

ORIGINAL SIN

An Essay By Richard Phillips

DEFINITION

Original Sin is a term that defines the nature of mankind's sinful condition because of Adam's fall. It teaches that all people are corrupted by Adam's sin through natural generation, by which—together with Adam's imputed condemnation—we all enter the world guilty before God. Original Sin shows that we sin because we are sinners, entering this world with a corrupt nature and without hope apart from the saving grace of God in the gospel.

SUMMARY

Original Sin teaches that all mankind is joined to Adam in both the guilt and the corruption of his first sin. All men and women are joined to Adam both by natural generation and by his covenantal headship. As a people who from our birth are corrupted by sin, we share in Adam's guilt before God, a guilt imputed to us under the covenant of works. Moreover, men and women are so corrupted morally and spiritually by our natural union with Adam that we are totally depraved. All our human faculties are corrupted by sin so that we have an inborn tendency to commit sin. Moreover, our total depravity renders us spiritually unable to love God or believe his gospel and be saved until we are first regenerated by his sovereign grace. Original Sin provides us with a biblical understanding of ourselves and casts sinners in utter reliance on God's saving grace in the gospel, with no confidence in the flesh, and with all the glory for our salvation belonging to the Lord.

THE NATURE OF MANKIND'S CONNECTION TO ADAM

Original Sin is the Christian teaching of mankind's sinfulness because of Adam's fall. It does not refer to the originating sin committed by Adam—eating the forbidden fruit in violation of God's command (Gen 3:6)—but rather to mankind's moral and spiritual condition because of that sin. Defining Original Sin requires the answer to two questions, the first of which is whether the moral and spiritual condition of humanity is connected to Adam in his sin.

During the Fourth Century AD, the heretic Pelagius (condemned by the Council of Chalcedon in 431) asserted that Adam's fall into sin had no direct effect on his offspring other than to set a bad example. With respect to the character of man and his relationship with God, Pelagius asserted that Adam's sin affected no one other than himself.

The biblical reasons for rejecting Pelagius provide the basis for the doctrine of Original Sin. Primary among them is Romans 5:12, where Paul says that "sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned." Paul's point was not that all men have sinned after the example of Adam and therefore suffer the curse of death, but rather that all men share in the consequences of Adam's sin. When he states, "because all sinned," Paul is referring to our union with Adam in his transgression of God's command. Herman Bavinck summarizes: "Adam sinned; consequently, sin and death entered the world and held sway over all."¹

Moreover, Paul describes Adam as "a type of the one who was to come" (Rom 5:14), namely, Christ. Both Adam and Christ stood before God's covenant as a representative for their people. Adam, as a type of Christ, undertook the test of the covenant of works (Gen 2:16–17) on behalf of all his natural offspring (his failure affecting them all), just as Christ fulfilled the covenant of works on behalf of all his spiritual offspring (his victorious obedience gaining them salvation). This principle of covenant headship is vital not only to Original Sin but also to the imputation of Christ's righteousness in the gospel. Paul makes this connection clear: "For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many" (Rom 5:15).

Original Sin provides answers to important questions about sin. For instance, why is sin universal among men and women? Geerhardus Vos writes: "The Pelagian theory leaves the universality of sin entirely unexplained,"² since if Adam's sin did not make all mankind sinners, we would expect some at least not to sin. Yet, as Solomon prayed, "There is no one who does not sin" (1Kgs 8:46; see also Rom 3:23).

Another question asks: Is sin merely a passive defect, having no corrupting power in man? The Bible answers, to the contrary, that sin is a deadly power that holds the sinner in bondage. Jesus said, "Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin" (John 8:34). To once have sinned is to come under the power of sin. Therefore, far from defining sin only as a transgression of God's law, the Bible describes sin as "lawlessness" itself (1Jn 3:4). More than this, David states that from the moment of his conception in his mother's womb the power of sin was upon him: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps 51:5). David was not charging his mother with sinful behavior in his conception but, rather, confessing the sinfulness he inherited at the moment his life came into being. Psalm 58:3 concurs: "The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth."

