

Original Sin

Presented to

Department of Systematic Theology

Dallas Theological Seminary

403N Trinitarianism – J. Scott Horrell

by

Scott F. Campbell

Box #293

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Introduction

Man has struggled with sin for as long as he has been on earth, at least since that first tragic experiment into disobedience in the perfect environment God had made for his perfect creation.

The doctrine of original sin is the traditional attempt to explain the overwhelming depth of penetration of sin into our persons and environment. Though this is a fundamental precept of Protestant orthodoxy and has connections into a number of other important fields of truth and study, it is still a developing field itself with more than its share of ambiguity and questions. Most that have a stated view of original sin, have in their own camps as many questions as convictions.¹

Such a confusing state of affairs might be tolerable in the case of a peripheral doctrine or for systems of theology that do not lay claim to an absolute authority. But it clearly raises serious questions for evangelical theology which not only affirms the crucial importance of this doctrine in its own right and in relation to other doctrines, but which also bases itself on a belief in the authority, clarity and sufficiency of Scripture for all matters of faith and practice.²

Another look at this doctrine is needed. Certainly evangelicals need some unanimity on at least the basic doctrines if we intend to faithfully and unitedly represent our Lord Jesus Christ to this generation.

Before continuing, let's define some terms so we can proceed together.

¹ D. Parker, "Original Sin: A Study in Evangelical Theory," *Evangelical Quarterly* 61:1 (1989): 58.

² *Ibid.*, 54.

Original sin is “a hereditary corruption and depravity of our nature, extending to all the parts of the soul, which first makes us obnoxious (subject) to the wrath of God, and then produces in us works which in Scripture are termed works of the flesh.”³ This may be used in different senses as described by S. Lewis Johnson,⁴ however in this paper an attempt will be made to remain consistent to the above. Two parts to Calvin’s definition need to be noticed. Being subject to the wrath of God speaks to the guilt or culpability inherited by all humans. The corruption and depravity speaks to an inherited flaw in our human character that compels us to sin beyond our ability to resist.

The sin of Adam or race-sin are other ways of referring to original sin. Further terms will be introduced that attempt to explain how original sin is transmitted to us, both the flaw in nature and the guilt. Depravity and corruption also describe the flaw in nature and condemnation further describes the guilt we are said to receive by birth as descendants of Adam.

This paper will investigate the prevailing Protestant views, try to discern those things we, as evangelicals, are sure of and those we are not, where there is agreement, how this doctrine is important and will attempt to offer some thoughts for further investigation. I will attempt to synthesize a working model with the caveat that my own thinking is still very undeveloped.

Basic biblical passages will be looked at first followed by a basic synopsis of prevailing views and, finally, some evaluation and synthesis of a working model.

Major Biblical Passages

Psalms 51:5 – “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,

And in sin my mother conceived me.” (NASB)

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 1975), 1:217.

⁴ S. Lewis Johnson, “G.C. Berkouwer and the Doctrine of Original Sin,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132(Oct-Dec 1975): 318.

Most traditional original sin advocates see this as an absolute statement of the inheritance of sin, at least that of a corrupt nature if not guilt. Others see this poetic passage as simply stating that, as Karl Barth says, “the life of man is transgression from the very first.”⁵

Psalm 58:3 – “*The wicked are estranged from the womb;*

These who speak lies go astray from birth.” (NASB)

The same basic comments will suffice for this poetic passage as the above.

1 Corinthians 15:21-22 – “*For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead.*”²² *For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.*” (NASB)

Many see in this a testimony that Adam, “by sinning, not only brought disaster and ruin upon himself, but also plunged our nature into like destruction.”⁶ Calvin also refers to this as “condemnation” and says “all are imbued with the taint of sin.”⁷ This sin is inherited, it “infected his whole seed”⁸, “transmitted the contagion to all his posterity”⁹ and is the direct result of Adam’s sin, “when he corrupted himself.”¹⁰

Another view would place more emphasis on the context and individual wording. The context is the resurrection controversy in Corinth. These verses are in the middle of Paul’s argument and are comparative, using the words “since . . . also” and “as . . . so also.” These verses are connected organically to each other with “For” and to the verse above with the same word, “For,” indicating support for the above line of thought in sequential logic. The concern

⁵ Frank Stagg, “Adam, Christ and Us,” in *New Testament Studies*, ed. Huber L Drumwright and Curtis Vaughan (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 1975), 130.

⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 215.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 216.

¹⁰ Ibid.

here is with physical death and resurrection, the controversy in Corinth. Spiritual condition and/or guilt and justification are not in view. Neither is universality in view for the comparative links would tie “all” dying with “all” being made alive. Sound hermeneutic would have to limit this only to Christians, to whom Paul is speaking. We see Paul making a limited comparison on a physical level, comparing our common experience of death (not sin) with one another and Adam, and comparing our common experience in Christ, yet future, the resurrection of the body. Frank Stagg says, “The Corinthian reference, then, has to do with bodily death and resurrection, not with the origin of sin.”¹¹

Romans 5:12-21 – “*Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned*” (Verse 12).

For the sake of time, we will only look at verse 12, here, even though the whole passage is an interesting transition from justification (ch 1-5) to sanctification and personal righteousness (ch 6-8). This verse is the main text referred to by proponents of the traditional view of original sin. It is the single most important text that needs to be dealt with on this subject of original sin.

The nature of the passage is one of comparison, again, just like the First Corinthians passage. It builds on the passage preceding, indicated by “therefore” and presents a comparison between Christ and Adam as the progenitors of two contrasting effects upon the people of the world. The comparison begins in verse 12 and is broken off there, to pursue some explanatory and, parenthetical, thoughts, to be picked up again, restated and finished in verses 18-19 with some concluding remarks in verses 20-21.

¹¹ Stagg, “Adam”, 123.

Certainly, something has happened since Adam fell and it has not been good. Original sin advocates see the passing on of sin in the pivotal verse 12, involving all of humanity in depravity and guilt. As Augustine said, “justly condemned, man could not be born of man in any other state.”¹² The references to Adam as “one man” or “one” occur 5 times in the larger context and certainly continue to point to him as in verse 12. However, others, such as Frank Stagg, do not see an organic, direct connection between Adam and the rest of us but would emphasize the last phrase of verse 12, “because all sinned” (NASB).¹³ Stagg sees a danger in universal application of the rest of the passage because of the comparative nature of it, comparing Adam to Christ. If we are involuntarily made sinners and guilty because of Adam then it would follow that “even so” (Rom 5:19 NASB) we could be involuntarily made righteous in Christ. This, of course, would violate a lot of Scripture.

There is a lot more to be discussed here. I think there are holes in both sides of the fence that need to be looked at honestly. There should not be such diversity of thinking about so highly valued a doctrine. Perhaps there is another more fitting way to establish our concerns. We’ll get to that but first a brief look at the traditional formulation of the doctrine of original sin.

Traditional View

History

We find only one indisputable mention of original sin in the Old Testament, the historical account of it in Genesis 3. This account consists of some prelude, with setting and the command from God, the actual drama and sin, and God’s description of the consequences. It might be noted that nowhere was man cursed here. Heavy consequences occurred and continue

¹² Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), 423, quoted in Stagg, “Adam,” 125.

