

Original Sin: A Study in Evangelical Theology*

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Introduction

The doctrine of original sin which refers to the 'morally vitiated condition in which we find ourselves at birth as members of a sinful race'¹ is commonly regarded as one of the most difficult parts of Christian theology. With talk of such matters as imputing Adam's sin to the race and our real incorporation in Adam, the doctrine seems to many to be a good example of some of the worst features of scholastic speculation.

Some theologians would go further and regard it as 'offensive' or 'a perversion of the Biblical doctrine of sin' and quite 'untenable in its traditional forms.' However, they would also generally concede that it does witness to a vital element in Christian truth, viz., that sin is 'a dominant force, and the fact that all men are connected in the solidarity of sin.'²

This makes it crucial for evangelicals who usually uphold it in a straightforward way because they believe it conserves a basic biblical teaching in a particularly emphatic manner. Thus, in an essay in *The Fundamentals* Thomas Whitelaw lists a number of key Scriptural passages in support of the doctrine, and then concludes:

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If these passages do not show that the Bible teaches the doctrine of original, or transmitted and inherited, sin, it is difficult to see in what clearer or more emphatic language the doctrine could have been taught. The truth of the doctrine may be challenged by those who repudiate the authority of Scripture; that it is a doctrine of Scripture can hardly be denied.³

But the importance of the doctrine for evangelicals lies not only in its specifically biblical content, but also because it is integrally related with other doctrines which are of primary theological and practical importance. These include the ideas of grace and salvation, the atonement, the nature of mankind, the function of baptism and evangelism. It also has implications for sanctification and ethics, and moreover, the methodology used to derive the doctrine is dependent upon vital hermeneutical decisions and philosophical presuppositions.

* This article was erroneously published as "Original Sin: A Study in Evangelical Theology". The title here is that originally given it by the author.

¹ E. L. Mascall, 'Sin', *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1968), 20, 556.

² Reinhold Niebuhr, 'Sin', M. Halverson and A. Cohen (eds) *A Handbook of Christian Theology*, (London, Fontana, 1960), 352; E. Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption* (London, Lutterworth, 1952), 103; H. Berkhof, *Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1979), 203.

³ 'The Biblical conception of sin' in *The Fundamentals*, 11, 7-22, cited from 15. See also Charles B. Williams, 'Paul's testimony to the doctrine of sin', Vol. 7, 49-63. The more recently published *Baker's Dictionary of Theology and Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* do not contain separate articles on original sin.

History

The doctrine is not stated in its traditional form in the Bible. It is generally agreed that Augustine (building upon the work of some of his Western predecessors) was the first to formulate it in the context of his controversy with Pelagius whose views provoked a turning point in the history discussion of the subject.⁴

Pelagius taught that individuals are born with the same nature as Adam before the fall and that their subsequent sinning was a consequence only of their imitation of the sins of Adam. Hence Pelagius did not hold to a doctrine of original sin, largely because he felt that it had no scriptural basis and because he believed that the strongly deterministic emphasis of Augustine's teaching undercut a Christian's sense of moral responsibility.

In reaction, Augustine refined his teaching and spoke of the idea of generic sin by which 'human nature, existing in its totality in Adam, was corrupted in the first act of transgression, and as such is transmitted to his descendants', the instrument of which is 'the sexual appetite'.⁵ Basing his views on Romans 5:12 where the

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Vulgate translation of the Greek *eph ho is in quo* (in whom) which, according to Augustine can only refer to Adam, he wrote,

Nothing remains but to conclude that in the first man all are understood to have sinned, because all were in him when he sinned; whereby sin is brought in with birth and not removed save by the new birth... It is manifest that in Adam all sin, so to speak, en masse. Hence, by that sin we become a corrupt mass—*massa perditionis*.⁶

Although Pelagianism was officially condemned at Carthage in AD 418 and at later councils, it reappeared in the modified form of Semi-Pelagianism, which taught that the first steps towards salvation could be taken by man although divine grace was needed for salvation. Both views were found during subsequent centuries with semi-Pelagianism often in the ascendancy.

The Augustinian view was revived by the Protestant reformers, with Calvin, for example, defining original sin as

an hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul, which first makes us liable to God's wrath, then also brings forth in us those works which Scripture calls 'works of the flesh.' (Gal. 5:19)... since we through his (Adam's) transgression have become entangled in the curse, he is said to have made us guilty.⁷

With the development of biblical criticism, the historicity of the Genesis record was discredited, and with it the idea of a literal period of innocence in the Garden followed by a

⁴ G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1971), 430.

⁵ G. P. Fisher, *History of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1896), 185. Augustine's position is not always entirely clear (Fisher, 186; Berkouwer, 434).

⁶ Fisher, 186. See also p. 190 'Persona corrumpit naturam; natura corrumpit personam; so the doctrine was summarily stated.'

