

Original Sin: an Overview

Romans 5:12-21



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INTRODUCTION

Looking back over the last one hundred years (post-Enlightenment), we can give examples of man's failure to demonstrate improvement, if only in the way we treat each other. Countless millions have died in world wars fought against aggression and greed. Many times, however, it has been difficult to find who is actually in the right. Man has imprisoned those with views counter to his in Gulags. Over six million Jews were exterminated because of prejudice and hatred, and some who called themselves "the Church" went along to get along. Because people did not look like us, they were put in prison camps in America during the last world conflict.

In spite of liberalism's bravado man does not seem to be getting better and more like his Maker. Our own art, literature, and music let us look at and listen in on what passes itself off, even at its best, as "spirituality", but for the most part is devoid of God. Every poll tells us that most believe in God and pray, but to which god do people pray.

In certain circles we see groups like the "Character Counts Coalition" started by Tom Selleck and Barbara Jordan emphasizing moral values. Again one must ask if this is no more than a revival of Greek ethics. Is this really a return to faith or just the overwhelming realization of a vacuum of values in our society? Or is it sheer pragmatism, i.e., because it works? Writers like Sartre, Camus and Beckett help us feel the despair of modern man. Even for the optimistic it is not difficult to believe the worst about humanity some days.

When we find a person in whom we can put our faith and trust, we stay on guard against his future failure. William Bennett was elevated to a position of teacher when it came to "Virtues," yet we were not surprised when he was found to have had a gambling

addiction. We have seen preachers of the Gospel rant and rave against rampant immorality in the world only to be found on TV the next week asking for forgiveness because they were caught in a moral failure of their own.

Bible characters from the Old and New Testaments alike are lifted up as examples. In I Samuel 13:14 we hear about David, “a man after God’s own heart.” Later, we listen to the same man in Psalm 51 ask God to create a new heart in him that is clean. The Apostle Paul struggles with his own demons while he tries to do what is right, but fails (Romans 7:14ff.).

“Original sin” even though not always understood certainly goes a long way under most interpretations to explain this huge gap between what God expects and what we are capable of doing. The Law did not help. It only proved to condemn us; yet a positive thing about the Law is that it developed a need and desire for a Savior.

1. THE ORIGINAL SIN

How Sin Happened

God created the universe in six days and it was declared “very good” (Gen. 1:31). Mankind was the crowning glory of the Creator, made in God’s very image (Gen. 1:27). Adam was commanded directly by God as to what he might eat with the consequences for disobeying (Gen. 2:16-18). Eve was created from Adam (Gen. 2:22) At this point they were innocent and free from sin (Gen. 2:25).

In Genesis 3, a serpent is introduced to the story. This creation of God’s (the serpent) is understood to be an adversary. He is identified as the Devil in Job 1:6ff, although really not found as a person until the New Testament. The serpent appealed to man’s desire to disobey God’s clear and direct command. Man exercising his free will elected to violate God’s clear command. Liberal theologians like Dodd believe this story about Adam is a myth (1959:100). Most conservatives believe the Bible understands Adam as an “historical” person and not just a Hebrew code word for mankind.

Why Sin Happened

Man was created a free agent able to make choices for himself, and that is where he ran into difficulty. Sin is really about the misuse of freedom. Even Schopenhauer, an atheist, identifies this “original sin” as an assertion of the will” (in Kung 1980:361). Sin often involves what *appears* to be good for us, but in reality is not (Gen. 3:6). Brown suggests “physical appetite (‘good for food’), esthetic sensibility (‘a delight to the eyes’) *and* intellectual ambition (‘to be desired to make men wise’)” (1908:272) were the areas the serpent used to create the trap for man. Man was *able* to be tempted by the “ruler of the Kingdom of the air.” He was seduced like we were before Jesus (I John 5:16).

Sin also is born out of pride. Luther quoting Sirach 10:14 writes: “The wise man has said: The beginning of all sin is to depart from God and not trust Him” (Niebuhr 1964:183).

The Result of Sin

Adam and Eve were immediately ashamed because they realized they were naked. Within the Roman Catholic tradition the concept of “original sin” is tied to sexual activity. Even within the structure of marriage there is this shame. Spurious doctrines such as the “immaculate conception” are a result of this view. “The sanctity (understood in a moral sense) of Jesus and Mary had to be protected from the evil influence of sex (according to Pope Siricius t398 even marital intercourse would have meant defilement for Mary)” (Kung 1976:454). Pain in childbirth and being subservient to Adam was a part of what Eve would experience as a result of her sin (Gen. 3:16). The idea of “hard” work to survive came also into play as the soil was cursed from which Adam would need to raise food. Also man became subject to being mortal (Gen. 3:17-19).

