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## ORIGINAL SIN Its Importance & Fairness

by Clay Jones

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It is no surprise that in a 2002 survey almost three-quarters of Americans (seventy-four percent) rejected the teaching of original sin.<sup>1</sup>

After all, Americans want to feel good about themselves Nathaniel Brandon, whom many consider the father of the self-esteem movement, said, “The idea of Original Sin...is anti-self-esteem by its very nature. The very notion of guilt without volition or responsibility is an assault on reason as well as on morality.”<sup>2</sup> Also, many view this as an idea from the so-called “Dark Ages”; philosopher and historian Ernst Cassirer noted, “The concept of original sin is the most common opponent against which the different trends of the philosophy of Enlightenment join forces.”<sup>3</sup> But, sadly, the survey also revealed that only fifty-two percent of evangelicals held to the doctrine of original sin.

The denial or misstatement of any Christian doctrine not only distorts our understanding of reality, but has grave implications for other Christian doctrines, and this certainly is true for the doctrine of original sin. For example, if there were no “first Adam” who actually was a man who sinned, the parallel to Jesus being the “last Adam” is lost. Also, if nothing happened to human nature when Adam sinned, then it becomes theologically inexplicable why Scripture constantly portrays all of humankind as evil and thus deserving punishment. On the contrary, a robust view of human sinfulness justifies God’s judgment, demonstrates God’s patience, and magnifies the significance of Christ’s sacrifice.

Although Christians define original sin differently, historically for Protestants original sin has two commonly held components: humankind is guilty for the sin of their first parents and humankind inherited a corrupted nature, since they are sexual reproductions of their first parents.<sup>4</sup>

Although the words “original sin” aren’t found together in Scripture, the doctrine is taught in many passages: “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned”<sup>5</sup> (Rom. 5:12<sup>6</sup>); “one trespass led to condemnation for all men” (Rom. 5:18); and “in Adam all die” (1 Cor. 15:22). So it is no wonder that David wrote in Psalm 51:5, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother *conceive me*” (emphasis added).

That humans are born corrupted makes sense of Jesus' proclamation in John 6:63 (NIV) that "the Spirit gives life; the flesh *counts for nothing*" (emphasis added) and his later telling the Jews in John 8:44 (NIV) that "you are of your father, the devil." The "natural person," wrote Paul, "does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). Then in Ephesians 2:2–3 we read that Satan is "at work in the sons of disobedience" who "were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." It is no wonder, then, that Paul tells us in Romans 3:10–12 that "none is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."

The hardest aspect of this doctrine regards how it could be fair that all humans should suffer for the sin of Adam and Eve. Historically, Christians have appealed to the following theories.

### **REPRESENTED BY ADAM?**

Many Christians appeal to "federal" (or "representative") headship of Adam.<sup>7</sup> The idea is that a head can be chosen to represent the other members of a group or country and, just as a country's leader may declare war without polling that country's individual citizens, so Adam, the federal head of the human race, chose to rebel against God, thus also making rebels of his race. Adam's progeny may not have "voted" for rebellion against God, but, just like the citizens of a country at war, Adam's progeny have become enemies of God by the act of their representative. Adam's children might object that they didn't have the opportunity to choose their representative, but God knows who is best able to represent the human race. As theologian William Shedd put it, "The sin of Adam, consequently, is imputed to posterity in the very same way that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believer—namely, undeservedly and gratuitously."<sup>8</sup> Proponents of this view point out that it wasn't fair that Christ should die for humans. One act may have made us guilty, but one act makes righteous all who trust Jesus. Anyone still angry that one sin could hurt us all should be angry at sin. Perhaps there is a cosmic lesson here for all free beings: hate sin!

### **PRESENT AT ADAM'S SIN?**

Another theory says that we are really and naturally related to Adam by actually being seminally present in Adam when Adam sinned. All of humankind was in "Adam's loins" when he rebelled, and since we were really present at his sin, we also are therefore guilty of his sin. Proponents of this view point to Hebrews 7:9–10: "One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him." Being ontologically present rendered Adam's sin as chargeable to us in the same way, as Shedd analogized, that "the hand or eye acts and sins in the murderous or lustful act of the individual soul."<sup>9</sup> As we were born in Adam, so also those who are born again into God's family were crucified with Christ, died with Christ, were raised with Christ, and are now seated with Christ in the heavenly places by virtue of our organic union with Him.<sup>10</sup>

## ORGANICALLY UNITED IN ADAM'S FALLEN NATURE?

Related to the “realistic union” theory above is a view known as “traducianism.” This view holds that not only were we present with Adam when he sinned, but as his natural generation, we inherited his fallen nature—all of it. Traducianism comes from the Latin *tradux*, for *vine*: we are all a part of the vine of Adam. In other words, every human possesses an organic union with the first couple. Theologian Millard Erickson wrote,

*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....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. 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.*<sup>11</sup>

It isn't just that we were in Adam: we are his reproductions and as such we are all conceived with an inclination toward evil that deserves death.

