

Musings on the Doctrine of

ORIGINAL SIN

and Related Topics

The doctrine of ‘*original sin*’ is a very difficult one. Unfortunately, the Scriptures are not explicit in detailing the universal condition of men and the complexities and dynamics of how *Adam’s* sin affected his posterity. Nonetheless, I do believe there are some theological absolutes.

I hold to what I refer to as a ‘*modified view of original sin*’, namely:

1. I believe men are born with a ‘*fallen nature*’ (*due to the fall we are not what God originally intended*), but not a ‘*sinful nature*’. To become a ‘*sinner*’, a man must commit sin.
2. Everything that exists has a ‘*nature*’. Hence, by ‘*fallen nature*’ I mean men are born under the *consequences*, not the *guilt* or *penalty*, of *Adam’s* transgression. Our nature, since the fall, is not what it would have been had sin not been introduced into the human experience. In other words, all who are conceived and have life are born with a ‘*nature*’, and that nature is less than what it would have been apart from *Adam’s fall*. This is self-evident and an undeniable and irrefutable fact.

“The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him.” —Ezekiel 18:20

3. Thus, infants, before they mature to moral accountability, are considered morally innocent as they are incapable of making moral choices. Should they die, they would go to heaven seeing they are unable to commit sin (*Rom 4:15*). However, we do well to remember, there is a vast difference between being ‘*innocent*’ and being ‘*righteous*’. When God called man ‘*good*’ (*say, for example, in Gen 1:21*) it is debatable that he was attributing moral character to man’s nature as man had

yet not exhibited a moral choice. ‘*Evil*’ requires moral choice, and likewise, so does ‘*Good*’. I believe God was referring to innocence.

4. All are born physically depravity (*physical weakness, death, etc., as a consequence of the fall*) and this contributes to a ‘*bent toward*’ sin. How this ‘*bent*’ or tendency toward sin is transferred from generation to generation I am content to confess, ‘*I do not know*’, but I believe it is there. Moreover, this ‘*bent*’ is difficult to define. It is not something resulting from an addition to our nature, but rather a subtraction. Fallen men are born estranged from God, their experience, however we may define it, is less than being born-again. This tendency or bent toward sin can be defined as the combination of...

- Physical depravity.
- Born into a fallen, deceitful, and sinful environment.
- And, the lack of a dependent relationship with God.

5. I agree sin is a moral choice, but it can affect our constitution as evidenced by physical depravity. Committing sin brings greater bondage to sin. Scriptures like *Proverbs 5:22, Jn 8:34, Rom 6:16, Rom 7:14 (legal experience), 2 Pet 2:19, etc.* teach committing sin brings slavery to sin.

6. Men are morally depravity by personal sin. The ‘*sin-nature*’ (*as I refer to it*) is acquired by *all (after the age of accountability)* by making the moral choice to sin. By ‘*nature*’, I do not mean physical nature, but rather moral nature. The *sin-nature*, if you will, is not something in our body, or our DNA, etc., it is spiritual and moral. Sin is not material, but moral and volitional. However, I do strongly believe sin, the committing of or refraining from, renders a moral/spiritual *change* in men.

I, of course, utterly reject the doctrine of ‘*original sin*’ as taught by Calvinists and Catholics, however, I am convinced that to deny a ‘*bent toward sin*’ (*however men may define this*) is contrary to Scripture and sound reason (*as is demonstrable*).

I assert the Scriptures teach sin greatly affects human nature and constitution. Thus, a denial of or redefining of the ‘*principle of sin*’ is very dangerous in my opinion as indicated in *1 John 1:8*. *1 John 1:8 and 10* addresses both *sin in principle* and *behavior*. A distinction is made between *sin as a principle* (‘*sin nature*’, *if you will*) and *acts of sin*...

“If we say that we have no sin (Strong’s 0266, ἁμαρτία—‘*hamartia*’, a noun), we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned (Strong’s 0264, ἁμαρτάνω—‘*hamartanō*’, a verb) ‘, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” —1 John 1:8-10

The *English* word *sin* in *verse 8* is translated from the *Greek* noun for *sin*, ἁμαρτία—‘*hamartia*’, speaking of the *principle of sin*. Thus, no real Christian will deny that human beings are ‘*sinners*’; all will acknowledge the universal sin-corruption of the human race, etc. (*acquired through personal sin, not inherited*). In *verse 10*, the *Greek* word translated into the *English* word ‘*sinned*’ is the *Greek* verb for *sin*, ἁμαρτάνω—‘*hamartanō*’. Therefore, no Christian will likewise deny they *have sinned* (*past tense*). Many Bible commentators affirm this truth...

“To deny that we have a *sinful nature* means self-deception and untruthfulness. Notice that *John* makes a distinction between *sin* (*1Jn 1:8*) and *sins/sinned* (*1Jn 1:9-10*). *Sin* refers to our corrupt, evil nature. *Sins* refers to evils that we have done. Actually, what we are is a lot worse than anything we have ever done. But, praise the Lord, Christ died for our *sin* and our *sins*. Conversion does not mean the eradication of the sin nature. Rather it means the implanting of the new, divine nature, with power to live victoriously over indwelling sin.”
—William MacDonald¹

“Observe, ‘*sin*’ is in the singular; ‘(confess our) *sins*, *sinned*’ (*1Jn 1:9-10*) in the plural. *Sin* refers to the *corruption of the old man*.” —Jamieson²

“*Sin* here is the *nature*, not the *act*, and for two reasons; the word is without the article, and such a construction in Greek emphasizes nature...” —Wuest³

“*Sin* in *1 John 1:8* is to be understood not as the *committal of sin*, but the *principle of sin*...”
—Vine⁴

To deny the *sin nature* also can lead to a subtle doctrinal undermining of the supernatural power of regeneration and its radical moral change rendered in the repentant sinner’s constitution. Conversion does more than merely change our behavior; it alters our very nature...

