

# The Fall

The Revd Dr Gerald Bray

Oak Hill College, London

The biblical doctrine of the Fall of man, like that of creation, is universal in its scope and fundamental in its importance, but like its companion it has been just as thoroughly derided and discounted as mythological. To some extent the accusers are a different breed, however. Creation has come under attack from biologists, chemists and geologists — experts in the natural sciences. The Fall has been discredited more by psychologists, sociologists and philosophers — students of the human sciences. This is not surprising, because although creation is certainly concerned with the origin of man, this is only one aspect of the doctrine. The Fall, however, is a human matter above all, with only somewhat debatable consequences for the rest of the created order.

**We are not entitled, on the basis of Scripture, to say that man lost the image of God at the Fall, nor ought we to say that it has been “defaced”, since evidence for that too is lacking.**

It is therefore a matter of primary importance to consider what the Scriptures tell us about man as a creature, if we are to understand what is meant by the Fall in Christian teaching. We are told in Genesis 2.7 that man was formed from the dust of the ground, a fact which secures his link with the material world. But at the same time we are also told that God breathed into him the breath of life, a feature which immediately distinguishes him from his fellow animals. We are also told (1.26-27) that man was created in the *image and likeness* of God, a vitally important concept which sets him apart from every other created being.

What is meant by this expression? For many centuries it was believed that the image and the likeness were distinct things, corresponding to the soul and spirit according to the classical tripartite division of man. Today we no longer accept that division, at least not in its traditional form, and our better knowledge of Hebrew tells us that *image* and *likeness* are two words for the same thing. As a result it is no longer possible for us to believe that at the Fall man lost the likeness but kept the image, so that Christian conversion is a restoration of the likeness of God in man. In some ways this is a pity, since the doctrine of the restoration of the likeness relied heavily on the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer — sanctifying his spirit — and thus touched on a fundamental Christian concern. In some branches of the Church this has been felt so strongly that the old idea has been artificially maintained, in spite of evidence to the contrary!

Conservatism of this kind is always a temptation, but it plays straight into the hands of those who brand the whole idea as an outworn myth. The abandonment of the soul-spirit analogy and the recognition that the image/likeness is a single reality must be accepted, but of course there are still problems, inherited from the older scheme of ideas, which need to be faced. The first of these is that the entire image/likeness was lost at the Fall, or if not completely lost, then so seriously defaced that it is no longer recognisable. This view has often been associated, one way or another with Protestants, and it has been severely criticised. The Bible nowhere says that the image/

*Dr Gerald Bray offers another contribution to his series of surveys of key Biblical doctrines.*



likeness was lost at the Fall; indeed, it appears as a functioning reality well after that event (e.g. Genesis 9.6). It is true that the idea does not reappear in the Old Testament, and that in the New it is strictly linked to Christ, the new Adam in whose image we are re-created, but that does not take away the basic point at issue. We are not entitled, on the basis of Scripture, to say that man lost the image of God at the Fall, nor ought we to say that it has been “defaced”, since the evidence for that too is lacking.

**The key to understanding the Fall is accepting that it was an act of disobedience above all else. As such, it did not affect man in his ontological state, but it *did* touch something more important — his relationship with God.**

But if we reject traditional teaching about the image/likeness of God in man, are we not also rejecting the notion of the Fall? Here the answer must be an unqualified no. The Fall, in Scripture, is not linked to the image/likeness of God but to the divine dispensation in the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 2.17 we are told that man was allowed complete freedom in the Garden, as long as he made no attempt to acquire moral awareness. This awareness was present in the Garden as a living reality, but it belonged to God, and not to man.

It may be that the tree is meant to be understood symbolically, but we should be very careful about this. It is one of the tricks of the Devil to make us think that sin must be some great crime, which the average person is most unlikely to commit. We are less inclined to believe that a small thing might be equally sinful and have consequences which are no less serious. Eating fruit from a tree may not seem like very much, but if it is an act of disobedience, it is sin every bit as much as the biggest crime. Our human minds need adjustment just at this point, since we are disinclined to accept the principle that divine authority is the source of Christian morality, rather than abstract principle. It is wrong for us to kill because God has said so — not because there is some ethical standard which makes killing inappropriate.

