

9. THE ORIGINAL SIN

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1. Article 9 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of 1563, which form the dogmatic bedrock of Anglicanism, states:

“Original sin . . . is the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam; whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that

 - the flesh lusteth always contrary to the Spirit;
 - and therefore in every person born into this world, it deserveth God’s wrath and damnation.
 - And this infection of nature doth remain, yea in them that are regenerated; whereby [...] concupiscence and lust hath of itself the nature of sin”.
2. The Scots Confession (1560) states:

“By which transgression, commonly called Original Sin,

 - was the image of God utterly defaced in man; and
 - he and his posterity of nature became enemies to God, slaves to Satan, and servants to sin;
 - insomuch that death everlasting has had, and shall have, power and dominion over all that have not been, are not, or shall not be regenerated from above”
3. Key aspects of this doctrine
 - 3.1. Human beings were created in the image of God and in a state of innocence and harmony with God and with each other expressed symbolically in the absence of *shame*:

“Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame” (Gen 2:25).
 - 3.2. The first couple’s transgression had consequences which affected not only their lives, but their ‘nature’
 - i. The image of God is “utterly defaced”
 - ii. Human nature is utterly corrupt
 - iii. Because this corruption affects the ‘nature’ it is communicated to all their descendants
 - iv. It makes every human being deserving of God’s wrath and damnation
 - v. It is the reason why human beings die.
 - vi. It takes the form of “inclination to evil” especially under the form of “concupiscence and lust”.

- vii. Even after baptism and regeneration, human beings remain ‘ill’ in the sense that they remain weak especially with regards to lust.
- 4. It must be said that this is the ‘hard’ version of the doctrine which was formulated by St Augustine and revived by Luther, Calvin, and the Reformation. The main traits of this ‘hard’ versions are that
 - 4.1. As a result of the original sin, the human nature is *totally* corrupt
 - 4.2. Human beings inherit from Adam and Eve not only the state of corruption but also the *guilt*: all human beings are culpable as if everyone had *actually* committed that sin and for this reason they deserve God’s wrath and punishment and have to die.
- 5. The Catholic tradition agrees on a ‘softer’ version of the consequences of original sin
 - 5.1. The image of God is not “defaced” and human beings keep the natural light of reason.
 - 5.2. The human nature is not totally corrupt – it is just incapable of pleasing to God.
 - 5.3. Original sin is essentially a privative state, that is the loss of the innocence in which human being were created
 - 5.4. Human beings are *not guilty* of the sin of Adam and Eve, they only inherit its consequences.
- 6. See the prayer for the confession of sins in the Episcopal liturgy

Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, maker of all things, judge of all men: We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, which we, from time to time, most grievously have committed, by thought, word, and deed, against thy divine Majesty, provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us. We do earnestly repent, and are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; the remembrance of them is grievous unto us; the burden of them is intolerable. Have mercy upon us, have mercy upon us, most merciful Father; for thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ’s sake, forgive us all that is past; and grant that we may ever hereafter serve and please thee in newness of life, to the honor and glory of thy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

 - 6.1. The mention of “wickedness” and of deserving “God’s wrath” is a remnant of the Calvinist or Reformed influence on the formation of Anglican spirituality.
 - 6.2. These are rarely if never to be found in the language of Roman Catholic liturgical texts.
- 7. **This doctrine raises some questions**
 - 7.1. **Is it compatible with the findings of science?**
 - 7.2. **Is it really vouched by the testimony of Scripture?**
 - 7.3. **How did it develop and why?**
- 8. About the comparison with the findings of science, among many other factors, one in particular is revealing:

“Biological death can no longer be regarded as in any way the consequence of anything human beings might have been supposed to have done in the past, for evolutionary history shows it to be the very means whereby they appear, and so, for the theist, are created by God. The traditional interpretation of the third chapter of Genesis that there was a historical ‘Fall,’ an action by our human progenitors that is the explanation of biological death, has to be rejected”.¹

9. Then, concerning the testimony of Scripture, the first chapters of the book of Genesis are not meant to explain *what happened* but should be read more as a description of the conditions of humanity:
 - 9.1. Genesis does not talk about the corruption of human nature
 - 9.2. But about the breaking of the harmonious relationship between human beings and God which entails a disharmony between human beings and with creation (animals, plants, soil)
 - 9.3. And it is meant to provide an allegorical illustration of the situation of shame, suffering, and death which afflicts humanity.
10. The testimony of the rest of the Old Testament is that human sinfulness is not just the consequence of individual choices. There is a tendency to do evil innate and universal:

“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” (Psalm 51.5)

“What are mortals, that they could be pure, or those born of woman, that they could be righteous? If God places no trust in his holy ones, if even the heavens are not pure in his eyes, how much less mortals, who are vile and corrupt, who drink up evil like water! (Job 15:14ff)

“The Lord looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.” (Psalm 14:4f)
11. The main biblical message is that human beings need to be saved, rescued, liberated
 - 11.1. from the evil they inflict on each other and on themselves
 - 11.2. and especially from their inability to be faithful partners in the covenant with God. Evil is not just individual, it is corporate.
12. In the New Testament, the account of Genesis is reframed by Paul in Romans 5:
 - 12.1. 12 Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned. [...]
 - 12.2. 15 But the **gift** is not like the **trespass**. For
 - i. if the many died by the trespass of the one man,
 - ii. **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!

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2. ¹ Arthur Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming – Natural, Divine and Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 222–3, quoted by Oliver Crisp.