⁷ *The Institutes* II, i, 8.

fall through sin. Accordingly, the basis for the traditional doctrine was undermined. Contemporary philosophical and social developments produced a range of views about original sin, most of which tended strongly to contradict the traditional view by appealing to such notions as justice and personal responsibility.

Even amongst contemporary evangelicals there is a wide variety of views. At one end of the scale, there is a popular level statement such as the one from *The Fundamentals* quoted above and this from Paul Little,

Because Adam's original sin is charged to us, we inherit a corrupt nature... From Adam we received sin and guilt... sin is our corrupt nature⁸

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Yet, despite these clear affirmations, Donald G. Bloesch has suggested that the evangelical practice of revivalism may be guilty of a *de facto* denial of the doctrine through too great an optimism about man's freedom to 'decide for salvation on his own' without the aid of divine grace.⁹ There may well be considerable validity to such a claim, but as most will admit, human experience and the Bible point to a serious problem of sin, so the doctrine can hardly be dropped altogether despite its problems.

Accordingly, at the other end of the scale there are lengthy treatments, such as those by Orton Wiley, Charles Hodge and G. C. Berkouwer, which develop complex statements on questions of imputation, divine justice and the impact of doctrine on the scheme of theology. All of this suggests that there is a good deal of truth in Berkouwer's point that it is easier to spot and condemn the error of Pelagius than to provide a satisfactory positive alternative.¹⁰

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.

Issues

Because the form and the terminology of the traditional doctrine are not to be found as such in Scripture, it is desirable to identify some of the major general issues before considering particular doctrinal expressions.

To begin with, it must be noted that the term 'original sin' itself is somewhat 'misleading', as E. L. Mascall concedes, since it does not refer primarily to the original sin of Adam, or to the first sin of an individual, but only to the state in which we find ourselves at birth as members of the race.¹¹ Hence, to avoid misunderstanding, the terms 'birth sin', 'innate sin', 'inherited

⁸ Paul Little, *Know What You Believe* (Homebush West: Anzea Books, 1973), 59f. See also Robert P. Lightner, *Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1986), 174.

⁹ Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* 1 (New York, Harper and Row, 1978), 113.

¹⁰ Berkouwer, 433, 435.

¹¹ Mascall, *op. cit.*, 556.

sin' or 'race sin' are sometimes preferred. But as Hendrikus Berkhof points out, it would appear that to the extent to which it is something which is

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'original' or innate, it can hardly be described as 'sin', if sin is connected with personal responsibility for rejection of God's will.¹²

There is little dispute over the fact that the human race exists in a vitiated state; while this is certainly 'asserted, assumed, and proved' in Scripture,¹³ experience alone is necessary to demonstrate it, and even those who reject the traditional form of the doctrine readily agree that this is the case. This corrupt state involves a bias or proneness to sin which leads inevitably, but not necessarily, to actual sinning in the case of each individual.

Therefore, the simplest way of thinking of this doctrine is to regard it as the theoretical explanation (of whatever cogency) for the patently obvious phenomenon of the universality of sin amongst humans. Thus E. J. Bicknell states that original sin is 'at bottom the attempt to express the fact that all men fall into sin'.¹⁴

From a biblical point of view, the universality of sin cannot be attributed to some external or physical characteristic (as some beliefs of gnostic or Manichean origin have it) for this would deny the doctrine of the creation of mankind in the divine image by suggesting that mankind is evil or defective *per se*. Rather, the fault must be a moral one, involving personal responsibility whereby each individual willingly consents to the inborn corruption and bias to sin and thereby actually sins.

The traditional formulation of the doctrine of original sin is intended to preserve this idea of personal involvement, for as Berkouwer notes, the church has always agreed that it 'may not function and cannot function as a means of excusing ourselves or hiding behind another man's guilt'.¹⁵ Therefore, even in its simplest form, it differs from the Pelagian view, yet in so doing it becomes little more than an alternative term for the state of depravity.¹⁶

However, because of ethical and metaphysical uncertainties surrounding the notion of an inborn tendency to sin and the links

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between this tendency and actual sins, it may be doubted if this way of understanding the doctrine has even succeeded in satisfactorily protecting the idea of sin. Yet it is not certain that support for a stronger view can be found in Scripture. Apart from a few notoriously controversial texts (via., Ps 51; Rom 5; Eph 2:3), all passages usually cited speak simply of

¹² Hendrikus Berkhof, 204.

¹³ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (London, James Clarke, 1960), 231.

¹⁴ E. J. Bicknell, *A Theological Introduction to the Thirty Nine Articles* (London, Longmans, Green, 1955), 177. W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1979), 159. See also John Stacey, *Groundwork of Theology* (London, Epworth, 1977), 257: 'The fall tells us the way things are.'

¹⁵ Berkouwer, 435.