The most direct result of this original (first) sin is that man experiences physical death and carries forward the promise of Genesis 2:17 “for when you eat of it you will surely die.” Romans 6:23 succinctly states that “the wages of sin is death.” Paul makes it clear that death entered the creation as a direct result of Adam’s sin. It has spread because all men sin (Rom. 5:12). Brunner calls it a “stream of death.” Calvinists believe that physical death came into existence as a result of the curse of Gen. 3:19. Arminians generally agree on this point with Calvinists, but in disagreement with Pelagians who believe man was created “mortal”. This is the concept that anything in a finite system that has a beginning must also have an end. Pelagians view Gen. 2:17 as referring to spiritual death. If indeed sin, as its punishment, does cause physical death, what about Jesus?

Another result of sin is spiritual death (in Moo 1996:320) which is estrangement and

alienation which if maintained will result in eternal death or separation from God. The Bible assumes everywhere man is a sinner and in need of repentance (Acts 17:30) and regeneration (Jn. 3:5). Man is in need of a Savior. Louis Berkhof says: “The Bible does not know the distinction, so common among us, between a physical, a spiritual, and an eternal death; it has a synthetic view of death and regards it as separation from God” (in Erickson 1987:611).

2. HISTORY OF THEOLOGICAL VIEWS ON “ORIGINAL SIN”

Augustinian

Augustine was bishop of Hippo in Northern Africa from A.D. 395 to A.D. 430. Even though the term “original sin” may have been first used by Tertullian of Carthage (2nd century), it was Augustine who developed it into an important theological idea. Augustine believed that man was so incapacitated by sin he was unable to do good. He believed humanity was born in that condition. He did believe man made a conscious choice to sin because he did not have the power to do otherwise.

Augustine used an illustration of a man who after abstaining from food long enough lost his ability to take in food to maintain his health. Even though it would be natural to eat for any human to maintain his health, he found himself unable to do so. By application then, in the Fall (Gen. 3) man became incapable of doing the good for which he was created.

One can see a difference in the original position of Augustine and people like Jerome. It has been observed there is a problem with total corruptness. After the Fall we still hear Scripture that leaves us with the impression man is not totally helpless in doing what is right (Gen. 4:6-7; Deut. 30:14; Rom. 10:8). The propagation of this corrupt and fallen nature is called concupiscence. The Roman Catholic Catechism (section 405) states “human nature has not been totally corrupted” (1994:102). This is certainly a modification inspired by Aquinas from Augustine’s original view.

Because Augustine’s writings were written in Latin and not translated into Greek until the 14th century his views were not held by the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches. They did not hold to the idea of inherited guilt. This was also the Jewish view of sin. “If there were not the rabbinic teaching concerning the good and evil *yeser* the

idea of impulses or inclinations in man would probably not suggest itself immediately. It is probably not a question of original sin but of a certain 'predisposition' to sin, which clearly follows from man's total dissimilarity to God" (Porter 1990:5).

Pelagian

The Pelagian view is named after Pelagius who was thought of as a British monk although never ordained. He was more of a moralist than a theologian and approached the idea of "original sin" mostly on that basis. He was thought of as a heretic by some especially in the Western Church, yet recent study has seen him no more out of line than many of our patristic writers.

Theodorus of Mopsuestia may have started the controversy between Pelagius and Augustine by denying that death came as a result of the sin of Adam. A friend of Pelagius by the name of Celestius also held a similar position. One of the propositions was: "Adam was to die in every hypothesis, whether he sinned or did not sin. His sin injured himself only and not the human race" (in Knight 1999: n.p.).

By all accounts Pelagius was a holy man and felt that man was able to choose to be good and not sin once baptized. He reduced Adam's sin to merely a "bad example" (in Ligouri 1994:102), and certainly nothing that is inherited by succeeding generations. Those associated with Augustine's point of view felt humanity was "born" sinful. Because of these differences Pelagius was brought up on charges by Jerome in Jerusalem before Bishop John. This happened in 415, and he was cleared of charges.