¹³ Stagg, “Adam,” 126.

to this day but only Satan and the ground were actually pronounced as cursed. “Outside Genesis 1-5, the Old Testament builds nothing theologically on Adam.”¹⁴ J.O. Buswell from the Reformed tradition confirms this, “The imputation of Adam’s sin to his posterity is not explicitly developed in the Old Testament.”¹⁵

Neither do we find the traditional Christian concept of original sin in the rabbinic traditions. According to Porter, “the rabbis had a concept of sin’s origin quite different from the standard Christian definition.”¹⁶

Also, Calvin has acknowledged the lack of a clear teaching on original sin by the early fathers of the church, saying, “the oldest doctors of the church only glance obscurely at the point.”¹⁷ Most give Augustine of Hippo the credit for the formulation of the doctrine of original sin, clearly arguing for it in his dispute with Pelagius in AD 411 and afterward. Actually Augustine was building on the work of Irenaeus and, especially, Tertullian to confute Pelagius. Irenaeus spoke of our nature, in physical terms, as corruption not guilt. Tertullian then added the legal aspect, “holding all men punishable even before they had committed sins of their own.”¹⁸ Catholic concerns with infant baptism, in fact, easily occupied the bulk of Augustine’s concern in his lengthy letter *On Original Sin*, written to friends mediating the Pelagian dispute.¹⁹ The Catholic Church became, over the centuries, semi-Pelagian itself, prompting the reformers to

¹⁴ Ibid., 116.

¹⁵ J.Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962-3), 2:286, quoted in Parker, “Original Sin,” 58.

¹⁶ Stanley E. Porter, “The Pauline Concept of Original Sin,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 41:1 (1990): 30.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 214.

¹⁸ A.C. McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1947), vol. 2, *The West from Tertullian to Erasmus*, 19, quoted in Stagg, “Adam,” 124.

¹⁹ From an online article at newbury.com.

return to Augustine and his high view of grace in developing their own stands against the forces of human religious effort in their own day. We are greatly indebted to Augustine. His was one of the last great lights to burn before the darkness descended in the Middle Ages. The reformers have given us the doctrine of original sin as we have it today, with very little change. It has taken two forms.

Reformed

John Calvin articulated the standard view that is still held by those of the Reformed tradition today. This is that the corruption of nature and the guilt resulting from the original Adamic act has passed down to all of us, as his children, making us depraved and condemned before we begin to breathe. Calvin especially emphasizes the corrupt state of the human being, the sin nature, which is itself reason for condemnation separate and apart from any acts it may inspire and commit. This corrupt state is a distinct feature of the reformed view, making the human being justly condemned even in the womb. Calvin explains, “even infants bringing their condemnation with them from their mother’s womb, suffer not for another’s but for their own defect. . . . Nay, their whole nature is, as it were, a seed-bed of sin, and therefore cannot but be odious and abominable to God. Hence it follows, that it is properly deemed sinful in the sight of God; . . .”²⁰ The inherited state is enough for judgement. More recent reformed theologians concur.²¹

The Reformed tradition splits, however, on the mode of transmission, how original sin, both nature and guilt, has come to us through the centuries. Calvin following Augustine assumes inheritance of original sin through physical procreation although Augustine is more

²⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 217-8.

²¹ Parker, “Original Sin,” 57.

explicit about the physical complicity involved. He says, “the nature which begets is corrupt.”²² Even though Calvin hedges a bit, he is still clear in saying, “corruption commencing in Adam, is, by perpetual descent, conveyed from those preceding to those coming after them.”²³ This mode of transmission, developed further by more recent theologians, is called the realist view. It is held by some, but is rejected most Reformed theologians. This view would say that we were all in a real way present in Adam as unindividualized humanity and participated in his sin through him. “Humanity” has now been passed down to us through natural reproduction, as we became individuals, carrying the guilt and corruption. This brings too much of a biological element to the nature of sin for most to be comfortable with, effecting the definition of sin and areas such as sanctification. It would seem, however, to be the most consistent with the inheritance of the depravity of our nature.

Consistent, at least, compared with the other major approach to transmission held currently, called the federalist view. This approach deals mainly with the legal aspect of original sin, the imputation of guilt. Adam is seen as the head of our race and as our representative we are held responsible for his misdeed, as it were, vicariously, by extension. G.C. Berkouwer has proposed that we look to the Old Testament concept of covenant alliance whereby the bond of a community with a single individual could be so strong that no trace of personal responsibility is left. All are bound by the action of the one.²⁴ Berkouwer is making a separate proposal with this but it goes well with the federalist view, giving it some biblical support and a conceptual framework. But the federalist view doesn’t account too well for the inheritance of a depraved nature, its main strength is legal, accounting for our guilt.