¹⁶ See especially Arminians such as H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology* (Kansas City, Beacon Hill, 1952), 11, 125, and Ernest S. Williams, *Systematic Theology* (Springfield, Gospel Pub. House, 1953), 2, 136.

the universality and inevitability of actual sins as a phenomenon, without offering any further metaphysical or theological explanation.

Nevertheless, formulating the doctrine of original sin as merely an explanation for the universality of sin does not satisfy a number of theologians because it does not seem to provide a strong enough explanation for the occurrence of sins.

To overcome this weakness, some theologians go further and speak of original sin and also of original guilt. The latter is defined as our judicial involvement with Adam's sin.¹⁷ This is a stricter view for it refers to the inherited corruption of the human race as sin for which people are culpable and not merely as a vitiated state and a tendency to commit actual sins.

This way of looking at original sin certainly succeeds in guarding against Pelagianism. However, to sustain such a view, it is necessary to show how it is feasible to think of mankind as a whole existing in a state which may be called 'sinful' in any biblical sense, and also how individuals can be associated with each other and with Adam in such a way as to be genuinely responsible for Adam's sin.¹⁸ It is in dealing with these issues that more problematic or even speculative elements make their appearance in the doctrinal formulations.

Thus to account for the universality of sin or 'race-sin', reference is made to the concept of generic human nature. Then sin itself is defined as not only an act of rebellion or rejection of God's will, but as a 'disposition or state' which 'lacks conformity to the moral will of God'.¹⁹ Finally, various mechanisms are proposed to account for the link between Adam and mankind in regard to sin. The most common of these are the physical by which Adam's descendants are born in a corrupt state by the laws of generation and consequently sin; the *organic* by which Adam's descendants are regarded as literally (seminally) within him and

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undifferentiated or unindividualised state; and the judicial by which Adam is regarded as the representative of all mankind in a legal sense so that he acts on their behalf in a covenantal (federal) relationship with God and they suffer the consequences of his fall, which includes death, depravity and guilt.

Some systems of theology make the process of imputing or reckoning sin and guilt to an individual (whether his own or Adam's) the entire problematic of original sin.²⁰ But this tends to distort the focus of the discussion by highlighting theories of imputation and ethical questions associated with guilt and the justice of God rather than seeing original sin as a call to the confession of our personal guilt and the grasping of the greater grace of God.²¹ Such a distortion exacerbates the apparently scholastic nature of the doctrine, but at least it does serve

¹⁷ Hodge 227; J. Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1962-3), II, 285.

¹⁸ Buswell II, 286.

¹⁹ A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, Judson, 1907), 549, 577; L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth, 1939), 246. H. Orton Wily, *Christian Theology* (Kansas City, Beacon Hill, 1952), 11.

²⁰ Strong, 593f.

²¹ Berkouwer, 466.

to emphasise the racial or generic aspects of the doctrine and so distinguish it clearly from the separate ideas of depravity and actual sin.²²

Therefore if the doctrine is to be retained at all, it needs to be stated in terms which deal with these more advanced issues. A review of some major evangelical schools of interpretation now follows.

Reformed Theology

Reformed Theology with its Augustinian roots is the most rigorous in its approach to original sin. A number of different examples may be found in readily accessible publications. They are similar but by no means identical in every detail.²³

The view that sin is not only an act but also a state which is out of the will of God is usually found as a basic tenet of the conservative tradition of Reformed theology, as is the belief that the Genesis record of Adam is historically reliable. Reformed

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theologians usually reach similar conclusions about the nature of Adam's sin and its immediate impact upon him. More significantly for the present topic, they also see Adam's sin affecting mankind as the cause or origin of sinfulness and the ground for a judicial sentence of guilt which is levelled against all people.²⁴

However, Reformed theologians differ among themselves over the modes of transmission of sin or the theories of imputation because of differing hermeneutical and theological schemes. Thus, J. Murray, L. Berkhof, J. O. Buswell and C. Hodge adopt the representative or federal mode, while A. H. Strong follows the organic or Augustinian mode. Strong also effectively restricts the idea of original sin to imputation although he defines his terms carefully assigning imputation to the divine treatment of sin and original sin itself to the abnormal human condition.²⁵

Therefore, although there may be significant differences in theories of imputation between these theologians, the net effect is similar in that they all affirm a concept of race-sin derived from and dependent upon Adam. Furthermore, the theories of imputation are all constructed so that the link with Adam still leaves all people personally responsible for sin even if not individually involved.

In their treatment of the 'abnormal human condition' they are more consistent. The starting point is the universality of sin as an empirical reality, the most obvious aspect of which is the

²² Hodge, 227.

²³ The four popular theologies examined here are those of L. Berkhof, J. O. Buswell, Charles Hodge and A. H. Strong. John Murray has also published a monograph on the topic (*The Imputation of Adam's Sin*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1959) adopting the representative view, and treating the topic from an exegetical perspective. This work expands on his observations in his commentary, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1967). Because of the logic of Romans 5:12 and 5:15-19, where the sin of Adam is accounted to be the sin of all, Murray speaks of 'solidaric sin.' (*Imputation*, 95).