MANKIND'S ORIGINAL GUILT IN SIN

Having shown all mankind's union with sinful Adam – both by natural generation and covenant headship – we must then ask another question: What is the condition of mankind as a result of this connection to Adam's fall? Original Sin first considers our connection with Adam in the universal guilt of mankind. When Adam sinned, the entire human race was "in him," so that his guilt accrued to us all. Consider Hebrews 7:9–10, which states that Levi was "in the loins of his ancestor" Abraham when he tithed to Melchizedek, establishing the superiority of Melchizedek's priesthood to that of Levi. Likewise, the entire human race was "in Adam" when he sinned. Levi was, of course, not present when his ancestor tithed to this priest, yet by virtue of Levi's natural descent from Abraham, the Levitical priests related to Melchizedek on account of Abraham's actions. Likewise, while Adam's descendants did not personally commit Adam's transgression, their natural union with Adam as his offspring establishes their condemnation in sin before God.

Because Adam's nature was corrupted by the fall—as evidenced in his alienation to God in its aftermath (Gen 3:7–12)—he could never produce morally superior offspring. John Murray explains: "Human nature became corrupt in Adam and . . . this human nature which became corrupt in Adam is transmitted to posterity by natural generation."³ Since we all come into life as sinners, all mankind must necessarily be repugnant to God's perfectly holy nature and be subject to his condemnation. We therefore find Paul describing all of mankind as "by nature children of wrath" (Eph 2:3).

Mankind's original guilt stems not only from our inherited nature as sinners. We remember that Adam stood under the covenant of works as the representative of the entire race. On this basis, Paul explains why men and women died between Adam and Moses, death being the penalty for sin (Gen 2:17). Romans 5:14 considers the case of those who sinned without a law, "whose sinning was not like that transgression of Adam," in that they had personally received neither the covenant of works nor the Mosaic Law. Why, then, did people die between Adam and Moses, with no law to condemn them, except that Adam "was a type of the one who was to come"? That is, Adam was a covenant head for all his people, his failure condemning them all under God's justice, just as Christ as the covenant head of those who believe attained their justification. Paul states this relationship clearly: "Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men" (Rom 5:18; see also 1Cor 15:22). Far from being an oppressive doctrine to the hearts of men and women, Original Sin establishes the very principle of covenant headship by which we receive the righteousness of Christ which we have not deserved. In Paul's own words in Romans 5:20, Original Sin preaches the inspiring news: "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more!"

The teaching of mankind's universal guilt as inherited from Adam alone can vindicate God for the miseries of human life. Secular man frequently assails God with the notion that he is culpable for the sufferings of people around the globe. Yet, as Augustine pointed out in his opposition to Pelagius (summarized by Bavinck):

The appalling misery of the human race can only be explained as a punishment upon sin. How can God, who certainly is good and just, subject all humans from their conception on to sin and death if they are completely innocent? An original moral debt must rest upon all; there is no other way to understand the crushing yoke that weighs upon all the children of Adam.⁴

From the moment of Adam's sin, the need of the fallen human race was a Redeemer to deliver them from sin. For this reason, God's first action in response to Adam's sin was to promise this Redeemer (Gen 3:15) and to depict Christ's atoning death through the sacrifice of animals in the garden (Gen 3:21). The logic of mankind's inherited guilt through Adam provides an essential logic to the gospel message from its earliest appearance in Scripture.

MANKIND'S ORIGINAL CORRUPTION IN SIN

The effect of Adam's sin upon his entire race did not end with guilt but extended to their moral and spiritual corruption as his offspring. The fall has polluted human nature with "an inherent positive disposition toward sin."⁵[v] We see this sin-ward bent in Romans 3:10–12: "None is righteous, no, not one . . . All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." Isaiah 64:6 adds: "We have all become like one who is unclean," so that even "our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment."