The key to understanding the Fall is accepting that it was an act of disobedience above all else. As such, it did not affect man in his ontological state, but it *did* touch something more important — his relationship with God. Because of his disobedience, man was cut off from God,

and no longer able to live in the way in which God had intended. The fact that his physical being was not altered as a result of this is extremely important for two reasons. First, it takes away any need to regard sin as a *stain* on the soul which must be cleaned (e.g. by baptism). We are not talking about an inherited defect but about a broken relationship which must be put right. Secondly, it makes it possible to understand how Christ could have been a man yet not have been sinful. If we picture sin as part of human nature, then either Christ sinned or he did not have a human nature — an impossible dilemma! But if sin is disobedience, leading to a broken relationship with God, then clearly Christ did not sin, even though he was a human being just like Adam!

It might be added in this connection that sin as disobedience also destroys the common equation which is made between sin and suffering. Today we hear talk of healing as if it were the automatic birthright of every Christian. The belief that pain and illness are due to unconfessed sin has returned in a slightly modified guise, since now they are likely to be seen as the work of hostile evil powers! Scripture gives no comfort to supporters of such views, who have simply misunderstood what happened — or rather what did *not* happen — at the Fall. Man in the Garden of Eden was mortal, but preserved from death. When he fell, that protection was removed, but his actual physical being did not change.

The Bible tells us that the Fall of Man came about through a disobedience which sprang from *temptation*. Man did not simply decide to disobey God; he was lured away by the promise that disobedience would make him more like God himself. And surprisingly, that promise was correct! When he ate of the fruit, he *did* become like God as we see in Genesis 3.22. The moral awareness which had been God's preserve now became man's privilege as well. What is more, God nowhere takes it away, either in punishment for the act of disobedience or as part of the restoration of man in Christ. The second Adam is in this respect greater than the first, a fact which is never denied or compromised in any way.

---

**Cosmic evil is personal, just as man is personal, and where there are persons there is responsibility as well.**

---

What are we to make of this extraordinary fact? We are told by the Apostle Paul that no man can thwart the plan of God, and here we see that even in sin his purpose for us is being worked out. At the same time, we cannot forget that it is being worked out in a way which is radically twisted as far as fallen man is concerned. His moral awareness increases his likeness to God, but on a basis of sinfulness which only serves to condemn him all the more. The message of Scripture, as we see from Romans 1, is that the more an unregenerate man knows of God, the greater is his condemnation. There is no scope here for any kind of natural theology which might be linked in with a concept of salvation by moral principle and good works!

Another important aspect of this is that man is engaged in a web of evil which goes far beyond himself. In recent years we have seen a renewed interest in types of sin which go beyond the conscious disobedience of the individual, though in the secular society in which we live this interest has focused on the structures of society. We are now being told that man is a prisoner of his heredity and his environment — factors which alleviate and may even

remove any responsibility on his part. The Bible certainly does not reject the idea of superhuman sin, but neither does it explain it in this way. As far as the Scriptures are concerned, man has passed from being the Son of God to being the Son of Beelzebub — the slave of Satan, who has entangled him in his rebellion against the Creator. Far from taking away his responsibility, it places it squarely in the camp of the rebellious angels, to whom the human race is in thrall. Cosmic evil is personal, just as man is personal, and where there are persons there is responsibility as well.

---

**When all is said and done, the Fall is a reality which has introduced into human experience the spiritual rebellion of the fallen angels.**

---

A further point about the Fall, which is so obvious as to be easily overlooked, or else so potentially controversial that it is simpler to ignore, is the role assigned to the female sex. We are told that it was Eve who sinned first, not only in Genesis but in 1 Timothy 2.14 where Paul uses this fact as justification for giving women a subordinate role in the public worship of the Church. How can we accept this in a day of sexual equality? The answer would appear to lie once more in the close connection between the Fall and the origin of man, male and female. The female came out of the male, and thus in some sense her being depended on his. Had he been the one to sin first, she might have escaped, or else been included in his sin without her consent. But by attacking the woman first Satan was able to touch the man at his weakest spot, and thereby seize them both. It is not because Eve had a greater guilt than Adam that women were subjected to men in the way outlined by Paul, but rather because *both* male and female were more vulnerable when the female was allowed to take the lead. It is for the protection of both, and not for the glory of one over the other, that Paul's commands are given in the way they are.