The major difference between the two theological points of view is that Augustine's camp felt man was innately bad and Pelagius felt that man was both "good" and capable of making correct moral choices. "The moral life of purity, for Pelagius, can only be achieved by drawing upon both 'the good of nature and the good of grace'; this will be the dominant theme of his exhortation" (Ó Riada 2003:n.p).

Very little of Pelagius' writings have survived, a letter from Pelagius to Demetrias

being a notable exception. His works on the Nicene Trinitarian and Christological doctrines, and the *Libellus Fidei* was kept by the Vatican mistakenly thinking they were of Augustine. At the end of the day one must really ask: who is the Heresiarch, Augustine or Pelagius?

Semi-Pelagian

It is a middle point of view theologically speaking, thus the name: “Middle” system. A French monk of Syrian extraction, John Cassian, helped birth this view. Those who followed this view were called Massilians because of the residence of their chief. In the mid-5th century, under the leadership of those like Faustus, bishop of Priez, Semipelagianism began to be accepted widely in the Eastern Church. It even gained some ground in the Western, but was eventually condemned by the synods of Orange and Valence, A.D. 529 (in Hodge 2001:n.p.).

Within the Roman Catholic Church the Franciscans and Scotists are generally thought to support Semipelagianism. Jesuits founded in the 16th century are also considered in this group.

This position is also identified with Arminianism named after James Arminius, a Dutch Reformed theologian. John Wesley would also later hold to this view. According to Arminianism we receive a corrupted nature from Adam. We still have free will, but are unable without God’s help to obey His commands. A later doctrine is “prevenient grace”. The idea is “prevenient grace is extended to everyone and in effect neutralizes the corruption received from Adam” (Erickson 1987:632).

Calvinism with its expression in denominations like the Baptist, Presbyterian and Lutheran churches both fall along the lines of Augustinian thought on “original sin”. “Luther saw man as totally bound to the powers of darkness-sin, death, and the devil” (Thomas 1986:1013).

3. RELATED COMMENTARY ON ROMANS 5:12-21

This text is without a doubt the primary text in the New Testament on the doctrine of “original sin”. It appears to be a summation of man’s fall and his potential of salvation through Jesus Christ, the Lord. Osborne says, “the universal consequences of the Fall are overcome by the universal consequences of the cross” (2004:136). Paul has laid out man’s sinful condition in Romans 1:13ff. He affirms in 3:23 “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” In 5:1-11 Paul talks about those in Christ who are experiencing reconciliation. So he continues to tell the problematic history of man with a reason to rejoice because of God’s grace.

¹²Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned—

Therefore may very well mean “because of this” and refer back to 1:18-5:11 as a transition to chapter 6. *Sin entered the world through one man* is an obvious reference to Adam. Sin is a personification of the evil that would be unleashed. Sin is introduced by Adam. Death came on the world stage because of Sin. Sin and death go together (I Cor. 15:56). This is more than likely a causal relationship, however, Porter allows for another possibility in death being “a concomitant circumstance of sin (Adam brought sin and death)” (1990:21). Adam’s decision affected all humanity.

The phrase translated *because all sinned* is of great importance as to how we view “original sin”. The $\epsilon\phi\ \omega$ would be translated “in whom” all sinned, by those following Augustine. Even though some like Brunner admit this was based on a false translation of the Greek, others like F.F. Bruce believe he got it correct in spite of that. This is the idea of natural headship. If you follow Pelagius, it might be rendered “because” all sinned, i.e. for them this meant sinning after the “example” of Adam, yet this does violence to the

context. Bruce also renders this “because,” meaning the sinning was in a corporate sense. There certainly would be biblical precedence for looking at sin as corporate. Adam was looked at as representing mankind. The Jewish mind would think of this in terms of solidarity. If Adam sins, it affects us more than indirectly. This is not a strange concept even in the New Testament where the Body of Christ is interdependent.

This can also be looked at as mediating imputation of sin. Everyone has been affected by and then participated in Adam’s sin. Osborne says, “they are guilty from two directions - the sinful nature inherited from Adam (passive sin) and their personal participation in that via their own sins (active sin)” (2004:138).

¹³for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law.

Sin has always existed since Adam. It is plainly seen because we see death. Having a written code does not produce good behavior by itself (See Romans 2:14ff.). Sin is talked about as a transaction. The Greek word *ελλογεω* means “to charge to one’s account” (Rienecker 1980:360), “a commercial term, ‘put in the ledger’” (Barrett 1991:104). This might be like what we see with books in Revelation (Rev. 20:12).

