

The "Logic" Of Original Sin

by Kel Good

In a recent paper¹, Robert Morey attempts to draw unavoidable logical connections between three core doctrines regarding salvation. He claims "the doctrines of original sin, a substitutionary atonement, and forensic justification stand or fall together." Finney and other intelligent modern "heretics" are said logically to deny all three because of this tight interconnection. Given Morey's definitions of these doctrines, he is correct to say Finney and those who follow in his wake, deny their validity.

Morey is also correct when he accuses many modern evangelicals of inconsistency for questioning the justice of our being treated as sinners because of what Adam did, and yet accepting the idea God treated Jesus according to our sins. He suggests this inconsistency as the failure to apply the obviously legitimate idea of our guilt being credited to Christ to the case of Adam's guilt being applied to us. But it is far from clear how imputation of Adam's guilt to his posterity, and of our sins to Christ, would constitute consistency of principal. Even if some kind of argument could demonstrate that a person's guilt could be transferred to another party, there is still a significant difference between the cases of Christ and us. Jesus chose to go to the cross and could have chosen not to. Had he not chosen to, it would have been a violation of all justice to treat him as God did. In the case of Adam's posterity, the transference of guilt is said to have taken place without any consent on the part of his descendants. Arminians have argued Adam's descendants have not inherited Adam's guilt, but have ratified Adam's choice through their own sinning, thus incurring guilt. We are asked not to notice that this ratification takes place inevitably because of the inheritance of a sinful nature that also comes free of charge through Adam's choice.

The true inconsistency of modern evangelicals is in rightly denying that Adam's guilt could be imputed to his descendants, and yet still accepting at all, that Jesus could have been justly treated according to our guilt. There are no annals of justice that could warrant punishing someone who was not guilty. If Jesus was punished for sins he did not commit, Jesus was wronged. Martin Luther recognised this and insisted Jesus was literally made to be the one who had committed the sins, so he could be justly punished. Besides wishing we could ask Luther why he had a problem with the justice of punishing a guiltless man, but did not have a problem with the justice of actually making someone who had not sinned into a sinner first so we could justly punish him, I think we would also be warranted in asking, "Is this magic?" Was Jesus who he was on the cross or was he someone else? Was he just himself, or was he everybody? Most Calvinists claim only that the guilt and appropriate punishment was transferred, not that the literal personal reality of being sinful was transferred. Thus Morey's phraseology of Jesus being treated "according to our sins." He was treated the way we should have been.

Justifying Original Sin

If the imputation of the guilt of one person to another violates our natural sense of justice, how does Morey justify original sin? He calls forth three ideas which are taught in scripture: Solidarity, representation, and imputation. Modern Christians struggle with the idea of mankind being treated according to Adam's sin, we are told, because they fail to see the biblical teaching that individuals are treated according to the group they are a part of. They are treated according to the actions of their representatives. Sins are imputed to different people than their true owners.

To support the solidarity concept, Morey suggests the image of God, which each individual bears, is a result of his solidarity with Adam. Individual Jews were "chosen" because of their membership in the Jewish Nation. This nation was chosen because of its descendance and solidarity with Abraham. A Levite was in the priesthood due to his solidarity with the tribe that was chosen as the priestly tribe. Ninevah was spared due to its solidarity in the actions of its king in repenting. Morey claims it did not matter whether individual Ninevites repented, they were spared because they were one with their king. Egypt as a nation was judged, as were the nations destroyed when Israel took over Canaan. The Assyrian and Babylonian captivities fall in the same category. In fact "... all ... judgements sent against nations, (were) justified by God on the basis of their participation in the solidarity of their nation."²

Even Nehemiah, a righteous man, confessed his guilt in a corporate sense, though not guilty individually. Sodom is also an example of corporate guilt. The whole city was condemned for certain sins prevalent in it. God also says he will visit the guilt of fathers upon the children, even to the third and fourth generations. Morey also points to the modern understanding of war, that nations declare war on one another and the individual citizens can be killed and their goods taken from them because of this corporate situation.

In addition to solidarity, the idea of representatives acting on behalf of a people is argued. Modern democratic government is a prime example. Biblically, Pharaoh's stubbornness is said to have brought the nation into judgement just as Hezekiah's prayer in II Kings 19 brought deliverance. Jesus' representative act on the cross brought salvation for his people.