We must conclude our examination of the Fall with one final point. This is the question of *total depravity*, so familiar to students of the Synod of Dort and so resented by those who believe that it is a miserable rejection of any form of human goodness or achievement. Total depravity, like everything else connected with the Fall, must be seen primarily as a spiritual consequence of disobedience. It is not that every human being is so thoroughly corrupt that he cannot rise to any form of good whatever. Unregenerate men and women are full of good works and great achievements, not infrequently surpassing those of Christians. Nobody is denying that! What we are talking about here is salvation, which comes by grace through faith, and not by works! The doctrine of total depravity says that fallen man is encased in a framework of sinfulness from which he cannot escape. He has a conscience, but uses it on the wrong foundation, for wrong ends. He does good, but in a manner which is ultimately futile and self-defeating. None of his gifts is denied; it is the context which is wrong, and which only God can put right.

When all is said and done, the Fall is a reality which has introduced into human experience the spiritual rebellion of the fallen angels. We did not start this rebellion; we have been tempted into sharing it. But once caught in the net there is no escape, unless God himself provides a way. This he did in Christ, when he defeated the power of Satan, destroyed the gates of hell and paid the penalty for sin which made it possible for God to receive us back as his children and open up to us the tree of life from which the disobedience of our first ancestor had so tragically barred us.

# 'Sharing' and 'Frankness'

Paul Helm

Department of Philosophy, University of Liverpool

*Faithful* Well, then, said Faithful, what is that one thing that we shall at this time found our discourse upon?

*Talkative* What you will. I will talk of things heavenly, or things earthly; things moral, or things evangelical; things sacred, or things profane; things past, or things to come; things foreign, or things at home; things more essential, or things circumstantial; provided that all be done to our profit.

*Faithful* Now did Faithful begin to wonder; and stepping to Christian (for he walked all this while by himself) he said to him (but softly), What a brave companion have we got! Surely this man will make a very excellent pilgrim.

*Christian* At this Christian modestly smiled, and said, This man, with whom you are so taken, will beguile, with that tongue of his, twenty of them that know him not.

*Faithful* Do you know him, then?

*Christian* Know him! Yes, better than he knows himself.

*Faithful* Pray, what is he?

*Christian* His name is Talkative.

Christians are currently being urged to become more talkative. Two of the words at present in vogue are "frankness" and "sharing". Such openness is held out as a Christian *duty* as well as being a source of mutual enrichment among Christians.

It stands to reason that Christians ought to value opportunities of friendship and fellowship with each other and that on such occasions, as on all other occasions, they should do their best to be free from hypocrisy, cant and humbug. In their talk with each other they should avoid needless misunderstanding and make every effort to minimise personal animosity, and to remedy its effects where it occurs. But there is a world of difference between telling the truth and telling the whole truth, between speaking honestly when one does speak, and telling all.

Those who appeal for frankness do not seem to appreciate this distinction. For they seem to be calling for a situation in which personal thoughts and feelings about oneself and others are expressed without reserve in public. Though even the advocates of such "sharing" recognise that there must be limits to such frankness, nevertheless what they are aiming at is clear. Christians ought to tell others much more about themselves than it is conventional to do at present. And, since sharing requires sharers, Christians must be prepared to listen to more about others than they are prepared to do at present.

I shall try briefly to argue that such an emphasis is both unbiblical and unwise. It is based upon at least two questionable principles about the human mind, and a misunderstanding in Christian ethics. First, the principles.

