



FROM THE GARDEN TO THE CROSS

A 20-WEEK STUDY OF MANKIND, SIN, AND SALVATION

WEEK 2—ORIGIN OF THE SOUL

Handout 3-1: Millard Erickson summarizes federal and natural headship

A question arises concerning the nature of the connection or relationship between Adam and us, and thus also between Adam's first sin and our sinfulness. Numerous attempts have been made to answer this question. The two major approaches see the relationship in terms of federal headship and natural headship.

The approach that sees Adam's connection with us in terms of a federal headship is generally related to the creationist view of the origin of the soul. This is the view that humans receive their physical nature by inheritance from their parents, but that the soul is specially created by God for each individual and united with the body at birth (or some other suitable moment). Thus, we were not present psychologically or spiritually in any of our ancestors, including Adam. Adam, however, was our representative. God ordained that Adam should act not only on his own behalf, but also on our behalf, so that the consequences of his actions have been passed on to his descendants as well. Adam was on probation for all of us, as it were; and because Adam sinned, all of us are treated as guilty and corrupted. Bound by the covenant between God and Adam, we are treated as if we have actually and personally done what he as our representative did. The parallel between our relationship to Adam and our relationship to Christ (Rom. 5:12–21) is significant here. Just as we are not actually righteous in ourselves, but are treated as if we have the same righteous standing that Jesus has, so, though we are not personally sinful until we commit our first sinful act, we are, before that time, treated as if we have the same sinful standing that Adam had. If it is just to impute to us a righteousness that is not ours

but Christ's, it is also fair and just to impute to us Adam's sin and guilt. He is as able to act on our behalf as is Christ.

The other major approach sees Adam's connection with us in terms of a natural (or realistic) headship. This approach is related to the traducianist view of the origin of the soul, according to which we receive our souls by transmission from our parents, just as we do our physical natures. So we were present in germinal or seminal form in our ancestors; in a very real sense, we were there in Adam. His action was not merely that of one isolated individual, but of the entire human race. Although we were not there individually, we were nonetheless there. The human race sinned as a whole and became guilty. Thus, there is nothing unfair or improper about our receiving a corrupted nature and guilt from Adam, for we are receiving the just results of our sin. This is the view of Augustine.¹

[...]

Original Sin: A Biblical and Contemporary Model

The key passage for constructing a biblical and contemporary model of original sin is Romans 5:12–19. Paul is arguing that death is the consequence of sin. The twelfth verse is particularly determinative: “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned ...”

Whatever the exact meaning of these words is, Paul certainly is saying that death originated in the human race because of Adam's sin. He is also saying that death is universal and the cause of this is the universal sin of humankind. Later, however, he says that the cause of the death of all is the sin of the one man, Adam: “many died by the trespass of the one man” (v. 15); “by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man” (v. 17). The problem is how to relate the statements that the universality of death came through the sin of Adam to the statement that it came through the sin of all human beings.

Augustine understood ἐφ ᾧ (*eph hō*, “because”) as meaning “in whom,” since the Latin mistranslated the Greek at this point. Accordingly, his understanding of the final clause in verse 12 was that we were actually “in Adam,” and therefore Adam's sin was ours as well. But since his interpretation was based upon an inaccurate translation, we must investigate the clause more closely. In particular, we must ask what is meant by “all sinned.”

It has been suggested that in the final clause of verse 12 Paul is speaking of the personal sin(s) of all. All of us sin individually and thereby incur through our own action the same personal guilt that Adam incurred through his action. The clause would then be rendered,

¹ Millard J. Erickson, [*Christian Theology*](#), 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 578.

“in this way death came to all, because each has sinned.” In keeping with the principle of responsibility for one’s personal actions and for them alone, the meaning would be that all die because all are guilty, and all are guilty because each one has sinned on his or her own.