²⁴ Hodge, 227.

²⁵ Strong, 594.

'conscious violation of law' or actual sin. There is no difficulty in proving this notion by referring to scripture and experience. However, it is a different situation when Reformed theology wishes to progress beyond this level and so distinguish itself from Pelagianism by proving that there is a link with Adam and also that sin is more than personal acts of sin. This is where it is necessary to call upon the notion of a corrupted human nature, which is the basis for a doctrine of original sin.

The clear statements of Scripture are not sufficient here, for as Buswell concedes, 'The imputation of Adam's sin to his posterity is not explicitly developed in the Old Testament.'²⁶ As far as the New Testament is concerned, he can only appeal to Romans 5 for an unequivocal statement on the topic. But even this is far from convincing when it is realised that interpreters from rather different schools of thought find the same passage supportive of their positions also! To demonstrate their case, Reformed

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theologians typically resort to a process of deduction that proposes a general law or common human nature to account for the universality of actual sins amongst human beings. Thus Strong writes,

Reason seeks an underlying principle which will reduce these multitudinous phenomena to unity... we are compelled to refer these common moral phenomena to a common moral nature, and to find in it the cause of this universal, spontaneous, and all-controlling opposition to God and his law. The only possible solution of the problem is this, that the common nature of mankind is corrupt... This unconscious and fundamental direction of the will, as the source of actual sin, must itself be sin; and of this sin all mankind are partakers.²⁷

According to Reformed theology, then, it is this common human nature now tainted by corruption which the Bible means when it speaks of 'the flesh' and the 'carnal mind'.

Buswell is one of the few to acknowledge in any detail the philosophical presuppositions involved in this process,²⁸ but even then, he does not allow this concession to affect his certainty about the racial dimension of sin. But this is a serious weakness because it is clear that only a doctrinal system presupposing the real existence of universals like 'human nature' could include the notion of 'race sin' or a generic human nature liable to be corrupted by the fall of its founder and head. If belief in the existence of universals is not part of one's theological or philosophical system, then the fact that all people do in fact sin may be accepted as an undoubted empirical and historical fact but one which requires no further explanation as to its cause or origin. In this case, there can be no doctrine of original sin and guilt except in the most elementary manner. The latter is a more popular philosophical position in the contemporary world, at least at the popular level.

The Augustinian or realist theory of imputation seems best suited to the idea of a corrupted human nature, but it is notable that only Strong adopts it. The others reject this theory because it seems to be too materialistic, thus tending to obscure the personal or moral element in

²⁶ Buswell, 286.

²⁷ Strong, 580.

²⁸ Buswell, 300. See also Fisher, 185, on Augustine.

original sin. But it is impossible to avoid such a position if the idea of a generic human nature is to be held. It is this factor in Augustine's original presentation that ensured the church would retain infant baptism as the sacramental remedy

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for original sin. It also led in time to the idea of the immaculate conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary as a safeguard for the Virgin Birth in order to prevent Christ and Mary from being affected by original sin.

Similarly, in Reformed Theology, the realist theory accounts for the belief that original sin is still present in the regenerate believer although not imputed.²⁹ This has a practical effect by its impact on the doctrine of sanctification by ruling out the possibility of entire sanctification until original sin is removed at the glorification of the believer at death.

The notion of a common human nature which is tainted or corrupted by the fall also leads Reformed Theology to assert a strict doctrine of original guilt, whereby Adam's descendants are judicially involved with his sin. They are therefore justly liable to its consequences in terms of both blameworthiness (*reatus culpae*) and liability to punishment (*reatus poenae*). But according to the Reformed doctrine of sin, this corruption or depravity is itself sinful because it is a state which is contrary to God's will and wholly inclined to evil. As Hodge puts it, original sin or the corruption of nature derived from Adam is 'truly and properly of the nature of sin, involving both guilt and pollution'.³⁰ However, it must be observed that this is a special interpretation of the idea of sin, as Buswell implies when he refers to 'sin, *in the form of corruption*' as dwelling in our nature.³¹

This idea of an original guilt is closely associated with the doctrine of total depravity which leaves mankind without hope of salvation apart from divine election. In its purest form, this is a harsh doctrine. Strong relieves it somewhat by stating that 'actual sin, in which the personal agent reaffirms the underlying determination of his will, is more guilty than original sin alone' and that 'no human being is finally condemned solely on account of original sin; but that all who, like infants, do not commit personal transgressions, are saved through the application of Christ's atonement.'³²

But even this does not seriously negate the idea of original sin, for Strong writes:

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There is a race-sin, therefore as well as a personal sin; and that race-sin was committed by the first father of the race, when he comprised the whole race in himself. All mankind since that time have been born in the state into which he fell—a state of depravity, guilt, and condemnation.³³

²⁹ Hodge, 230; Griffith Thomas, 171f.

