

Paul completes his account of justification by comparing Jesus Christ to Adam, each of whom acted on behalf of an entire race. In this world all men are related ultimately to one of these men or to the other. Each human being's destiny was determined by one or the other.

“Covenant Theology”

Romans 5:12-21

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Paul has one more thing to say about justification by faith. In one way he is going to repeat himself. He is going to speak of the way sinners are put right before God in Jesus Christ. But he is going to illustrate that one and only way of salvation by comparing what Christ did for sinners to what Adam did for or to the entire race at the very headwaters of human history. There is a likeness between Adam and Jesus Christ in the Way what *they* did bears on *others*. The paragraph that follows is of immense importance to a biblical understanding of reality, but, typical of Paul in Romans, it also contains some notorious difficulties of interpretation.

Text Comment

v.12 The question is “how did *all* sin”? It is clear in this verse that death came to all men because all men sin, but it is just as clear that death came to all men because of the sin of one man, the first man, Adam. How does Adam’s sin relate to the sin of all men? There is obviously some kind of solidarity between Adam and the human race. But what is the form of that solidarity? How did Adam’s sin become *our* sin? One view is that the relationship is biological and genealogical. In this view mankind inherited a corrupt nature from Adam, from that nature each person commits his own sins, and it is for those sins, their sins, that individual by individual is condemned to death. In that view all sin because all become sinners as a result of Adam’s fall. Original sin in this view is simply inherited corruption. We commit our own sins but do so because we have a nature bent toward sin that we received from Adam. The tense of the verb in v. 12 is against this view, however. Paul does not say that all sin; he says that all *sinned*.

Another view is that all men sinned in Adam because in Adam the entire race existed in an undifferentiated form. Human nature sinned in Adam when he was the only human being and in that way all men and women were co-sinners with Adam. Their nature was there in the garden and their nature sinned and fell.

Another view is that Adam was appointed the representative of his race and that he stood probation for the entire race. The race sinned in him when he sinned because he was their representative, acting on behalf of every human being who would follow. In this view all sinned *when Adam sinned*; his sin was theirs because he was acting on their behalf. There are, as you might guess, many versions of these different theories. Calvin didn’t understand Paul here in the same way that the 19th century Presbyterian Calvinist, Charles Hodge did, or the 20th century Calvinist, John Murray did. I don’t want to confuse you or get you bogged down in a complicated discussion that has pitted major Reformed authorities against one another through the years. Let me say only this at this

point. As we continue to read it will become clear that in Paul's argument all the emphasis falls on the judgment that came upon men because of the sin of *one* man, not because of the sins of all men. In some interpretations of this passage all men are themselves sinners and it is *their own* sin that brought death upon them. But that does not seem to be Paul's point. His point seems rather to be that *the one man's sin* became the sin and guilt of all. That view is supported by the tense of the verb at the end of verse 12. It is not that all sin, but that all *sinned* in the one man's sin. This is the important point because it becomes the basis for Paul's comparison of Adam and Christ.

- v.13 Sin was all pervasive before Moses and so was death even though the specific commandments of the Law of Moses with their corresponding penalties had not yet been revealed.
- v.14 This difficult verse has been understood in very different ways. The chief problem is to identify who Paul means by "those who did not sin by breaking a command" but who nevertheless died as a judgment for sin. Death was obviously a reality far wider than the commission of sins such as Adam committed, i.e. the direct violation of an explicit commandment given by God. Infants died, for example, and yet were certainly not Adam's type of sinner. Clearly if death is punishment for sin the death of infants at the very moment of birth or before or shortly after must be death for guilt they acquired not by their own thinking and acting, but vicariously, that is, through their relationship with someone who was acting on their behalf. In a somewhat different way, those who lived outside the circle of divine revelation in that period of human history did not transgress commands that God had given them as Adam did. Paul is not saying everything here, of course. He is not denying what he asserted in chapter 2, viz. that the law or moral demand of God was and is written on the heart of all men. He is simply making the point that Adam's sin obviously had consequences for every human being.