*Principle One: Christians know their real selves* (but are generally unwilling to reveal them). An unspoken and perhaps an unrecognised assumption in the advocacy of frankness is the idea that each of us knows ourselves but is inhibited by present conventions from publicising what he knows. Remove the inhibitions, and the enrichment will follow. But is it true that each of us knows himself in this transparent sense? Certain eminent thinkers appear

to have taken this view. For example Descartes said that there is nothing more easy for him to know than his own mind, and by this he seems to have meant not only that it was *easier* to know his own mind than to know anything else but also that it was *easy* to know his own mind. For Descartes, consciousness is an infallible sign of mind, indeed consciousness is mind, and such consciousness is self-intimating or transparent.

According to Descartes if a person wants to tell someone else his mental state then he can do so — he simply reads it off from his consciousness. Many commentators on Descartes point out that such a view is pre-Freudian, but it is not necessary to have been convinced by what Freud said about the unconscious to recognise its importance. Nor are modern novelists revealing much that is new when they attempt to limn such subcutaneous meanderings. Long before the rise of the novel, Puritan ministers had wrestled hard and long with the pastoral problems of inauthentic religion, "bad faith" and the dangers of self-deception.

And this is surely a biblical emphasis. At this point at least Scripture is clearly anti-Cartesian in its insistence that self-knowledge — a person's knowledge of his own inner motives and desires — is an extremely difficult attainment only made possible by the gift of wisdom. Left to himself a person is inclined to censor and suppress the truth about themselves. The New Testament repeatedly cautions against the possibility of self-deceit (1 John 1.8, 2 Cor. 3.18). The believer is advised to examine himself (1 Cor. 11.28, 2 Cor. 13.5). Most important of all, in Scripture God alone is said to be the one who knows the hearts of men (1 Kings 8.39, Prov. 21.2, Acts 1.24).

---

**But there is a world of difference between telling the whole truth, between speaking honestly when one does speak, and telling all.**

---

It may be said that frank talk is a way of getting to know oneself better. Perhaps it is. But it is more likely that a person's preparedness to reveal in public some deeply personal matter will heighten the prospects of distortion and self-deceit. Well-intentioned witnesses who have sworn to tell the whole truth have been known to be carried away by the occasion into error.

If we are defective in our knowledge of ourselves, of facts about ourselves and of the significance of those facts, this should induce in us an appropriate reticence in publicising our state of mind. For we may not have got the facts right. Talkativeness is not necessarily a sign of self-knowledge. It may be a sign of the very opposite, as Bunyan acutely suggests.

But even if we suppose that we do have accurate knowledge of ourselves, there is a further reason to be reticent.

*Principle Two: Thoughts and feelings should generally be made transparent in public behaviour.* It is easy to fall into the following line of thought. What is private is dark; what is dark is bad and evil; what is bad and evil ought to be confessed; what ought to be confessed ought to be publicly confessed, confessed in the light of day.

But when we think about this more carefully such a line of thought does not have very much to commend it. It certainly does not amount to a convincing *argument* for frankness. "What is private is dark". Yes, we often talk about keeping secrets, hiding them in the recesses of our minds, keeping things dark. But the fact that what is private may be appropriately described as "dark" does not mean that this darkness is the darkness of sin or moral evil. Much that is secret is sinful. Scripture compares sin to darkness (John 3.19-21) and to night, and holiness to light and day (1 Thess. 5.5). But it does not follow that because what is immoral is often kept secret that whatever is kept secret is immoral. Nor does it further follow that what it is right to confess it is right to confess publicly.

The present-day emphasis on frankness among Christians seems to have more to do with the modern cultivation of explicitness and "authenticity" than it does with Christian principle. How often — in certain types of journalism or television reporting, for example — is the suggestion made that what a person is not prepared to reveal to a reporter must for that very reason be shameful? What has the person to hide? Why does he not tell us? Such innuendoes ought to be resisted. A person's refusal to tell a reporter what he is thinking, or planning, or has done, need not be because such thoughts are immoral or shameful but because they are — quite simply — none of the reporter's business.