There are several problems with this interpretation. One is the rendering of ἥμαρτον (*hēmarton*). Were this interpretation correct, the word would properly be written ἁμαρτάνουσιν (*hamartanousin*), the present tense denoting something continually going on. Further, the sin referred to in “because all sinned” would be different from that referred to in “sin entered the world through one man,” as well as from that referred to in verses 15 and 17. And, in addition, the latter two clauses would still need to be explained.

There is another way of understanding the final clause in verse 12, a way that avoids these problems and makes some sense out of verses 15 and 17. The verb ἥμαρτον is a simple aorist. This tense most commonly refers to a single past action. Had Paul intended to refer explicitly to a continued process of sin, the present and imperfect tenses were available to him. But he chose the aorist, and it should be taken at face value. Indeed, if we regard the sin of all human beings and the sin of Adam as the same, the problems we have pointed to become considerably less complex. There is then no conflict between verse 12 and verses 15 and 17. Further, the potential problem presented by verse 14, where we read that “death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam,” is resolved, for it is not imitation or repetition of Adam’s sin, but participation in it, that counts.

The final clause in verse 12 tells us that we were involved in some way in Adam’s sin; it was in some sense also our sin. But what is meant by this? On the one hand, it may be understood in terms of federal headship—Adam acted on behalf of all persons. There was a sort of contract between God and Adam as our representative, so that what Adam did binds us. However, our involvement in Adam’s sin might better be understood in terms of natural headship. We argued in chapter 21 for a special creation of the entirety of human nature. We further argued in chapter 23 for a very close connection (a “conditional unity”) between the material and immaterial aspects of human nature. In chapter 24 we examined several biblical intimations that even the fetus is regarded by God as a person. These and other considerations support the position that the entirety of our human nature, both physical and spiritual, material and immaterial, has been received from our parents and more distant ancestors by way of descent from the first pair of humans. On that basis, we were actually present within Adam, so that we all sinned in his act. There is no injustice, then, to our condemnation and death as a result of original sin.

There is one additional problem here, however: the condition of infants and children. If the reasoning that precedes is correct, then all begin life with both the corrupted nature and

the inherited guilt that are the consequences of sin. Does this mean that should these little ones die before making a conscious decision to “receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness” (v. 17), they are lost and condemned to eternal death?

While the status of infants and those who never reach moral competence is a difficult question, it appears that our Lord did not regard them as under condemnation. Indeed, he held them up as an example of the type of person who will inherit the kingdom of God (Matt. 18:3; 19:14). David had confidence that he would again see his child who had died (2 Sam. 12:23). On the basis of such considerations, it is difficult to maintain that children are to be thought of as sinful, condemned, and lost.

This does not rest upon merely a sentimental impulse, however. There are several indications in Scripture that persons are not morally responsible before a certain point, which we sometimes call “the age of accountability.” In Deuteronomy 1:39, Moses says, “And the little ones that you said would be taken captive, your children who do not yet know good from bad—they will enter the land. I will give it to them and they will take possession of it.” Even with the Hebrew idea of corporate personality and corporate responsibility, these children were not held responsible for the sins of Israel. In the messianic prophecy in Isaiah 7, there are two references to the time when the boy “knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right” (vv. 15, 16). Finally, Jonah quotes God as saying, “Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?” (4:11). Although this is less clear, it appears from the context that the reference is to the ability to distinguish morally. Underlying these statements is the apparent fact that prior to a certain point in life, there is no moral responsibility, because there is no awareness of right and wrong.

To summarize the major tenets of the doctrine as we have outlined it: we have argued that the Bible, particularly in the writings of Paul, maintains that because of Adam’s sin all persons receive a corrupted nature and are guilty in God’s sight as well. We have, further, espoused the Augustinian view (natural headship) of the imputation of original sin. We were all present in undifferentiated form in the person of Adam, who along with Eve was the entire human race. Thus, it was not merely Adam but humans who sinned. We were involved, although not personally, and are responsible for the sin. In addition, we have argued that the biblical teaching is that children are not under God’s condemnation for this sin, at least not until attaining an age of responsibility in moral and spiritual matters. We must now ask whether the doctrine of original sin can be conceived of and expressed in a way that will somehow do justice to all of these factors.