In any case we discern in Adam's relationship to the human race a pattern that is then reproduced in Christ's relationship to his people. The typical translation of the word the NIV renders "pattern" is "type," by which is meant a relationship or analogy or likeness between two things. There is a way in which Christ is like Adam. We will now learn *how* he is like the first man.

- v.15 The likeness between Adam and Christ consists in this: each man determines the outcome of the lives of those who belong to him. [Moo, 334] The term "many" here is probably a deliberate echo of Isaiah 53:11 where it is said that the Servant of the Lord will justify *many*. It might interest you to know that Calvin thought v. 15 was a demonstration of the fact that the number of people who would be saved by the end of history would far exceed the number who would be condemned.
- v.19 Verses 18-19 sum up what Paul has said so far. Paul's great concern in this paragraph is to assert the likeness between Adam and Christ as men whose acts have immediate and permanent consequences for those on behalf of whom they acted. Just as all died when one man sinned; so many are made righteous by the righteous act of the one man.

v.20 Paul indicates clearly here that the law he is talking about is the Law of Moses. One purpose of that law – only one to be sure; there are others – was as a means of demonstrating to the human conscience its hopelessness apart from the grace of God; the impossibility of sinners being righteous by their own effort and their need for a righteousness that would come from God. Paul makes the same point about the law in Galatians 3:19. The law clarifies the nature and extent of human sin and transgression against God. It brings sin into the light of day. It forces us to see how much of it there is in our lives. It also actually increases sin according to the principle that forbidden fruit is the sweeter. Remember the old woman who objected to the Ten Commandments because they put so many ideas into people’s heads! [Cited in Bruce, 128] It does this still today as Paul will go on to say later in Romans and as he says in Galatians. By revealing to us our sin the law is a schoolmaster to lead us to Christ. The Law teaches us we need him!

Most of you will have heard the term “covenant theology.” It is a term bandied about quite often in our circles. However, it is a term that is widely misunderstood and for entirely understandable reasons. It used by different people to mean different things. To some covenant theology means infant baptism. To others it means a particular view of the relationship of the OT to the NT. But fundamentally and originally it means something else. Bible readers hear the term covenant theology and naturally suppose that we are talking about all those covenants mentioned in the Bible: the covenant with Noah and Abraham and with Israel at Sinai and with King David and so on. What else would the term refer to? And, in fact, covenant theology eventually does make a great deal of those covenants.

But, in fact, those biblical covenants are not really what covenant theology is about, at least in the way the term is used by theologians. In fact, apart from an intriguing statement in Hosea 6:7 – the interpretation of which is hotly disputed – the covenants of “covenant theology” are never called “covenants” anywhere in the Bible. It is just like theologians to do something like that. And, what is more, they are very different things than the covenant the Lord made with Abraham or Israel or David. There are two covenants in covenant theology: the covenant God made with Adam and the covenant he made with his Son, Jesus Christ. In each case the one man stands and acts as a representative of a race. That was never true of Abraham. His faith didn’t make all his descendants believers. It was not true of David. His faithfulness to his calling did not make the kings that descended from him faithful as well. Neither of these men represented and acted decisively for and in the stead of an entire community of people. Quite the contrary indeed, as we know.

But Adam’s fall meant the fall of every human being. His disobedience made all human beings who would come from him to be guilty sinners from the beginning of their lives. And, in a similar way, Christ’s righteousness, his death on the cross, made Christ’s people righteous before God and reconciled to God as we read in the previous verses of the chapter, the verses we considered last Lord’s Day morning. The consequences of the actions of these two men, the two Adams as Paul calls them in 1 Corinthians 15, the first Adam and the last Adam, will unfold as people come to life in the world, but there can be no escaping the result achieved by each person’s representative.