¹⁴Nevertheless, 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, who was a pattern of the one to come.

Of course there was sin (and death) between the time of Adam and Moses (Law). Still, this was a different kind of sin in this period in that it was not normally a direct violation of God’s word (transgression). Even before there was the Law, “there are many examples to prove that all men have been conscious both of good and evil” (Torrance 1960:112-113). If man is utterly depraved as so many Calvinistic systems say, why and how would the Law help those without understanding of God?

Adam being a type (*τυπος*) or pattern of the “coming one” is not like Jesus in every way because Jesus exceeds Adam in every category. Barrett says “Adam and

Christ are reversed images of each other...Adam fell Christ did not” (1991:105). “Adam is a type of Christ in the sense that the universal effects of his act pre-figure the universal effects of Christ’s act” (Moo 1996:334). The rest of the pericope will bright light to how this typology is understood. Adam is the head or source of the problem; Jesus is the solution. The following verses lay out in antithetical terms how the First Adam and the Last Adam are in fact very different.

¹⁵But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!

Literally the grace or an act of grace is not like the sin. This gift is further defined in verse 17 as the “gift of righteousness” (in Osborne 2004:142). The word in verse 14 (παράβασις) for sin is a change from ἁμαρτία in the text before and παραπτώμα here. ἁμαρτία is usually a general sinning, a missing of the mark, i.e. in spite of one’s best effort, there is failure to obey. Παράβασις is only used seven times in the New Testament (three times in Romans). It appears to be a direct refusal to obey a specific command especially in the context of the Law in Romans. Sin is a deviation, “a swerving from a straight path” (Guthrie 1981:202). Paraptoma means a “false step” and a sin against God. The use of these words for sin may be just variation of the vocabulary rather than hard differences, but all sin separates and alienates us from God.

The “many” is another way of saying “all men” like in verse 12 regarding sin. The “many” is qualified at the end of the verse and refers to those who have placed their faith in Jesus (believers). Joachim Jeremias shows us that “polloi” is exclusive not referring to “all,” but the majority. See his article in TDNT, vol. VI, pp. 536ff. (in Stott 1994:158). A New Testament example of this concept would be at Pentecost where the Holy Spirit is poured out on all people (Acts 2:17). This could not mean everyone in the world, but those present that day.

“The precise nature of the relation between Adam’s trespass and the death of the

many is not clarified” (Dunn 1988:294). The terribleness of man’s condition is more than balanced off by what God has done through Jesus Christ. If death came through sin even “original sin,” life has come through Jesus Christ the “Coming One.”

¹⁶Again, the gift of God is not like the result of the one man’s sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification.

Here we have a contrast between what man has done and what God does. Man brings death; God gives life. Guilt is replaced by a right standing with God, no more hiding and being ashamed in front of our Creator. Κατακριμα (condemnation) is only used three times in the New Testament, all in Romans, and twice in our passage (here and v. 18). Cranfield says, “That one single misdeed should be answered by judgment, that is perfectly understandable: that the accumulated sins and guilt of all the ages should be answered by God’s free gift, that is the miracle of miracles, utterly beyond human comprehension” (1975:286).

¹⁷For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Two men produce diametrically opposed results from their life. Adam brought death. Jesus brings the gifts of grace and righteousness. Some take this as an apocalyptic concept, but more than likely it should be understood as inaugurated eschatology. Stuart Briscoe deals with this section because of the word reign as if there were four monarchs (1982:119-128). We can reign in the kingdom of death with Adam or in the Kingdom of our Lord. It is through (δια) Jesus we have these twin gifts of grace and righteousness. “Receive” is “the present continuous tense presumably reflecting Paul’s appreciation of the ongoing character of grace” (Dunn 1988:295).

¹⁸Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men.

We return where verse 12 left off after a long wait to finish the thought. This act of righteousness could be the justification of sinners, but more than likely it is Jesus' death on the cross that provided the means for justification.