²² Augustine, quoted in Calvin, *Institutes*, 216, more in Augustine, “On Original Sin.”

²³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 216.

Berkouwer notices something else about the federalist view that he sees as a fatal flaw. This view leaves us with a dual standard for the imputation of guilt, that of a declared “alien” guilt (from someone else’s sin) and that of a sin personally committed. This is not a problem for me since there are degrees involved in God’s just judgment. But it does raise yet another complexity in this matter, that of a distinction between our culpability for Adam’s sin and our culpability for our own individual acts. It begs, somewhat, a traditional definition of sin as requiring personal involvement. Calvin himself has drawn a distinction²⁵ and others have followed even suggesting different degrees of condemnation for personal verses original sin.

Arminian

The next major category of thinking about original sin is that of the Arminians. Some in this general camp completely reject the traditional doctrine of original sin because of a perceived lack of biblical support and because of problems with the idea of inherited guilt. Others hold to the doctrine firmly. W.T. Purkiser says, “the doctrine of original sin is not a mere appendage to Christian thought, but is one of the foundation stones of the building.”²⁶ This is defined as, “the transmission of hereditary guilt and depravity to all the natural progeny of the first sinning pair.”²⁷ This sounds identical to the Reformed view above, but profits from closer inspection.

Arminians, actually, place far greater emphasis on inherited nature than on inherited guilt. Inherited nature is also defined differently, as the loss of original righteousness rather than

²⁴ Johnson, “Berkouwer,” 323.

²⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 217.

²⁶ W.T. Purkiser, ed., *Exploring Our Faith* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1960), 237, quoted in Parker, “Original Sin,” 61.

²⁷ Hannah, quoted in Benjamin Field, *The Student’s Handbook of Christian Theology* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1883), 122, quoted in Parker, “Original Sin,” 61.

including the further step of aggressive sin “prolific in all kinds of evil,”²⁸ as Calvin says.

Arminians would say we are depraved by being deprived.

As to inherited guilt, Arminians draw a distinction between the consequence of Adam’s sin and personal responsibility for our own sins. That there is a difference comes from Rom 5:14, “those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam” (NASB). The consequence is called ‘guilt as liability to penalty’ and applies to those of us under Adam as head of our race, a ‘penal consequence’ of our association with him.²⁹ It seems this is not guilt at all, as Arminians develop it, so I’m using the word consequence. This happens all the time when one person is affected by the effects of another’s mistakes. In fact there are other consequences to the initial sin in the garden, such as pain in childbirth and the difficulties of work. A further distinctive feature of Arminianism is that all guilt, whether for a depraved nature or for Adam’s sin, is removed by an initial benefit of the cross of Christ to all men. This prevenient grace removes “the condemnation that rested on the race through Adam’s sin.”³⁰

We see, then, that Arminianism dilutes the inherited corrupt nature of the Reformed to a lack of positive righteousness and effectively removes inherited guilt by the initial gift of prevenient grace.

There are variations on the above forms and more contemporary “solutions,” as well, but we have covered the major categories of thinking on the complex subject of original sin.

Evaluation

What can we gain, now, by virtue of perspective on the landscape of original sin?

²⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 218.

²⁹ Parker, “Original Sin,” 62.

³⁰ H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology*, (Kansas City, Beacon Hill, 1952), 2:135, quoted in Parker, “Original Sin,” 63.

This doctrine, as noted earlier, has developed a bewildering array of differing opinion for something so fundamental to evangelical, biblical faith. There has been quite an effort to define original sin in rational terms and explain all its technical aspects, but without any sort of united consensus. One wonders if there is really any concern about this or if the concern is to maintain the borders of the particular camps with diminished or no concern for the health of the church in general, her individual members or a lost world we are here to communicate with. There is a certain “scholastic nature of the doctrine”³¹ and the essentials seem to have been lost in the philosophic development of what Scripture does not comment on.