The English Puritan, Thomas Goodwin, put this in a homey way in the 17th century. He said that there are but two men standing before God, Adam and Christ, and these two men have all other human beings hanging from their belts.

It is the view, based supremely on this paragraph and 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul speaks of the two Adams and refers to Christ as the second or last Adam, but many other texts of Holy Scripture as well, it is this view that all of God's dealings with mankind are in terms of these two representative or federal relationships – the first in Adam, the second in Christ (in each case the head acting on behalf and for the body) – I say it is this view of the history of mankind that is properly designated “covenant theology.” The covenants of biblical history, Abraham, Israel, David and so on, are then simply the historical outworking and progressive revelation of that salvation that was accomplished by the second Adam, Jesus Christ.

It is a view with tremendous implications as I think you immediately see. It, of course, explains the nature of human life as pervasively and profoundly sinful. As Pascal once said,

“The doctrine of original sin is beyond our ability to explain, but without it we cannot explain anything.”

Why is it that everyone is selfish, short-tempered, so often thoughtless of others and unkind? Why is it that everyone so consistently condemns others for doing what they do themselves? Why is it that everyone violates the very standards of behavior they themselves uphold as good and right? Why is the most universal experience of human beings the uneasy conscience, the sense that we have done what we should not have done or failed to do what we should have done? Why have we never been able to educate sin out of the human heart and life? Or punish it out of heart and life? Or cajole it out of heart and life? Why have all of our efforts to address human problems by government left us with the same sinful humanity with which we began? Why is it that nowhere at any time has a sinless people existed in the world? Why is evil so easy to fall into but true goodness so difficult to rise to? Why is our desire so strong for unchastity? Why is chastity so difficult? Why is it that with all the technological advances that man has made, there is no evidence that he is better, morally speaking, than he was before? Indeed, is it not our experience that technology is just as certain to increase man's opportunity to harm himself and others and to increase the misery of human life as it is to improve his lot? Why is it universally the case that the best people in the world are the most conscious not only of their moral failure but of their bent toward what is unworthy, unloving, dishonest and impure?

And why is it that already in infancy we can see so clearly the pride, envy, and selfishness of human life beginning to appear? Augustine found his proof of original sin by watching babies in their cribs! Pelagius, the 4th century churchman who denied original sin, imagined that we all end up sinners simply by imitating one another. But imitation does not explain the selfishness of a little baby. Nor does it explain why there are never any exceptions! A PCA pastor friend of mine told me of a friend of his who denied the reality of original sin until he and his wife made a cross-country trip from San Francisco to the East Coast with their two year old son. By the time they reached Chicago he believed in original sin! Why is man like this? Because, says Paul, he has been judged and condemned to a life of sin on account of the sin of the one who acted for him.

In a similar way, this understanding of history as the outworking of the life stories of just two men – Adam and Christ – explains the supreme place of Jesus Christ in the history of the world. He is any man’s and every man’s only hope of salvation. The two-Adam theology of the Apostle Paul explains why there has never been but one way of salvation from the time of the Fall. There are but two men for all men: Adam and Christ. Once Adam had cast his race into despair, only Christ, the second Adam, could “retrieve the cosmic situation.” [Barrett] Every human being must be either in the one Adam or the other. There is no other alternative. There is but one way to be righteous before God and that is the way of righteousness that comes from Jesus Christ.

This explains, for example, the artless way in which Jesus Christ is read back into the narrative of the Old Testament by the writers of the NT. We read in Hebrews 11 it was Jesus that Moses suffered for. It was Jesus, Jude says, who delivered his people Israel from bondage in Egypt by the exodus. It was Jesus who led Israel in the wilderness, whose glory shown from Moses’ face, and who delivered the law to Israel at Sinai. It was Jesus whose glory Isaiah saw when he was given a vision of God in the temple, and so on. It has always been Christ for his people; he has always been their Savior and their Lord, even long before they knew him by his incarnate name, Jesus of Nazareth. It could not be otherwise, because he is the one who bears responsibility for the people of God; he is the one who represents them to God; and he the one whose death on the cross would be their salvation. He and he alone is their Adam!