---

### **Yet the thrust of the New Testament teaching is that the tongue needs careful watching (James 3) and that the Christian ought to be slow to speak (James 1.19).**

---

A person's feelings towards his wife, his hopes for his children, his plans for his career, his state before God — these matters and much else are his own affair, part of his own and his family's private "space" which goes to make up a person's or a family's identity and individuality. A person may, under special circumstances, reveal such details to relatives or friends whose judgement he values. The disclosure of a person's most deeply-felt and private states can only properly take place in relations of trust and mutual respect and dependence of which a happy marriage and a deep friendship are the paradigms. To press for such disclosures in public in the interests of the enrichment of Christian fellowship is to run the risk of impoverishment of spirit.

Of course a person may, if he is sufficiently notorious or celebrated, write and publish his autobiography. But the point is that he has no obligation to do such a thing, and it may be prudent not to. Neither Christian morality nor Christian spirituality require a person to broadcast the details of his life widely or indiscriminately.

Our discussion is now beginning to touch upon ethical questions and so it is to the ethics of frankness that we must now turn. The suggestion that I wish to make here is that the basic thrust of such frankness is that it is *uncivilised*. Civilised relations between people depend upon self-restraint both in advancing one's own point of view and in putting the best possible construction on the expressed attitudes of others. Such mutual self-restraint occupies an exposed, easily trampled-on middle-ground between a situation in which every public action has to have a legal warrant in order to be permissible, and a state of total unrestraint, pure anarchy. Freedom of speech is not the duty of always speaking one's mind, but the privilege of being able to speak one's mind.

The maintenance of such civilised relations clearly depends upon each of us not broadcasting everything that we believe about everything and everyone, ourselves included. For it is only restraint in publicising one's views which permits a person's views to be sufficiently opaque and ambiguous for another person honestly to put a favourable construction (favourable to him, that is) upon them. Such restraint is seriously threatened by the cult of frankness, and civilisation is threatened with it, whether this is civilised relations within a church or within the wider community.

While they are distinct, the public and the private are not totally disconnected. What is private affects what is public and *vice versa*. Perhaps, as certain modern philosophers have argued, the existence of a public realm, a community of individuals, is a necessary condition of individuals identifying and describing their private states. But if people had to publicise whatever they thought this would at once impoverish the inner self. The requirement of decency and civility — that we do not say all that we think — safeguards such freedom of thought.

Lest anyone is tempted to condemn this point of view as "complacent", "bourgeois" or "middle-class" (and this is a predictable reaction) I shall now try briefly to show that such a view is fully in accord with the ethical outlook of Scripture.

To begin with, there is Christ's explicit teaching. In the Sermon on the Mount Christ taught that Christians should keep quiet about when they pray, or fast or give (Matt. 6.1-18). These are essentially private activities because the danger of formalism and of self-advertisement is otherwise so great. The principle behind Christ's teaching is clear: a Christian ought to do what he can to prevent the moral perversion of his activities, and this frequently requires him to keep quiet about them.

From time to time during his ministry Christ refrained from telling his disciples about matters which they could not "bear" (e.g. John 16.12). No doubt a case could be made out for the view that such a practice was unique, occurring as it did at a special time in redemptive history. Yet Christ's practice surely embodies a more generally applicable principle about Christian talk and Christian teaching, namely that such talk should be governed by the overriding question, Does it edify? What is on the tip of my tongue may be true, and I may very much want to say it, but if it will cause confusion or despair or ridicule then I ought not to say it.

Then there is the whole character of the gospels as documents. The claims of liberation theologians and other radicals to the contrary, the four gospels are positively bourgeois in their restraint. There is much that the reader is not told about Christ that was there to be told. What did Christ look like? What were his mannerisms, his likes and dislikes, his small talk? What were his views, in detail, on the Roman occupation and the social problems of his day? Would it not be fascinating to have answers to these questions? Why the restraint? Why are the gospels so brief and scanty a record? The reason is obvious: because they are given to us not as a modern, critical biography, but to highlight one thing — the redemptive work of the Messiah, the work which the Father had given him to do (Jn. 4.34, 17.4).

Reticence is imposed about many things in order to highlight one thing. And if such reticence is built into the very fabric of the gospel narratives then surely it ought to

*continued on p18.*