The idea of imputation is clearly referred to in Romans 4 where Abraham's faith was imputed or credited to him as righteousness. In Psalm 32 David describes the experience of forgiveness as not having his sins imputed or credited to him.

Morey then attempts to show we are related to Adam through solidarity (genetic and spiritual), representation, and imputation. We have solidarity in our inheritance of the image of God. We have a spiritual solidarity because Adam harmed that image in himself and bore offspring in his image. Romans 5 shows Paul clearly drawing parallels between

Adam's representative acts for the race in sinning and Jesus' representative acts in obedience. I Corinthians 15 is also cited to document Adam as the source of spiritual death. Romans 5 teaches Adam's sin and condemnation made us sinners and condemned. Imputation of Adam's sin upon his posterity was a consequence of Adam's sin, even as justification for his posterity spiritually is the result of Jesus' obedience.

How do we respond to all this? First we must admit that the Bible does teach concepts of solidarity, representation, and imputation. We need not deny these ideas to deny their application or interpretation by Morey. A closer examination of them will result in a failure to find the need to draw Morey's conclusions.

Solidarity And Individuality

The concept of solidarity is a challenging moral concept for those whose thinking is strongly influenced by enlightenment individualism. Such advocates are guilty at times of accepting this way of thinking with little self examination of its implications. In the same way, those of a more Calvinistic bent (of whom Morey is a good modern example, though you'll forgive me if I fail to call him a heretic), tend to be heavily influenced by more classical thinking. This viewpoint often neglects the worth and uniqueness of the individual, in the name of the group. Solidarity is a concept much more at home in classical thinking than modern thinking. But it is interesting how the Bible does not seem to make us choose between them. Although not every example Morey gives us of solidarity is accompanied by a balancing individualist qualifier in scripture, most of his examples are. The few which are not may certainly be read in the light of those which are, in the same way we read passages talking about salvation which neglect to mention the condition of faith as implicitly including it, since it is mentioned in most others. Let's look at Morey's examples again.

We are said to be in the image of God due to solidarity with Adam who was in God's image. This is mistaken. We are in God's image because we have the same attributes as Adam, but we would be in God's image even if we were the only ones alive and there never had been an Adam. If God had made several individual men besides Adam, would they have been in God's image because they were all a part of "the human race" or because they were all made similarly? The latter seems the correct idea. While the empirical fact of our being in God's image stems from our ancestry, there is no logical connection.

The Jews were God's chosen people for the purpose of bringing the saviour to the world because God made a choice to use their nation. Most missiologists agree that God's vision as expressed to Abraham in the promise that all nations would be blessed through of him was international. The Jews were not unique in this. But there was a manner in which the individual Jew had a unique place because he happened to be a part of that nation. We need not deny this concept. There are no difficult moral problems that arise from it either. The case of the individual Levite was the same. Since each of these "chosennesses" were

gifts of God, and did not have to do with what was just in the treatment of individuals, no moral problem arises here. God may give his gifts to whomever he chooses.

Morey surely misrepresents the case of Ninevah. It is true that the king himself repented and put on sackcloth, and he did order by official decree that his people repent. In the culture of the day leaders had this kind of power, to control corporate worship. The case of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel 3 indicates that individual response to such a decree was not inevitable. Jonah 3:10 tells us God decided to spare the city, not simply because the king repented, but because all the people did.

Is Individual Guilt Irrelevant?

We do not have enough details about Egypt or the Canaan nations to assess their state regarding the judgements brought on them, but Abraham was told by God that his descendants would live as slaves in Egypt until the wickedness of the Amorites was complete. This suggests a very universal situation where the Canaanite nations were concerned, warranting judgement. Egypt was probably growing in wickedness in the same fashion. There is much evidence in the ten plagues of Egypt that God's intention was to bring this judgement, whatever Pharaoh's reaction, since several times God is said to have hardened Pharaoh's heart himself. That the plagues attacked idols and gods indicates the state of the nation and the people inhabiting it.

