship Proposal" (classroom lecture notes, 27070 – Systematic Theology II, Spring 2004), 97.

Adam, all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive.” (1 Cor 15:21-22; cf. 1 Tim 2:13-14). The passage in Corinthians certainly affirms federal headship, but Paul works this out in greater detail in Romans 5:12-19, to which we now turn.

Romans chapter 5 appears at a crucial juncture in Paul’s argument. He has just finished showing that everyone, Jews and Gentiles are condemned under sin, moving from the creation of the world (Adam) and through the time of the Law (Rom 1-2). In chapters 3-4, Paul explains that Jesus Christ is the only way men of any race can be righteous in God’s sight. Chapter 5 pulls all of this together, summarizing the main points already made. Paul sets forth the contrast between Adam and Christ (law and gospel) in which Adam was the type and Christ the antitype (Rom 5:14).

Because of space limitations, the following will concentrate on Romans 5:12-13 and verse 19. Romans 5:12c says, “kai\ ou(/twj e)j pa/ntaj a)nqrw/pouj o( qa/ntoj dih=lqen, e)f’ %( pa/ntej h(/marton,” “and so, death spread to all men, because all sinned.” In the past, many have drawn attention to the fact that the word “h(/marton” is an aorist, and therefore it refers to Adam’s single, completed, past action, rather than to the sins of the world. However, the aorist cannot be interpreted this way.<sup>25</sup>

The real question relates to the phrase, “e)f’ %( pa/ntej h(/marton.” Augustine, translating from Jerome’s Vulgate, rendered “e)f’ %(” as “in whom,” so that his translation read, “through one man sin entered . . . in whom all sinned.” But this is grammatically incorrect if translating from the Greek. Probably the best translation of “e)f’ %(” is the causal, “in that,” or “because.” This is the view of most commentators and translations and does not necessarily decide one’s interpretation of the text.

The most controversy surrounds the words, “pa/ntej h(/marton.” In what sense is it true

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<sup>25</sup>

D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 68-73.

that “all sinned?” In his Romans commentary, Charles Hodge gives four possible interpretations. First, it could mean that all actually sinned. However, that is inconsistent with the purpose of the verse, which is about the sin of Adam, and it contradicts the analogy between Adam and Christ in the rest of the passage. If all men die because of their personal sins only, then men are righteous because of their personal obedience as well. Clearly the passage intends a different conclusion. Second, it could mean that all men became “corrupt” because of Adam’s sin (mediate imputation). But, the text does not say that; rather, it says “all sinned,” and the passage is not proving the “corruption” of humanity, but the difference between being in Christ and being in Adam. Third, it could mean that all men actually sinned in Adam (realism). However, this is only defensible on the philosophical notion that humanity was “numerically one” in Adam, which is biblically questionable. Besides, it would ruin Paul’s parallel between Adam and Christ, unless all the elect are “numerically one” and actually obey in Christ.<sup>26</sup>

The fourth interpretation is the best, and says that “all sinned in Adam” as their federal (or representative) head. Just as Christ represents all who believe in Him, such that His obedience and death counts for them, so also Adam represents all who descend from him such that his disobedience counts for them. This makes best sense of the passage as a whole, and it is the best sense of verse 12.<sup>27</sup> Even though he denies the federalist interpretation, Cranfield admits that exegetes are driven to understand sinners as guilty in Adam apart from their own sin because the text says that sinners are righteous in Christ apart from their own righteousness.<sup>28</sup> Stein says, “Hodge left no doubt that he considered the doctrine of imputation the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*. If the certainty of universal sin was questioned, then the necessity of atonement stood

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<sup>26</sup>

Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Philadelphia: Claxton, 1864) 232-236.

<sup>27</sup>

*Ibid.*, 236-243.

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C.E.B Cranfield, “On Some of The Problems in The Interpretation of Romans 5:12,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 22 (1969): 338.

in jeopardy.”<sup>29</sup>

Romans 5:19 says, “For as through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One, the many will be made righteous.” Because of Adam’s sin, his descendants are counted guilty, and because of Christ’s obedience, believers are counted righteous. This verse is most easily understood in terms of federal headship.

The next step is to argue that just as Christ’s righteousness is the ground and foundation of the believer’s actual holiness (Rom 6:6-7),<sup>30</sup> so also Adam’s guilt is the ground and foundation of the unbeliever’s pollution. Though the Bible never says this in so many words, federalists often draw this conclusion. They reason that if Christ’s righteousness is the legal basis of God’s just sanctification of hell deserving sinners, then Adam’s guilt must be the legal basis of God’s justice in cursing all who are in Adam with a corrupt nature that then issues in actual sins. Louis Berkhof says, “In His righteous judgment, God imputes the guilt of the first sin, committed by the head of the covenant, to all those that are federally related to him. And as a result they are born in a sinful condition as well, and this inherent corruption also involves guilt.”<sup>31</sup> So, the Bible teaches that Adam is the federal head of all who descend from him by natural generation, and all who are in him have the guilt of his sin imputed to them. As a result, everyone in Adam is cursed with a sinful and depraved nature that inevitably produces personal transgressions.

### **Theological Implications**

Several theological implications follow from this doctrine of the transmission of Adam’s sin to all his posterity. First, if the contrary were true and if all men were not necessarily

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Stephen J Stein, “Stuart and Hodge on Romans 5:12-21: An Exegetical Controversy About Original Sin,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 47 (1969): 350.

<sup>30</sup> John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), 75-79.

<sup>31</sup>

Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1958; reprint, 2000), 242.

sinner and in need of salvation, then all men would not necessarily be in need of Christ. If a strong doctrine of the transmission of Adam's sin were not affirmed, then a strong doctrine of salvation by the work of Christ alone could not be affirmed. The two doctrines stand in direct relationship to one another. The doctrine that Adam is representative of humanity preserves the doctrine of Christ's representation. We are not righteous because of what we do, but because of what Christ did. To put it in other terms, the Adam-Christ federalism preserves the distinction between the law and the gospel. Finally, this doctrine implies that traditional covenant theology is correct in suggesting a contrast between the covenant of works (call it the "covenant of creation" if "covenant of works" seems improper) and the covenant of grace, though the outworking of that implication would require another paper at the very least.

### **Conclusion**

This doctrine is prone to elicit many objections, but for the Christian, the question must be settled on the Christian worldview, and that means it must be settled in Scripture. Scripture supports the doctrine that human beings are guilty and sinful because of Adam just as Christians are righteous and holy because of Christ. Every objection against the imputation of Adam's guilt and the transmission of his sin also applies to the imputation of Christ's righteousness and Christian sanctification in Him. If the fact that Adam's sin is imputed to his descendants is bothersome, then trust in Christ and own His righteousness instead of Adam's guilt. The doctrine of the imputation and transmission of Adam's sin leads to despair. There is no hope whatsoever of salvation by personal achievements, and this is the reason everyone must rest in Christ alone for acceptance in the sight of God. All are shut up under sin so that all who believe may be saved through Jesus Christ.