³⁰ Hodge, 230. Note that Protestant theologians at the Reformation and later strongly rejected the distinction between *reatus culpae* and *reatus poenae* as 'papistical' pointing out that 'reatus is nothing else than obligation to *poenae*, which springs from culpa' (Turretine). U. Murray, *Imputation*, 37, 79-85.

³¹ Buswell, 286.

³² Strong 596.

³³ Strong, 596.

According to the Reformed theologians, nothing less than this can account for facts of life and the teaching of Scripture, but Arminian Theology has a different view.

Arminian Theology

Some contemporary theologies in the broader Arminian tradition reject the traditional doctrine of original sin as having no explicit biblical warrant and as creating insoluble problems over the idea of original guilt.³⁴ But there are other, more conservative examples which assert the doctrine in no uncertain terms. Thus W. T. Purkiser writes,

That there is a profound and permanent perversity in the heart of man is the fundamental, uncompromising assertion of Christianity about human nature. To this perversity Christian theology has given the name 'original sin'. The doctrine of original sin is not a mere appendage to Christian thought, but is one of the foundation stones of the building. For only in the light of man's enslavement to sin does the plan of redemption become intelligible. If man can solve his problems without divine assistance, then the incarnation of God in Christ is largely meaningless.³⁵

Classical versions of Arminian theology (especially of the Wesleyan tradition), therefore, like Reformed Theology, accept the reliability of the Genesis account and see sin as rebellion against God, the consequences of which include the penalty of death. Furthermore, Arminian theology accepts a moderate expression of the natural and federal headship of Adam so that all mankind become involved in the results of his sin. Thus Arminian theology, in contrast with Pelagianism, does support a doctrine of original sin which it has defined as 'the transmission of hereditary guilt and depravity to all the natural progeny of the first sinning pair'.³⁶

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It is in discussion of these two elements of original sin that the distinctive elements of the Arminian position begin to emerge. First of all, depravity, which is defined as the morally tainted nature inherited from Adam,³⁷ is not an evil infused by God as a judgement upon man but the result of the loss by Adam of original righteousness of God's life-giving presence and power with the consequent state of spiritual death or depravity. Adam as head of the race passed on to his posterity that state or condition. That is to say, it is a case of 'depravation' arising from 'deprivation'.³⁸ Arminianism affirms that mankind's morally depraved condition is the consistent teaching of Scripture and is assumed by it throughout.

Such a view of depravity calls for a particular view of inherited or original guilt. Arminian theology places great emphasis upon the distinction between guilt as personal blameworthiness and guilt as liability to penalty.³⁹ Both are true for actual sin and in the case

³⁴ E.g., John Stacey, *Groundwork of Theology*, (London, Epworth, 1977); H. Maldwyn Hughes, *Christian Foundations* (London, Epworth, 1927); Gordon S. Dicker, *Faith with Understanding* (Sydney, Unichurch Pub., 1981).

³⁵ W. T. Purkiser (ed.), *Exploring our Faith*, (Kansas City, Beacon Hill, 1960), 237.

³⁶ Benjamin Field, *The Student's Handbook of Christian Theology* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1883), 122, quoting Hannah.

³⁷ This is similar to Reformed theology. Wiley, II, 119.

³⁸ Wiley, II, 123; Field, 126.

³⁹ i.e., *reatus culpae* and *reatus poenae*. Wiley, II, 126; Field, 124.

of Adam's sin, but only the liability to penalty (*reatus poenae*) applies to race-sin, since it is argued that on any moral principle, the posterity of Adam could not be personally responsible for his sin.

For biblical support, Field and Wiley both note the importance of a particular interpretation of the phrase, 'whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam' in Romans 5:14.⁴⁰ Here a distinction is made between Adam's sin and that of his posterity in that he sinned personally (incurring both kinds of guilt) but his posterity did not sin personally. Yet by empirical evidence, his posterity suffered death which is stated to be the penal consequence of Adam's sin in his role as representative head of the race. This means that the posterity were dealt with as sinners because of their connection with Adam and not because of personal sins.

Such an arrangement is defended as being in harmony with God's justice for it is not unnatural for one to suffer the results of another's actions, although in such a case one is not blamed for them.