SHARP FAITH

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

- 12.3. 16 Nor can the gift of God be compared with the result of one man's sin:
- i. The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation,
 - ii. but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification.
- 12.4. 17 For if,
- i. by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man,
 - ii. **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!
- 12.5. 18 Consequently,
- i. just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people,
 - ii. so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people.
- 12.6. 19 For
- i. just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners,
 - ii. so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.
- 12.7. 20 [...] **where sin increased, grace increased all the more,**
- i. 21 so that, just as sin reigned in death,
 - ii. so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.
13. The reasoning of Paul in this passage needs to be carefully unpacked:
- 13.1. Paul establishes a connection between the "sin of one man" and the "condemnation" and "death" that afflicts humanity.
 - 13.2. The point however is not to emphasize the sinful condition of humanity but the "gift" of salvation, and the overflowing of "grace".
 - 13.3. The starting point is not human sinfulness but the salvation realized by Jesus Christ.
14. Thus the OT and the NT introduce the image of an "original transgression" through an analogous process:
- 14.1. The OT starts with God wanting to establish a covenant, a friendship with his people – and the people experiencing their fundamental inability to reciprocate. This inability to reciprocate is so universal and inescapable that it can be considered as a trait of the human condition.
 - 14.2. The NT starts with the confession that God had to take human flesh to save us because we were not able to save ourselves. Therefore, there must have been something in the human condition which needed such an extreme intervention on God's part
15. In a nutshell, the testimony of Scripture is that without God, without Christ, and the Holy Spirit, we are prisoners of a vicious circle that prevents us from harmonious relations with creation, with each other, and with God, as Jesus says in the Gospel of John:

"Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

16. The thinking of the Church concerning this issue has been driven by this conviction: unless God saves us, we cannot save ourselves – we cannot even *want* to be saved! Human condition is such that we are blind even to the hopelessness of our situation.
17. This line of thought is essential to understand the way in which the doctrine of the original sin not only came about, but developed into the “hard” version championed by Augustine and then by the Reformed tradition.
18. Saint Augustine (5th century) was somehow goaded to harden his thought on original sin by his polemics against the Pelagians.²
 - 18.1. For **Pelagianism** human sinfulness is a matter of imitation not imputation and human individuals are able to act righteously because their will is not compromised.
 - 18.2. According to **semi-Pelagianism** humans beings are able to co-operate with divine grace in bringing about their own salvation.
19. The problem with these doctrines is that God’s grace is seen simply as a stimulant, a help. Human beings are not totally incapable to act righteously – they only need a good example or a little help. This however runs against the testimony of the New Testament that “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5) – and that for our salvation God had to become flesh and die on the cross, and send the gift of the Holy Spirit, for us to be able to believe and follow Jesus’ teaching and example.
20. This started a ‘trend’ in theology:
 - 20.1. The more thinkers wanted to emphasize the necessity of God’s grace
 - 20.2. The more they overstated the human need for grace by insisting on the corruption, the wickedness, the perversion, of human nature.
21. Thus, it is very significant that the revival of the ‘hard’ version of this doctrine should have happened with the Reformation:
 - 21.1. The main problem of the Church before the Reformation was that it sounded as if salvation depended on human cooperation to grace: the Catholic Church routinely taught that people ‘deserve’ to be saved or to be damned according to their good works.
 - 21.2. The Reformers interpreted the Roman Catholic teaching as a revival of Pelagianism and just like Augustine endeavoured to oppose it by
 - i. Affirming that people can be saved by “grace” only (*Sola Fide*)
 - ii. And by emphasizing the total corruption of human nature and will – hence a total inability to cooperate to salvation or ‘deserve’ it by good works.
22. It can be said that the instinct behind this doctrine is right (confessing God’s grace) but the method is unfortunate (adopting a pessimist view of the human condition).
23. We can add that the main casualty in this ‘escalation’ has been the negative perception of sexuality which has become pervasive in Christianity.

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² From Pelagius, a monk and spiritual author in the 5th Century, contemporary of St Augustine.

- 24. Disregarding the fact that the beginning of Genesis is an allegory, the mention of shame and of the need to cover their nakedness has led authors to consider that the main manifestation, if not the cause, of original sin was *lust*.
- 25. Augustine famously hardened this perception especially in his anti-Pelagian polemic against Julien of Eclanum :
 - 25.1. The effects of original sin will never be overcome and they have to be tolerated as the case of lust within the marriage clearly demonstrate
 - 25.2. Lust is a "motion which is indecent because it is disobedient to the reason"
 - 25.3. Consequence in sexual intercourse (even within marriage): lust has to be waited for to set sexual members in motion
 - 25.4. Because of this lust, whatever comes into being by natural birth is bound by original sin.
 - 25.5. Even after baptism, lust remains as a 'languor', even though it is no more imputed as a guilt.

What should we retain of this doctrine?

- 26. Even just from the narrative viewpoint, the Gospels do present the human situation as one of powerlessness and illness:
 - 26.1. Jesus does teach what we should do - but this is just an aspect of his ministry
 - 26.2. Most of his time goes to *healing* the blind, the dumb, the paralytic – and these healings are symbolic: they mean that without God's intervention we are not even able to *see* salvation, to *hear* Jesus' teaching, and especially to *walk* in his footsteps.
- 27. It is not possible to read into the first chapters of Genesis the ideas
 - 27.1. of a "corruption of nature" which is
 - 27.2. communicated by generation
 - 27.3. which consists especially in lust.
- 28. The parables of these chapters teach that
 - 28.1. Human beings were created in the image of God
 - 28.2. and in a state of innocence and harmony with God and with each other expressed symbolically in the absence of *shame*:

"Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame" (Gen 2:25).
- 29. It is also possible to interpret Genesis not as a narration of the origins but
 - 29.1. as a description of what God wants for humanity, namely this harmonious relation with God, each other, and creation
 - 29.2. to which we need to add that this destiny is not within human reach but can only be welcomed as a gift from God.