¹⁹For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

This is what defiance and disobedience of God will get you, and also what obedience brings. Here again obedience could refer to Jesus' entire life, but more than likely it refers to the defining moment in his life on our behalf: going to the cross. Osborne quoting M. Black makes a valid point here that "the translation *were made* is somewhat weak...it has a strong legal connotation and means to 'appoint' or 'constitute' someone into a certain class or category" (2004:145). Being made righteous is a gift from God and contingent upon faith (Rom. 1:17, 3:10). Righteousness does not come through the existence of a covenant, but through a God who graciously saves those who obey Him. And Barrett correctly states, "the word 'sinners' and 'righteous' are words of relationship, not character" (Barrett 1991:109).

²⁰The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more,

Law had no power to change man's nature. It could only define his deep need to rely on grace rather than perfection to please God. "Abraham stands for a personal relation with God resting on faith and grace (iv.16); the law could offer at best a mediated relation (Gal. iii.19, 20)" (Barrett 1991:110). It is a natural tendency (Augustine) to want what is forbidden, so law only intensifies desire and lust for things that are not good for us to pursue. Dunn says, "Adamic plight and destiny of man has been more than countered and superseded by the gracious act of Christ" (Dunn 1988:298). The problem of sin has been more than amply solved by Jesus. Here is a contrast of sin that abounded, with grace that "super" abounded. C.H. Hodge as quoted in Stott said, "the gospel of the grace of God has proved itself much more efficacious in the production of good, than sin in the

production of evil” (1994:161).

²¹so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

There are reasons for these diverse kingdoms. Sin’s kingdom brings death, but Jesus’ kingdom is one of life eternal. This should hardly be a difficult decision, but so many miss the blessings of grace for the ease of disobedient and faithless lives.

CONCLUSION

Some believe we sin because of “imitation,” i.e., of a bad example in Adam (Pelagians). Others think it is because we have contracted an “infection” which has been passed on by some unknown process that leaves us near death spiritually (Augustinian). A group which makes the most sense is that it is a matter of “inclusion” (in Moo 2000:189-190) in that there is solidarity and a corporate aspect to sin and death. Paul tells us in I Corinthians 11:7: “A man ought not to cover his head, since he *is* the image and glory of God...” It says man is (present tense) the image and glory of God. There is still something there.

The Scots Confession (1560) says: “By this transgression, generally known as original sin, the image of God was utterly defaced in man” (Book of Confessions 1996:11). The Second Helvetic Confession says, “we are unable to do or even to think anything good of ourselves” (Book of Confessions 1996:65). And you will read similar remarks in other Confessions in the Calvinistic tradition.

The Roman Catholic position is not quite so severe in its language. On page 105 section 418 of the most recent catechism it states: “As a result of original sin, human nature is weakened in its powers; subject to ignorance, suffering, and the domination of death; and inclined to sin...”(Ligouri 1994:105). Even this weakened definition from what Augustine would have originally proposed has led to a variety of spurious practices and doctrines such as infant baptism, limbo (taught by Aquinas), sinless state of Mary (and even her mother), and the Assumption of Mary (not even agreed upon until 1950).

In the world religions outside Christianity there are similar principles. “It is known that man cannot approach God quite naturally assuming his own innocence, that he needs purification and reconciliation, that sacrifice is needed to wipe out sin, that he

reaches life only by passing through death; in fact, that man, in the last resort, cannot redeem and liberate himself but is dependent on God's all-embracing love" (Kung 1980:627).

"The idea of God's man as the fulfiller of God's purpose is a recurring one in the Old Testament" (Bruce 1976:125). When one person fails God raises up another. That was true of Moses and Joshua, Saul and David, and Elijah and Elisha.

Only one man could undo what the first man, Adam, unleashed on the generations to follow. That man is Jesus Christ, Son of God, and Savior to those who place their faith in Him. The emphasis in Romans 5:12-21 is not so much on the doctrine of "original sin," but on how Jesus, God's solution, is so much better (*how much more*) than what was from the Fall.

If you look at the "just as" portion of our scriptural section we might be depressed because the Monarchs of Sin and Death (Briscoe) are seen reigning. Sin (six times) and death (5 times) do play a vital role here. It is clear this is about kingdoms (Βασιλευω is used 5 times in this section). The question is Whose kingdom? If we were to stop with the "just as" illustrations, there would be reason for pessimism. Thanks to God there is another section within our text that is headed by the phrase "so also." In these portions we find righteousness, justification, and life and finally grace which leads to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (v.21). That is the path I recommend for all. As Brunner says, "world history has been changed through Jesus Christ from a history of disaster into a history of redemption" (1956:47).

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