

The Question of Original Sin **Henry C. Sheldon**

Biblical and Rational Data as to Man's Condition by birth, or the Question of Original Sin - Excerpts from Henry C. Sheldon's System of Christian Doctrine

One familiar with the theological teaching of the centuries, with its confident and explicit indoctrination on original sin, or the Adamic connections of human sinfulness, is naturally surprised when he turns to the Bible to find it well-nigh silent on this theme. In the Old Testament it is not awarded a single direct word. Only one New Testament writer makes specific mention of it, and that in the course of historical parallels where the line cannot be regarded as sharply drawn between literal fact and admissible symbolism. In neither Testament is there any approach to the assertion that the moral state of the race was so conditioned upon the conduct of Adam that if he had continued obedient to the divine command the race would infallibly have persisted in holiness. This is a monstrous imagination which limits the notion of probation to Adam alone, if it does not cancel it entirely, and throws the whole responsibility for the occurrence of sin upon the will of God. For if God could have kept every one of Adam's posterity from falling, then we are obliged to conclude that he could just as well as not have kept Adam from falling, and the fact of his transgression is clear proof that God was well pleased to have him transgress. But this conclusion makes a mock of sin, since it is perfectly manifest that what pleases God ought not to make anyone sorry, or else that it is obligatory to regard the divine pleasure a subordinate interest....

As for the New Testament, only two or three Pauline passages come into the account, as having any real appearance of making the race sharers in the guilt or condemnation of Adam's sin. Of these the most important is Rom. v. 12-21. The apostle here draws a comparison between the evil potency in the sinning Adam and the beneficent or saving potency in the righteous Christ. As the one reached beyond all national bounds, and affected the lot of the race as a whole, so the other, which serves as an offset, is intrinsically adapted to be at least of as far-reaching effect. Both are pictured rather according to their tendency than according to literal fact. Surely the potency of grace in Christ does not actually come upon all men unto justification of life, but it tends to that end, and hence is so described. In like manner the evil potency in the sinning Adam is characterized according to its tendency. In strictness it was only an initial cause of the depravation of the race; but as a corrupt disposition is a standing occasion of sin, the primary source of the corruption--the trespass of Adam--is graphically described as making men sinners, or as involving all in sin. This is bold language, to affirm the fact where only the potency comes into account which tends to the realization of the fact; but it is not discordant with Paul's usage. He represents, for example, believers as having died with Christ, or as having been crucified with Him.

Why? Simply because the death of Christ had in itself a potency for extirpating or crucifying the old man with his carnal and sinful disposition. So in like manner as regards the sin of Adam. Men did not actually sin in his sin, or become sinners through him

without an exercise in detail of personal agency, any more than they were actually crucified with Christ. Why should a prosaic and rigorous construction be demanded in the one instance and be excluded in the other? In either case, and no less in the one than in the other, it is reasonable to take the words of the apostle as religious oratory, in whose vivid strain the tendency is treated as substantially identical with the fact toward which it tends.

If the passage in the fifth chapter of Romans is not to be regarded as teaching the condemnation of all men on the simple ground of Adam's sin, no more can such a tenet be found in Eph. ii. 3. The context of the clause, "by nature children of wrath," emphasizes the force of ungodliness in both Jews and Gentiles. There is nothing in the connection to hint that the sin of Adam was in the thought of the apostle. As little is there any indication that he was thinking of the state of new-born infants. It is the ingrained sinfulness of contemporary men, manifested in the fulfillment of fleshly desires, upon which he is dwelling. Surveying this rank of conscious accountable transgressors, and viewing them as living out a characteristic tendency or disposition, Paul speaks of them as by nature children of wrath. Would the apostle, apart from the assumed fact of a personal appropriation and living out of abnormal tendencies, have regarded any of this group as actually subjects of God's wrath? We believe it rash to assume that he would. He has nowhere described little children as under the wrath of God. It is to be noticed, moreover, that Paul has given us a hint that the term *phusei*, "by nature," is not necessarily to be understood of a condition resulting simply from birth. In Rom. ii. 14 he speaks of the Gentiles as doing "by nature" the things of law. Now, evidently he did not mean that they were born doers of the law, but only that they were born with a nature adapted to provide in due time for a sense of moral obligations. In like manner the phrase in Ephesians may reasonably be taken as meaning, not that men are born children of wrath, but only that by birth they have a nature which tends to such personal choice and conduct as invite the divine displeasure. In any case, if we bring the New Testament into view, the scene of Christ blessing little children, and declaring that "of such is the kingdom of heaven," must be regarded quite as truly indicative of their standing before God as a brief phrase in an epistle, in which there is no specific mention of children and no certain reference to their standing.