The doctrine of original sin was developed for two reasons, to guard us against the error of Pelagius and to account for the universality and pervasiveness of sin. We must remember that the teaching of original sin did not develop on its own but arose under the two above pressures. There is agreement on all that is necessary to speak to these two issues. All agree (at least all who are a part of this debate) on depravity, our enslavement to sin both from an empirical and a biblical standpoint. We are lost and helpless but for the grace and intervention of God. We all agree on the current condition of mankind and the need for an absolute Savior.

Though we all agree on where we are, we do not agree on how we got here. The mode of transmission of original sin is the issue of debate and, interestingly, that which the Scripture speaks so little of, if at all.

Differences on the nature of depravity hinge on definition. Is it simply a loss of righteousness or an aggressive, inventive compulsion? Arminians would agree with their Reformed brethren that our current nature is aggressive, Purkiser saying, “profound and

³¹ Parker, “Original Sin,” 57.

permanent perversity in the heart of man . . . man's enslavement to sin.”³² Differences on the issue of guilt are closer than at first appearance, as well, hinging on understanding the distinction between personal blameworthiness for our own acts and culpability for Adam's. The latter is discussed in two aspects, condemnation and consequences. There is work to be done but agreement and unity is within sight on these issues. Even Calvin said that, “we, who are in ourselves innocent and blameless . . .,”³³ while Charles W. Carter believes, with Wesley, that there is “but a hair's breadth” separating the two major traditions.

Beyond this agreement on our current condition, neither mode of transmission, either realist or federalist, provides a satisfactory answer to the question of how we got where we are. Realism is on thin ice because of the need of physical transmission to make us actual co-sinners with Adam. A biological element to the definition of sin and being only one step from the errors of Gnosticism and Manicheism (saved by the original perfect creation of Adam) are realism's problems. But federalism, while having a cogent line of reasoning for the legal imputation of guilt, provides no real method for the transmission of a sin nature since federalists would be uncomfortable with the physical element of realism.

Working Model

We have truly made original sin, as Bavinck has said, “one of the most difficult subjects of dogmatics.”³⁴ Does it really need to be this way, or have we gone beyond what God has revealed, even inventing something under pressure that's unnecessary? Is there a way to sort through the issues and reduce them to a workable core of certainty? We have certainly not

³² Purkiser, *Exploring*, 237, quoted in Parker, “Original Sin,” 61.

³³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 217.

³⁴ H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Kampen: J.H. Bos, 1906-11), 3:78, quoted in Johnson, “Berkouwer,” 319.

achieved clarity with our extra-biblical philosophy and rationalistic speculations. “Stronger measures yet are necessary to overcome the difficulties in formulating this doctrine.”³⁵

As we look to God for such a way we should keep in mind some critical biblical guidelines. The truth we seek must accomplish God’s goal for those of us who are His people, “to the *building up* of the body of Christ; *until* we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, *to a mature man*” (Eph 4:12-13). In short, our doctrine and teaching must accomplish character growth or righteousness in us. Said more concisely, “the goal of our instruction is love” (1 Tim 1:5). Rationalistic intellectualism is not enough any more, we must produce changed lives with our theology or it is illegitimate. Besides, “You have hidden these things from *the* wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants” (Luke 10:21). Better knowledge will be given to us if our motives are right (see, also Phil 1:9-10 NASB), anyway. Luke 10 presents us with another guiding hermeneutical principle, simplicity. Both love (the sum of all righteousness) and simplicity come together in 2 Cor 11:3 to guard us from doctrinal confusion, lest our post reformation minds should “be led astray from the simplicity and purity *of devotion* to Christ.” Let love be our goal and simplicity our method to arrive at unity by the grace of God.