The case of Nehemiah is more interesting since he confesses the sins of his people. Morey is mistaken again, however, to claim this is a prayer where Nehemiah is guiltless and confesses only a corporate guilt. In verse 6 of chapter 1 he clearly identifies that he himself is guilty of the sins he is confessing. We cannot use this passage therefore as proof of a perfectly righteous man still claiming guilt because of his corporate identity with his group. Daniel might have been a better choice, since nothing specific is said of his personal sins. An argument from silence is not, however, a proof.

The unique case of Sodom flies directly in the face of Morey's claim that solidarity means God judges groups without distinction of the moral guilt of individuals. The whole interaction of Abraham with God in Genesis 18 is based on Abraham's challenging God on the fairness of such an idea. He asks how God can judge a whole city when there are righteous people in it. The great barter with God, to spare it if 50, ... , 10 righteous people are found, shows God in agreement that he will not judge if they are found. Abraham gave up at ten, and significantly fails to ask about Lot. Even though ten righteous people cannot be found and Abraham's criterion of justice has been satisfied, God still goes to Sodom to remove the one righteous man Lot before the judgement falls. What happened to "It did not matter if he, as an individual, had sinned or repented. The destiny of his nation was his destiny"³? Perhaps a city is too small a group with which to have solidarity!

Even in the Exodus 34:6-7 where God claims he will visit the sins of the fathers upon the third and fourth generations, this is only after affirming he will maintain love to thousands, forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. This indicates the visitation of guilt "for the father's sins" is a judgement against generations who perpetuate their father's evils. God is not judging people who are not themselves involved in the sins being judged. Those who repent, who individually set themselves apart from guilt for these sins, are shown mercy. If generations carry on a family tradition of sinning, God will judge. It was confusion regarding this very principal which had led the Israelites, like Morey, to develop the proverb discussed in Ezekiel 18:2 "The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." God had to correct their misunderstanding by emphasising that each individual is judged for his own sin, not for the sins of his father or son.

God Does Not Confuse Moral Categories

Throughout the judgements God brings in scripture, we see the same actions taken to save the remnant who have not "bowed the knee to Baal." On this same basis Noah was not destroyed in the flood, and it is at least implied that time was given for others to repent. We do not see in scripture that individuals are subjected to judgements, because of the sins of the groups they belong to, but we see God making provision for those who were not guilty of the sins of their group. That solidarity is taught, and corporate judgements occur is undeniable. You can sin a whole lot better with your friends than by yourself! Group guilt is accumulative and worse than individual guilt, just as a sum is greater than all its parts. God does not ignore questions of individual justice in carrying out these judgements.

Morey's use of the example of warring nations clearly fails since a major aspect of modern "just war" debates deals specifically with the problem of the immorality of innocent civilian deaths. It is generally concluded that it is wrong and barbarian to dismiss such deaths as utilitarian necessities. It would certainly not be accepted that such deaths were "deserved" simply because the nation of the civilian was at war. Calvinist views of solidarity guilt enshrine such barbarism as the standard by which God judges.

Another important detail left out by Morey is that his argument assumes that there are actually people in these various groups God judged who were guiltless. Is Morey denying that all have sinned? Probably, in the judgements God brought in scripture, there were no guiltless individuals who could claim perfect amnesty. Even so, where there were those who God was willing to refer to as "righteous", on whatever basis, they were spared by specific exception.

What Is A Representative?

How does Morey's idea of representation fare? His example of representative government does not make his point since the whole idea of representation assumes that the representative was chosen by his people, and his decisions are ratified by such choice.

Problems with the extent to which individuals can truly be said to endorse the actions of elected officials, and with the coercive "non choice" nature of the state itself, form the core of moral challenges in political theory today. Adam was not chosen to be a moral representative by any of his descendants on the traditional original sin view and hence could not be fairly considered our representative. Only to the extent that his posterity are able to personally ratify his choice can his representation be recognised.

That Pharaoh was in control of whether the nation was judged is debatable, as we saw above. That the nation was judged for Pharaoh's sins is impossible. God judged the sinful nation. God did stave off an attacking army because Hezekiah prayed, but the Bible is plain that anyone who is willing to do the moral work of prayer may seek God and receive response in like fashion. It was not because Hezekiah was king that God answered his prayer. But may God give us leaders who will pray!