The Bible presents man's sinful nature as utterly comprehensive, ruining every human faculty. Jeremiah 17:9 says: "The heart is deceitful above all things." Romans 3:13–18 depicts the mouth, feet, and eyes as debased, concluding: "the way of peace they have not known." Above all, the fallen mind is corrupted: "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law" (Rom 8:7). This fallen condition is known as "total depravity." Robert Reymond summarizes:

His understanding is darkened, his mind is at enmity with God, his will to act is slave to his darkened understanding and rebellious mind, his heart is corrupt, his emotions are perverted, his affections naturally gravitate to that which is evil and ungodly, his conscience is untrustworthy, and his body is subject to mortality.⁶

The teaching of total depravity states not only that every faculty of fallen mankind is corrupted by the power of sin, but it also asserts a spiritual inability to believe God and receive his salvation through faith. Paul states, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him," and then adds, "he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1Cor 2:14). For this reason, Jesus told Nicodemus: "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Paul wrote that apart from God's regenerating work, we are all "dead in the trespasses and sins" (Eph 2:1). Contrary to those who would describe fallen man merely as sick—with a weakened but nonetheless inherent ability to believe—Paul insists that we are no more able to come to God in faith than a dead man is able to rise from the grave. Whereas Adam was created in a righteousness so that he may be described as having once possessed a free will, Original Sin has placed the will of mankind in slavery to the power of sin. People, of course, retain a faculty of choice, but the bondage of one's will in sin denies them the liberty to choose the way of God. Louis Berkhof concludes: "He cannot change his fundamental preference for sin and self to love for God, nor even make an approach to such a change. In a word, he is unable to do any spiritual good."⁷

ORIGINAL SIN AND THE GOSPEL

Original Sin provides the basis for a true understanding of ourselves as fallen humans. This knowledge is essential for those who would be saved through the gospel of Jesus Christ. James Boice explains: "Without a knowledge of our unfaithfulness and rebellion we will never come to know God as the God of truth and grace."⁸ Original Sin teaches us to despair of all hope in ourselves or any other natural source, relying instead entirely on God's supernatural grace in the gospel. For although dead men are unable of themselves to rise from the grave of their fallen life, God is able by his grace to make us "alive together with Christ" (Eph 2:5). The truth of Original Sin shows us that our salvation must be by the grace of God alone, so that the glory also belongs only to him. Moreover, knowing that the case of every sinner is hopeless apart from God's saving grace, wise

ministers set forth the gospel as proclaimed in God’s Word, “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16). To appreciate Original Sin is to base our evangelism and preaching entirely on God’s Word, which in the power of the Holy Spirit is able to convey life to the dead. For, in the words of 1 Peter 1:23: “You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.”

FOOTNOTES

1Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 3:85.

2Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., trans. Richard Gaffin (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012), 2:29.

3John Murray, *The Imputation of Adam’s Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959), 26-7.

4Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:93.

5Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1941), 246.

6Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 450.

7Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 247.

8James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 199.

Further Reading

Murray, John. *The Imputation of Adam’s Sin*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959. The classic exegetical study of Romans 5:12–21, making clear man’s covenantal union with Adam in the fall and the believer’s union in Christ for justification.

Edwards, Jonathan. “The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*. 2 vols. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974, 1:143–233. A classic Puritan exposition of the biblical basis for Original Sin, defending against objections from Enlightenment philosophy.

Challies, Tim. “Original Sin and the Death of Infants,” Challies, July 19, 2006. A thoughtful application of the Bible’s teaching of Original Sin to this emotional subject.

Piper, John. “The Fatal Disobedience of Adam and the Triumphant Obedience of Christ,” *Desiring God*, August 26, 2007. A sermon video and text highlighting the glorious saving connection between the imputation of Adam’s sin and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.

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FOR FURTHER READING:

THE FATAL DISOBEDIENCE OF ADAM AND THE TRIUMPHANT OBEDIENCE OF CHRIST *Sermon Resource by John Piper*

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<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-fatal-disobedience-of-adam-and-the-triumphant-obedience-of-christ>