Many struggle to understand this because of a strong sense of Western individualism, but we are not like angels, which apparently were created individually. Rather, we are all organically, spiritually, psychically the same as Adam, and if we live long enough, we will ratify our union with him through our own sinful choices. Adam and Eve had the choice to disobey and ruined their family. But now through faith we may enjoy an organic union into God's family.

## EXPLANATORY POWER

The doctrine of original sin accounts for much of human evil. Indeed, it is empirically verified every day. As G. K. Chesterton put it, “Certain new theologians dispute original sin, which is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved.”<sup>12</sup> Even non-Christian Darwinist Michael Ruse thinks so: “I think Christianity is spot on about original sin—how could one think otherwise, when the world's most civilized and advanced people (the people of Beethoven, Goethe, Kant) embraced that slime-ball Hitler and participated in the Holocaust? I think Saint Paul and the great Christian philosophers had real insights into sin and freedom and responsibility, and I want to build on this rather than turn from it.”<sup>13</sup>

And it's not just Ruse. In the many books on genocide I have read to date, every genocide researcher and genocide survivor concludes that it is the average member of a population that commits these horrors.<sup>14</sup>

In her report on the trial of Auschwitz administrator Adolf Eichmann, Hannah Arendt found it particularly troubling that “there were so many like him, neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal.”<sup>15</sup> Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel wrote, “Deep down...man is not only an executioner, not only a victim, not only a spectator: he is all three at once.”<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Auschwitz

survivor Primo Levi wrote, “We must remember that these faithful followers, among them the diligent executors of human orders, were not born torturers, were not (with few exceptions) monsters: they were ordinary men.”<sup>17</sup> Consider the conclusion of two Holocaust researchers:

*What remains is a central, deadening sense of despair over the human species. Where can one find an affirmative meaning in life if human beings can do such things? Along with this despair there may also come a desperate new feeling of vulnerability attached to the fact that one is human. If one keeps at the Holocaust long enough, then sooner or later the ultimate truth begins to reveal itself: one knows, finally, that one might either do it, or be done to. If it could happen on such a massive scale elsewhere, then it can happen anywhere; it is all within the range of human possibility, and like it or not, Auschwitz expands the universe of consciousness no less than landings on the moon.*<sup>18</sup>

If these researchers and victims are correct, then all humans are born Auschwitz-enabled and the doctrine of original sin best explains that fact. Sometimes people ask, if Adam and Eve sinned, why didn't God just “start over” with someone else? But that is what God did. God sent His son Jesus into the world as the “last Adam” (1 Cor. 15:45) who endured temptations without sinning to redeem those who come to Jesus. Adam may have made a choice that corrupted his family, but his descendants can choose to escape that corruption through Jesus. When they do, they are born again into God's family and are imbued with God's nature.

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## NOTES

- 1 Barna Group, “Americans Draw Theological Beliefs from Diverse Points of View,” October 8, 2002, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/82-americans-drawtheological-beliefs-from-diverse-points-of-view>. Accessed June 29, 2011.
- 2 Nathaniel Brandon, *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem* (New York: Bantam, 1994), 148.
- 3 Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951), 141.
- 4 Eastern Orthodox Christians prefer “ancestral sin” to “original sin” and believe that Adam's descendants inherited Adam's corrupted nature, which inclines them to sin, but they are not guilty for Adam's sin.
- 5 Douglas Moo writes: “The point is that the sin here attributed to the ‘all’ is to be understood, in the light of vv. 12...and [Rom. 5:] 15–19, as a sin that in some manner is identical to the sin committed by Adam....All people, therefore, stand condemned ‘in Adam,’ guilty by reason of the sin all committed ‘in him.’” Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 326.
- 6 All Scripture references are from the English Standard Version except where otherwise noted
- 7 Sometimes also called “forensic union.”

- 8 William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3rd ed., ed. Alan W. Gomes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P and R, 2003), 435.
- 9 Ibid., 564.
- 10 Rom. 6:1–4; Eph. 2:6–7.
- 11 Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 652.
- 12 G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Chicago: Moody, 2009), 28.
- 13 Michael Ruse, “Darwinism and Christianity Redux: A Response to My Critics,” *Philosophia Christi* NS 4, 1 (2002): 192.
- 14 For more documentation on the pervasiveness of evil, see the paper I presented, “Human Evil and Suffering,” at the 2009 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, available at [clayjones.net/resources](http://clayjones.net/resources).
- 15 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 277.
- 16 Elie Wiesel, *The Town Beyond the Wall*, trans. Stephen Barker (New York: Avon, 1970), 174.
- 17 Primo Levi, *The Reawakening* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 1995), 228.
- 18 George M. Kren and Leon Rappoport, *The Holocaust and the Crisis of Human Behavior* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980), 126.