Thus all mankind is born in a state of separation from God as a result of Adam's fall and therefore under the curse of the law and in need of restoration through Christ, as Galatians 3:14 and Ephesians 2:3 make plain. Accordingly, 'hereditary depravity (or

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original sin), then, is not only the law of natural heredity, but that law operating under the penal consequences of Adam's sin.'⁴¹ So, for Arminianism (in contrast to Reformed theology) 'original sin [is] a depravity that results from deprivation... a loss of original righteousness and involves guilt only in the sense of culpable liability to punishment.'⁴²

To understand fully this apparently weaker view of Original Guilt, it is necessary to see the link with other theological themes, especially the fine balance in Romans 5 between Adam and the Fall on the one hand and Christ and righteousness on the other. This leads on to what Wiley calls the 'distinctive doctrine' of Arminianism, viz., 'the free gift of righteousness, or the unconditional diffusion of grace to all men, as a first benefit of the universal atonement made by Jesus Christ'.⁴³ It is by this gift of prevenient grace 'that the condemnation that rested on the race through Adam's sin is removed' and that accordingly 'no child of Adam is condemned eternally, either from the original offense, or its consequences' or for the 'depravity of his own nature'.⁴⁴ So there is no need for a concept of election and reprobation as in Calvinism, or for the weaker view of Pelagianism which denies the penal consequences of Adam's sin altogether. There is also no role for sacramental infant baptism.

The Arminian view of Christ's atonement and prevenient grace which mitigates the 'culpability of original sin'⁴⁵ is a much neater and stronger solution than others that have been offered, yet one that does not deny the 'exceeding sinfulness of sin'. It is also more positive because it leads on to the assurance of being able to deal with depravity in the life of the

⁴⁰ Field, 125; Wiley, II, 97.

⁴¹ Wiley, II, 125.

⁴² Charles W. Carter (ed.) *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1983), 1, 263.

⁴³ Wiley, II, 130.

⁴⁴ Wiley, II, 135.

⁴⁵ Wiley, II, 136.

believer by the power of the gospel. Accordingly, Arminian theology teaches the 'eradication' or purification of inherited corruption by the work of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁶

Traditional Arminianism may offer a neater solution, but whether it has done so by merely re-defining terms is another matter. Some of its own advocates have their reservations, especially in regard to the meaning of the biblical texts and the ethical problems of the imputation of Adam's guilt.⁴⁷ This

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continuing difference illustrates the notorious 'difficulty' of this doctrine, at least in its classical formulations. It is not surprising then that some contemporary theologians have attempted to find a more radical path to resolving it.⁴⁸

Contemporary Solutions

Donald G. Bloesch

Donald Bloesch, who has attempted to 'resolve past conflicts' by use of a radical biblical approach in his *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*⁴⁹, recognizes the vital role of hermeneutics in dealing with the biblical material. He agrees with the view of Niebuhr that the Genesis record must be taken seriously if not literally. This can be done easily, he argues, if it is regarded as 'symbolic or mythopoetic rather than univocal'.⁵⁰ Using this principle, he concludes there was a real fall, but not necessarily an historical one, by which is evidently meant not one that can be confined to our present historical continuum but one that is pre-historical and universal.⁵¹ The first man and the first fall are not only historical but also universal and representative.

Thus, by taking a wider view of Scripture, Bloesch is able to argue for a racial concept of sin. However, he is obliged to concede that no rational explanation can be offered for the relationship between primal sin and individual sin—it is, as Brunner noted, 'sui generis'. Hence Bloesch can only conclude, 'original sin is not a biological taint but a spiritual contagion which is nevertheless, in some inexplicable way, passed on through biological generation', and accordingly, it is 'not a natural necessity but a historical inevitability'.⁵² Yet despite this, Bloesch, in common with others, effectively denies a concept of

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⁴⁶ *Contemporary Wesleyan Theology*, 268.

⁴⁷ *Contemporary Wesleyan Theology*, 268; Richard S. Taylor, *Beacon Dictionary of Theology* (Kansas City, Beacon Hill), 378.

⁴⁸ Not all contemporary theologians adopt a radical approach. See, e.g., Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 (Word, 1983), 248 who takes a traditional Augustinian position. The works of G. C. Berkouwer and Hendrikus Berkhof could also be consulted.

⁴⁹ Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, (2 vols) (New York, Harper & Row, 1978), 1, 5, 'Total Depravity'.

⁵⁰ Bloesch, 104. This is a view which Henry condemns when he finds it expressed by Dale Moody. (Henry, 248).

⁵¹ Bloesch, 106f.

⁵² Bloesch, 106, 107 (emphasis added). Compare Bloesch's wording in his article in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (1913) where he says that this spiritual infection is in some mysterious way transmitted through reproduction.'

Original Guilt (*reatus culpae*) when he states that original sin 'does not become rooted in man until he assents to it and allows it to dominate his whole being.'⁵³

Millard J. Erickson

A similar position is taken in one of the most recently published evangelical statements—*Christian Theology* by Millard Erickson. After having reviewed the various issues and options, Erickson finds the starting point for his distinctive position by recognizing that a loose interpretation of the balance between Adam and Christ found in Romans chapter 5 may permit belief in an 'unconscious faith' on the part of unbelievers. However, because such a concept is not sanctioned anywhere else in scripture, he concludes that this must be a false interpretation of the passage.