But you will not be surprised that this understanding of the history of the human race, its fall in Adam, its recovery in Christ, has been strenuously objected to. People have long been deeply offended by what Paul teaches here. We say, of course, that whether or not we can satisfactorily answer all the objections that people may bring, what matters in the final analysis is what the Scripture teaches. This is, after all, the Word of *God*! And Paul seems very clearly to say here that the human race fell, became both guilty and subject to death as punishment for sin, on the one hand, and, on the other, became sinful by nature, sinful by natural bent and disposition, as the result of what Adam did as its representative.

But people say, “*That isn’t fair!*” It isn’t fair that I should be condemned for what someone else has done! It isn’t fair that my life should be blighted; that I should be put at risk of God’s judgment; that I should come into the world by nature a rebel against God because of what someone else did thousands and thousands of years ago! Surely we can all feel the force of that objection. We recoil at the notion of someone being punished for a crime he did not commit. In the Rayburn family one of the most vivid memories of my children, all of them remember it, is an incident in their childhood in which my son Robbie was punished for what was, in fact, Evangeline’s sin. She had handed her little brother her hotdog under the table and told him to feed it to the dog. Robbie was caught doing so and then punished for giving *his* food to the dog instead of eating it himself, when he hadn’t actually done that. I didn’t realize that it was Evangeline’s hotdog that the dog had eaten and, at least Robbie had the character not to implicate his sister to spare himself a spanking. But why do my children remember that single incident so well? They don’t remember all the spankings they received but they remember this one. Why? Because it was unfair, unjust. He was punished for someone else’s sin! And that is precisely the objection that people raise against Paul’s teaching here. It is not fair for God to condemn us for what someone else did!

So powerful is this objection to the idea of mankind being condemned for Adam's sin that many interpretations of Paul's words in these verses take the form they do precisely to evade that objection. If, for example, it can be said that we were all there in the garden because human nature was compressed into a single individual at that moment in history, then it was not Adam's sin only, but ours as well that brought condemnation upon us. That does not seem to be what Paul is saying here, and most people are not impressed by this argument. After all we certainly did not sin in Eden *as persons or as individuals*; the most that could be said was that human nature sinned; but natures don't sin, people do; and how can people sin before they even exist? What is more, if we all sinned in Adam's sin because we were all there in his human nature – not yet split up into the multitudes of human beings who would eventually descend from our first parents – what need is there to introduce in v. 14 a class of sinners unlike Adam? In this view every human being sinned just as Adam did. But Paul argues in v. 14 that there were those who didn't sin as Adam did and yet still suffered the punishment of sin as a consequence. See the problem?

In any case, take the point: the problem of mankind being condemned for the sin of one man is, as one theologian put it, "the Gordian knot in the dogma of original sin." [Shedd, ii, 30] That is, it is the seemingly insoluble problem. What can be said in answer to this objection? Does not the Bible itself teach that a man is not to be punished for his father's sins? Yes, it does, though obviously the rules that apply to civil government and jurisprudence do not necessarily apply to the divine government and to the plan and purpose of the infinitely holy and just God for the life of mankind. But there is more to say.

First, the relationship between Adam and his posterity is utterly unique. There is no parallel to this relationship and that makes it very much harder to claim that the relationship is unjust. *Second,* it remains forever the case that had Adam trusted and obeyed the Lord, all his posterity, you and I together, would have forever benefited from that faithfulness. We would have been established forever in righteousness and eternal happiness. The arrangements in Eden that God made with Adam and with the human race in Adam were generous, gracious, and beneficent. There was a wonderful promise made that God was under no obligation to make. This must never be forgotten. *Third,* whether or not we can understand the reason of it, it remains the case that man comes into this world already a sinner and a lover of sin; a rebel against God and against God's law. He is obviously under a curse for something from the beginning of his life. He is either under a curse for Adam's guilt or for no guilt at all. It is impossible to imagine why his life should be under this curse of sin apart from the explanation the Bible itself provides both in the history of Genesis and in such explanations as these in Romans 5. Either man was tried and fell in Adam or he was condemned without a trial!