¹ MacDonald, W & Farstad, A. *Believer’s Bible Commentary*: Thomas Nelson.

² Jamieson, *1 John 1 Commentary*.

³ Wuest, K.S. *Wuest’s Word Studies from the Greek New Testament*.

⁴ Vine, *Bible Commentary*.

“And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.” —Ephesians 2:1-3

7. I am also leery of a redefining of ‘grace’ as only an impersonal influence void of divine power. Though such an assertion can technically be defended, the Greek word χάρις, translated ‘grace’, literally means *divine influence upon the heart and its reflection in the life*. I believe it is foolish to declare that divine influence, God’s very influence, is somehow not ‘power’.

“And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” —2 Corinthians 12:9

“Whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power.” —Ephesians 3:7

I do believe ‘grace’ is a divine influence, however, I think to merely reduce it to ‘divine favor’ or ‘influence’ is somewhat inadequate. Holy Ghost power is something promised to the believer through the atoning work of Christ. I think it very unwise and unscriptural to attempt to separate *divine grace* from *divine power*. True, God will force no one to live holy or to forsake sin. Nevertheless, He will grant them *grace*. No doubt, the issue at the root of human rebellion is not ‘I can’t’ but ‘I won’t’. Nevertheless, we cannot reject, in an effort to uphold human responsibility, what the Bible teaches regarding the spiritual and moral ramifications of sin. Sin renders men bound, but ultimately men are accountable for their own bondage. As an illustration, consider the following example...

Suppose I am thoroughly warned about taking a certain path through the forest. However, suppose I obstinately reject, against all reason, the wise counsel of others and take the aforementioned path anyway. Soon, as I was forewarned, I fall into quicksand. Now, I am helpless. I cannot free myself and can only be rescued by the power of another (though it will require my co-operation). Nevertheless, any rational man knows I am completely and solely responsible for my predicament.

So, it is with the sinner. The word that seems to trouble many people is ‘*enable*’. But enable does not mean force, which is what would be necessary to strip men of moral responsibility or give them any reasonable excuse for neglecting holiness.

8. Also, in zeal to uphold human responsibility, making too much of ‘*natural ability*’, I believe, is to wander into perilous theological waters. I believe men have a certain degree of natural ability, namely, that they can externally refrain from any given sin. In other words, men do not *have* to commit specific sins: they do not *have* to get drunk or be sodomites, etc. However, sinners cannot have right motives, hence, nothing they do, even external conformity to the law, is acceptable to God. No one, apart from *Christ*, can produce *Christ*. Christ is God’s standard. Hence, all must be born-again. Men are ultimately responsible for their sins because God has provided the means for utter deliverance, namely, *Jesus Christ*.

“The sacrifice of the wicked is abomination: how much more, when he bringeth it with a wicked mind?” —Proverbs 21:27

“But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousness are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.” —Isaiah 64:6

“No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day.” —John 6:44

Even if you regulate the above verse to mere instruction from the Word of God, you cannot divorce grace from this experience as the Bible declares ‘*grace and truth*’ comes by Jesus (*Jn 1:14, 17*) and Jesus is the Word of God.

“...no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost.” —1 Cor 12:3

Every command of God is also supercharged with supernatural and divine power (*Jn 6:63; Heb 4:12*). A man cannot hear God’s demand to *repent* without also being offered the grace to fulfill. It cannot be otherwise, else we remove God from the dynamic of man’s salvation.

9. I do not believe that sinners, apart from being converted, can fully or completely fulfill the moral law (*Rom 3:19-20*). Personal sin has rendered sinners so bound, both in action and principle, that they become helpless in their sin. However, contrary to what many believe, this does not excuse them for their sin. I believe

once a human being reaches the age of moral accountability and chooses to plunge headlong into sin, sin takes its toll. Then the sinner must be set free, nevertheless, the sinner is solely responsible for his condition. Romans 7, in my estimation, clearly demonstrates this. Could Paul be lying when he said that the Romans 7 man could not find *ability* to perform that which is good in *verse 18*? I think not. And yet, the Romans 7 man was still responsible for his sin and the consequential bondage because he sold himself to evil (v. 14).

In my estimation, if we become more driven to be logical than Biblical, we will most certainly err in our doctrine. No doubt, a desire to understand God, His Word, and His ways are born of God's Spirit. Moreover, a burden to not only comprehend but to teach and logically communicate Biblical truth is consistent with the call to preach. However, we are unwise to overlook this dynamic of philosophical tension ever present in establishing a systematic theology. There is a delicate precedent that must always be maintained: first God's Word, second perceived logic and intellectual consistency. If this precedent is ever violated and logic transcends simply holding to what God's Word clearly teaches, we are on dangerous ground. Ultimately, if we are loyal to the Scriptures, sometimes our precious system of thought will be void of adequate explanations and we will be forced to confess, '*I cannot explain it*'. I recall some wonderful advice given to me by an older and seasoned preacher that applies...

"One of the highest forms of wisdom a man can display is to simply admit that he doesn't know the answer to everything."

Again, describing man's natural condition before conversion is a difficult task. In many cases I think misunderstandings arise due to mere semantics.

—B.W.