To Impute Or Not To Impute

Finally, the doctrine of imputation is a biblical doctrine. It deals with when people are considered to be sinful and righteous in a legal sense. It has to do with whether God holds people's sins against them, and keeps them on their record, or whether God forgives and credits righteousness to them. Nowhere does it deal with the idea of transference of guilt from one person to another. The biblical doctrine is that through Christ's death God may credit righteousness to those who believe, he does not have to credit their sins against them. Morey suggests in his paper God may decide when he will or will not do this. It is true that God need not pardon anyone. On a forensic view of atonement, God would have no choice but to set free anyone whose sins were paid for. Although God need not offer salvation to anyone, the Bible also indicates God may only do so on the conditions laid out for salvation. Had God not provided atonement, and only required repentance and faith, he would have been unjust to justify sinners.

God cannot impute guilt where it does not exist. God cannot pardon without atonement. Nowhere that I am aware does the Bible use the same phraseology to suggest our sins or their guilt were imputed or credited to Christ. Jesus is said to bear our sins, they are said to be placed upon him, but this all draws on the imagery of the Old Testament sacrifices. It conveys the idea of their being "taken away" rather than that someone is punished instead of us. He carries them away from us through his sacrifice. The idea that someone's guilt can be imputed to someone else is specifically denied in Ezekiel 18. As we saw above, no one but the guilty party can be considered guilty. This passage in the prophet is probably the most concise biblical statement denying what the doctrine of original sin claims, that a person could be considered guilty for what someone else had done.

Morey says "That Adam's sin is imputed to us should not bother us any more than that our sins were imputed to Christ."⁴ Morey is correct. It should not bother us any more, it should bother us just as much. If God is transferring literal guilt from persons who

committed sins to persons who did not, we are in real trouble. This is the final court of appeal! If we cannot count on God to keep fair records, then we have no hope. Better by far to have God do what is necessary to extend pardon to people who are guilty, so he need not impute their sins to them, but be able to impute righteousness to their account through their advocate. God can do this through pardon. He need not punish an innocent man, even a willing one, to accomplish this.

The Proof Text

Space does not allow me to examine Morey's treatments of Romans 5 and I Corinthians 15 in detail. Morey's statements are assertive rather than clearly exegetical. Other authors have dealt with these passages, including Finney, to show that Adam's role, if representative at all, is one of being the occasion of sin, with his decision being ratified by his descendants. Rather than choosing for the race, Adam is used as typical of mankind, since all have sinned. Since Adam was the first man, literally, he is also identifiable as the source of sin and condemnation for his race. He is the one who got the ball rolling. We are all "in Adam" in this sense. Involvement in Christ's salvation must be ratified by these same descendants. If, as the doctrine of original sin suggests, such ratification was not required for condemnation, then no such ratification should be required for salvation. This would mean that the same "all" and "many" who were condemned must be saved without any choice on their part being necessary. It is true verse 17 indicates salvation requires us to receive God's gift. It follows from the strict parallelism of the passage that participation in condemnation also must have been through "receiving" Adam's "gift." (With friends like this?) Ratification of Christ's action through voluntary identification with his work is the necessary individual act that creates solidarity with his work of salvation for the particular individual. The parallelism suggests this must also be the basis upon which each individual has participated in solidarity with Adam's condemnation. We have chosen to be in Adam even as we must choose to be in Christ.

Morey is correct that our denial of his view of original sin requires us to deny his view of atonement. But so does all moral sense of justice. God could not have punished Jesus for our sins. Jesus did not commit them. Governmental views of the atonement expressed in our circles are far from being free of difficulties, but they express the conviction that something else than literal payment for guilt was in view. If by forensic justification Morey means sinners are literally seen as not having sinned, then he is correct that we deny this. The Bible teaches forgiveness and pardon, not that we may through the death of Christ claim salvation as our right on the basis of justice. We are forever sinners, guilty and condemned, but pardoned by a gracious God who did what was necessary to extend this gift to us.

Endnotes

¹. Morey, Robert A., "Original Sin, The Atonement, And Justification", Unpublished manuscript.

². *ibid*, pg. 5.

³. *ibid*, pg. 4.

⁴. *ibid*, pg. 7.

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