Fourth, it is simply a fact of human life that a great deal of what determines our lives is the consequence of our connection with those to whom we belong. You and I know this. No man is an island. The organic connection between ourselves and other human beings is an inescapable fact of human existence, like it or not. The Bible makes much of this, of course. Think of the stress it places on the faithfulness of parents to the Lord and his gospel as a means of their children coming to faith in Christ themselves; or think of the destruction of Achan's household because of his sin or the deliverance of Rahab's household from destruction because of her faith;

or remember Israel's deliverance from the Philistines because of the exploit of her champion, David, against Goliath, and on and on. Nations fall and their populations suffer, sometimes terribly, because of the foolishness of their rulers; children's lives are ruined because of the dereliction of their parents. In my neighborhood I see children whose lives, apart from the intervention of the Lord Christ, are over – so far as true and lasting happiness is concerned – almost before they have begun! And what of the blessing and success that attend so many because they were born into the right families and the right countries and the right economies. So much of what determines the course of our lives we had nothing to do with at all; I am fully aware that I am the person that I am and have had the life that I have had because of my parents and their parents. In many cases these things were determined for us before ever entered the world. Well so our relationship to Adam. It is like so much else in our lives, like it or not.

These are important points to make and there are others like them. But they are not the main answer to the objection to Paul's doctrine of original sin. That is something else, something quite different. However hard it may be to understand how Adam's sin condemned the entire race to guilt and death, the fact is that it is by this same solidarity with a representative man that any human being is rescued from bondage to sin and the death that is its rightful punishment. Adam ruined his race, but Christ rescued his!

Someone may say that it is not right that something Adam did should unalterably affect my eternal destiny. But Adam's act is not the final word. There is another Adam, another man acting for others, and for all who are in him there is deliverance from sin and entrance into eternal life. We are not, as perhaps might have been the case, on our own to succeed or fail as Adam was. Had we been brought into the world to stand our own probation we would have been likely to fail as Adam did, perhaps even more likely. We are not better than our first parent. And if we should stand for ourselves, by ourselves, why do we imagine that we would have succeeded where Adam did not. When the angels fell, sinning as individuals, there was no hope of restoration for them. Sinning as individuals they sinned beyond recovery! [S. Lewis Johnson, "Romans 5:12 – An Exercise in Exegesis and Theology," *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, 315-316]

As we fell through a representative, it is easier to see why we are restored through a representative. In the wisdom and grace of God there has come a Second Man, a Last Adam. He stood for us, acted for us, lived and died for us. His victory over sin and death *is our victory*; his triumph over our guilt by his sacrificial death *is our triumph*. We fell through no personal fault of our own, but we rise to eternal life and to the indescribable fullness of human life forever through no virtue of our own either. That commonality between Adam and Christ, the similar roles they played as representing an entire race, that is the basis of the greatest, grandest, most wonderful news that can be published to the human race. As one commentator put it: "We hit a gusher in the Last Adam!" [Johnson, 316] There can be no complaining about our suffering for Adam's fall without in some way refusing to appreciate what glory and goodness and pure happiness comes to us because of the Second Adam's ascension to heaven.

There is still much here shrouded in mystery. "Whereof one cannot speak, thereon one must be silent," said a wise philosopher. But there can be no silence about the Second Adam and his act of righteousness by which we are made righteous before God. Because of him and him alone

grace reigns to bring us to eternal life. Saying that, Paul has said all and is now free to move on to describe the transforming power of Christ's victory on those who belong to him.