But this line of thinking also rules out the possibility of the related idea of unconscious sin on the part of mankind. There is some basis for accepting that 'we all were involved in Adam's sin and thus receive both the corrupted nature that was his after the fall, and the guilt and condemnation that attach to his sin.' However, when it comes to the question of inherited guilt, the situation is different because there can be no 'unconscious faith'. Therefore, 'there must be some conscious and voluntary decision on our part. Until this is the case, there is only a conditional imputation of guilt.'⁵⁴ This 'conditional imputation' becomes 'actual', Erickson concludes, whenever we accept or approve of our corrupt nature. Thus Erickson overcomes the problem by retaining the notion of depravity but by modifying the idea of Original Guilt to the point where the idea of 'guilt' becomes virtually meaningless.⁵⁵

While both these theologians who work from a broadly Reformed perspective are grappling seriously with the central issues in an attempt to overcome the traditional difficulties, it cannot be said that they arrive at a fully persuasive solution.⁵⁶

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Contemporary Wesleyan Theology

Similarly, another recently published systematic theology, this time from the Wesleyan perspective⁵⁷, can only concede the complexity of the issues and the lack of consistency amongst Arminians. In the end, its author, Charles W. Carter, rejects the Augustinian/Calvinist position for two major reasons. The first on account of the ethical problem that the idea of original guilt contradicts the idea of guilt as 'a culpable act traceable to the unethical conduct of a morally responsible person'. The second reason for rejection is because of 'the Augustinian tendency to identify sin with physical being [which] leads to a

⁵³ Bloesch, 107.

⁵⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3 vols, (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1983), 639.

⁵⁵ A. H. Strong (596) speaks of a similar qualification.

⁵⁶ The authors themselves show a certain tentativeness about their own positions. E.g., Erickson (639) refers to 'the current form of my understanding...'

⁵⁷ Charles W. Carter (ed.) *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology: Biblical, Systematic and Practical* (2 vols) (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1983), 7, 'Harmartiology'. The editor is the author of this chapter. This work is useful as a sample of Wesleyan thinking, but it is neither full nor conclusive and suffers from a lack of clarity of aims and methods.

materialistic understanding that attributes a sort of tangibility or "thingness" to it'.⁵⁸ Such a tendency subtly transform the concept of sin.

According to Carter, Arminianism can be defended because it avoids this problem by maintaining the view that biblical terms such as 'flesh' and 'the old man' should not be interpreted literally but as 'symbols or metaphors to communicate nontangible realities'. Consequently sin is not 'an independent metaphysical entity' but a 'moral reality that exists only in the distorted relationships between God and fallen humanity'.⁵⁹ In this way, the dynamic concept of sin and grace is maintained which tends strongly to preserve the sense of personal responsibility on the part of man. Although such a position seems quite distinct from Augustinianism with its strong reifying process, Carter believes that a better understanding of the structure of Arminian and Calvinist theological systems, especially in regard to the definition of sin, would reduce the differences in line with Wesley's opinion that there was 'but a hair's breadth' between them.⁶⁰

Conclusions

The substantial differences of opinion which do remain indicate that stronger measures yet are necessary to overcome the difficulties in formulating this doctrine. As a first step in achieving this, the structure of the traditional evangelical approach needs to be clearly recognized.

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The common aim is to produce a systematic statement of the biblical teaching about the universality of sin and to correlate this with the data of human experience and with other areas of theology. The fact of the universality of sin is clearly found in Scripture, but there is much less support for specific teaching about a concept of race-sin, its nature or cause, and its link with Adam's sin, assuming that the history of the Genesis record is to be accepted, at least in a general sense.

However, the desire to provide an explanation for the universality of sin and thus to provide a substantial basis for soteriology leads many theologians to notions of a generic human nature corrupted by the fall of Adam and to theories of imputation to account for the transmission of this corruption and guilt. But it is only possible to hold to such ideas on the basis of particular philosophic presuppositions which do not necessarily find unambiguous support in Scripture.

Consequently, from a biblical point of view, it is possible to adopt other philosophical principles which do not postulate such explanations, but are content simply to speak of the way all mankind does sin and is therefore in need of salvation. The biblical data do not seem to require anything more than this if they are taken quite naturally and within their proper context. Yet at the same time, they exclude the Pelagian error which proposes the avoidability of sin and hence the possibility of salvation apart from grace. Biblical passages referring to Adam are interpreted as either symbolical statements of the existential condition of man, or more conservatively, as showing how man has sinned ever since the beginning.

⁵⁸ *Contemporary Wesleyan Theology*, 261, 267.

⁵⁹ *Contemporary Wesleyan Theology*, 261.

⁶⁰ *Contemporary Wesleyan Theology*, 272.