The parallelism that Paul draws in Romans 5 between Adam and Christ in their relationship to us is impressive. A similar statement is found in 1 Corinthians 15:22: "As in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive." Paul asserts that in some parallel way, what each of them did has its influence on us (as Adam's sin leads to death, so Christ's act of righteousness leads to life). What is this parallel? If the condemnation and guilt of Adam are imputed to us without there being on our part any sort of conscious choice of his act, the same would necessarily hold true of the imputation of Christ's righteousness and redeeming work. But does his death justify us simply by virtue of his identification with humanity through the incarnation and independently of whether we make a conscious and personal acceptance of his work? And do all humans have the grace of Christ imputed to them, just as all have Adam's sin imputed to them? The usual answer of evangelicals is no; there is abundant evidence that there are two classes of persons, the lost and the saved, and that only a decision to accept the work of Christ makes it effective in our lives. But if this is the case, then would not the imputation of guilt based upon the action of Adam, albeit Adam as including us, require some sort of volitional choice as well? If there is no "unconscious faith," can there be "unconscious sin"? And what are we to say of infants who die? Despite having participated in that first sin, they are somehow accepted and saved. Although they have made no conscious choice of Christ's work (or of Adam's sin for that matter), the spiritual effects of the curse are negated in their case. While some theologies preserve the parallelism by allowing both unconscious or unconditional imputation of Adam's guilt and Christ's righteousness, another available alternative seems preferable.

The current form of my understanding is as follows: 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. With this matter of guilt, however, just as with the imputation of Christ's righteousness, there must be some conscious and voluntary decision on our part. Until this is the case, there is only a conditional imputation of guilt. Thus, there is no condemnation until one reaches the age of responsibility. If a child dies before becoming capable of making genuine moral decisions, the contingent imputation of Adamic sin does not become actual, and the child will experience the same type of future existence with the Lord as will those who have reached the age of moral responsibility and had their sins forgiven as a result of accepting the offer of salvation based on Christ's atoning death. The problem of the corrupted nature of such persons is presumably dealt with in the way that the imperfectly sanctified nature of believers will be glorified.

What is the nature of the voluntary decision that ends our childish innocence and constitutes a ratification of the first sin, the fall? One position on this question is that there is no final imputation of the first sin until we commit a sin of our own, thus ratifying Adam's

sin. Unlike the Arminian view, this position holds that at the moment of our first sin we become guilty of both our own sin *and the original sin as well*. There is another position, however, which more fully preserves the parallelism between our accepting the work of Christ and that of Adam, and at the same time more clearly points out our responsibility for the first sin. We become responsible and guilty when we accept or approve of our corrupt nature. There is a time in the life of each one of us when we become aware of our own tendency toward sin. At that point we may abhor the sinful nature that has been there all the time. We would in that case repent of it and might even, if there is an awareness of the gospel, ask God for forgiveness and cleansing. At the very least there would be a rejection of our sinful makeup. But if we acquiesce in that sinful nature, we are in effect saying that it is good. By placing our tacit approval upon the corruption, we are also approving or concurring in the action in the garden of Eden so long ago. We become guilty of that sin without having committed any sin of our own.

A similar result would be achieved by a model in which the guilt of the Adamic sin is immediately imputed to everyone, and then Christ's righteousness is imputed without the recipient's faith, to those unable to exercise faith. While all theories require some assumptions, this theory seems to require more of these than the one stated above. Sometimes it speculates about the possibility of infants being justified at the first sight of Christ, or becoming matured so that they are able to make a conscious choice.²⁸ The view advocated here is preferable because of its greater simplicity, thus meeting the criterion of Ockham's Razor, or as scientists term it, The Law of Parsimony.²

² Millard J. Erickson, [Christian Theology](#), 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 579–583.