The Scripture speaks strongly, perhaps vehemently, and consistently to the depth, as well as to the breadth of sin. This depth of individual penetration and breadth of universal experience speak clearly to the error of Pelagius and to the universality of sin. These are the two issues, as we discussed above, that have given rise to the traditional formulation of original sin and its continued expression in contemporary faith. The entire Old Testament experience, especially during the period under the Mosaic Law, was precisely to convince the world of its

³⁵ Parker, “Original Sin,” 66.

need for a Savior (Gal 3:19-22 NASB). Eph 2:1-3 and 4:17-19, as well as the entire first three chapters of Romans all speak strongly to the depravity of man, using language such as, “dead in your trespasses and sins,” “by nature children of wrath,” “given themselves over to sensuality” and “having no hope and without God in the world.” That man’s salvation is not from himself is clear in the many passages excluding “works of righteousness” from the salvific formula (Eph 2:8-9, Titus 3:5 and Rom 3:19-31 NASB). Pelagius is of no consequence in the light of these passages.

The universality of sin is also clearly spoken of in all the above passages as well as in the classic polemic of Rom 3:9-18, “There is none righteous, not even one” (verse 10 NASB). The sin of the nations in prophetic declaration and, especially, that of privileged Israel are condemned in great detail, “that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God” (Rom 3:19 NASB).

With all this do we even need a doctrine of original sin to cover our concerns? We have avoided the error of Pelagius and provided for the gospel with universal actual sin and depravity. Why strive to say more when the Scripture gets murky beyond this point? Will the sheer proliferation of evidence convince the enemies of the gospel or protect us any better?

Not only this, but the doctrine itself creates many problems, theologically. Berkouwer has said, “it is easier to spot and condemn the error of Pelagius than to provide a satisfactory positive alternative.”³⁶ The doctrine of original sin has actually brought us problems with the impeccability of Christ, salvation of infants, change of nature in sanctification, the definition of sin (biological element and “alien” guilt), personal responsibility for our condition (always qualifies original sin at some point), and affinity with Gnosticism (in the realist view). There are

³⁶ G.C. Berkouwer, *Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 433, 435 from Parker, “Original Sin,” 54.

probably other problems contained in the baggage of this doctrine, to say nothing of, at least, the appearance to the world of a house divided, as camp mentality persists. Is it really worth all this when our concerns are met with the simple clear language of Scripture? I would say no.

Really the only thing left is the somewhat theoretical issue of how we got the way we are. This can have pragmatic implications and benefits if we can avoid the temptations to speculate and determine to stick to what God has revealed. Revealed truth, of course, gives us the liberty to work outside of its strict sense by the guidance of the Spirit but always to quickly return to it for readjustment. In this spirit there is a proposal on the origin of personal sin that I'd like to make at some point. It involves the presence of sin and death in the world and the personal encounter of it through condemnatory law and the fear of death. This thinking is still very undeveloped and falls outside the scope of this paper.

Conclusion

I have certainly seen how little I know about this subject. Hopefully, this will motivate further study as I look forward to continuing to learn with an open heart.

What I have seen has concerned me, regarding the ambiguity and proliferation of extra biblical philosophy to support a teaching that has at best scanty biblical support and emphasis. This doctrine is not referred to in any of the judgments of God in the Old Testament, nor any of the great sermons or doctrinal developments in the New Testament. Rom 5:12-21, which I wish we could have spent more time on, is the only major portion of scripture and maybe the only scripture at all to speak to the doctrine of original sin. Even this comes in Romans *after* Paul's great development of the gospel in chapters 1-5:11, especially his comprehensive treatment of sin in chapters 1-3:20. God must not think this is very important to the

accomplishment of His goal to reconcile the world to Himself. We have followed Augustine to give this an unnecessary place of importance in our thinking. Our concerns are covered already.

I readily follow Daniel and Nehemiah in confession and sorrow for the sins of Adam and humanity and grieve over the presence of sin and death in the world and in my own life.

“Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!” (2 Cor 9:15 NASB)

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