Therefore it can be concluded that one major problem with the traditional formulation of the doctrine of original sin is the desire to go beyond Scripture by seeking rational explanations for the causes and mechanisms of sin. One result of this is to distort the Biblical witness by placing heavy dependence on extra-biblical philosophical doctrines, rather than putting the emphasis where the Bible does, viz., upon moral relationships which speak of the 'confession of our sin' or 'the guilt character of all sin'.⁶¹

But once it is recognized that Scripture does not offer an explanation for the universality of sin, many of the traditional difficulties with the exegesis of passages noted above dealing with sin fall away,⁶² leaving them to be interpreted in their original

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pastoral context. There is therefore no inclination to add anything to the doctrine of sin to sharpen its impact, and no need to hedge soteriology around with any protective doctrinal affirmations. This means that there is no need for elaborate theories of imputation and furthermore, there is no pressure to develop a doctrine of sacramental infant baptism or to move in the direction of the Catholic Marian dogmas of the immaculate conception or of the bodily assumption. It also frees up the idea of the Virgin Birth and enables it to make a more dynamic contribution to Christology.

As well as dealing with the racial aspects of man's existence, this doctrine also deals with the 'morally vitiated condition in which we find ourselves at birth'.⁶³ The inclusion of the term 'sin' in the description of this condition is another major problem facing the doctrine. This is because the word 'sin' in theology is usually associated with a strong sense of personal responsibility. But it is used in a special sense in the doctrine of original sin to refer to our moral condition at birth. But it is ethically difficult to assign responsibility for a state or condition of existence and one over which the individual has no personal control. Yet, biblical teaching and human experience will not allow the simple Pelagian solution of denying that mankind exists in a morally vitiated condition.

The use of the term 'depravity' as an equivalent or alternative to original sin as found in some Arminian theology offers a promising lead for resolving the difficulty. The terms 'depravity' or 'innate moral corruption' may be used to refer to the fact that, due to the absence of God's gracious presence and power resulting from the fall, man exists in a morally deprived condition. He is therefore unable to please God or to prevent himself from falling into sin. By virtue of this condition, he is therefore under the displeasure of God and 'by nature a child of wrath' (Eph 2:3). To refer to this as 'sin' (as the traditional formulations do) may be correct if the definition of sin is broadened to include the idea of 'moral corruption', but it is certainly misleading, and could well be avoided by the use of other terminology which differentiates between sin and the morally vitiated state of mankind.

To speak of 'innate moral corruption' instead of 'birth sin' not only resolves the ethical problem relating to 'sin' and the idea of 'inherited guilt', but also has a clarifying effect on the corresponding view of salvation. The new terminology stresses inability,

⁶¹ Berkouwer, 466ff, Henrikus Berkhof, 192.

⁶² See, e.g., Strong, 553 (d), (e) where there is an over-exegesis in regard to the personification of sin.

⁶³ Mascall, 556.

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lostness and separation from God and his life-giving presence. The motifs of salvation which correspond to these are reconciliation, redemption and liberation. These are prominent in biblical teaching and also, common enough in evangelistic practice. However, they are not always associated with theological statements relating to man's need of salvation arising out of original sin, but are instead often overshadowed by the penal substitutionary view of the atonement. This exclusive dependence upon only one of the biblical models of the atonement (which is distinctive of the entire system of evangelical soteriology) can be corrected by the new approach to the doctrine of original sin. The universality of sin and its penal consequences requires penal substitution while 'innate moral corruption' calls for reconciliation, redemption and liberation.

Thus it can be concluded that the biblical data as they stand speak of the universality of sin and mankind's needy moral condition, both of which need the intervention of divine grace for salvation. The term 'original sin', as Griffith Thomas suggests, is 'not the most accurate phrase to employ'.⁶⁴ Happily, it may be set on one side without any fear of either compromising biblical teaching about sin or undermining soteriology. To make the change would be in accord with a more satisfactory methodology for evangelical theology and would result in a simpler and therefore stronger doctrine by eliminating the causes of most speculation, misunderstanding and controversy. To discard the terminology would be no loss for it is not biblical in any case, and what we have to do is maintain the 'anti-Pelagian motif' of its 'formulation in a doctrine of Original Sin' as such.⁶⁵

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<http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/>

⁶⁴ Griffith Thomas, 158.

⁶⁵ Brunner, 103. A good candidate for simplification by following such a process is to be found in John Murray's re-evaluation of imputation where he does not hesitate to critique previous Reformed theologians and others for making misleading statements or failing to guard against misunderstanding. (See, for example, his critique of Charles Hodge—*Imputation*, 78). But in the process, he places so many qualifications on the notion of imputation, as expressed in Romans 5:12-20, that the doctrine is reduced virtually to a plain statement of the factuality of the universality of sin. 'Solidarity was constituted by divine institution and the solidarity is of such a nature that the sin of Adam devolves upon all naturally procreated posterity.' (*Imputation*, 41. See also, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 186).