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PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND CONTRITION FOR SIN

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ABSTRACT

A biblical understanding of responsibility and contrition for sin are important to systematic theology, pastoral work, public life, and personal piety. Misunderstanding sin and responding inappropriately to personal sin can be damaging to physical and spiritual health. Hence, this paper reviews the doctrines of original and actual sin and identifies responsible personal reactions to sin. The traducian and imputation theories of the transmission of sin are outlined and the orthodoxy of personal responsibility for original sin is asserted. Several biblical examples of confrontation with actual personal sins are analysed to determine what elements constitute a responsible reaction to personal sin, and the ways in which a person may mis-react to sin. The responsible reaction to personal sin is repentance. Calvin locates contrition in the apologetic element of repentance, Berkhof in the emotional element.

INTRODUCTION

A considered doctrine of responsibility and contrition is important not only to systematic theological development but also to pastoral ministry and counselling, personal piety, and societal participation. How do pastors and counsellors provide effective and biblical support to trials and crises, which may be partly self-induced, in the life of a congregant or client? To what extent should we reproach ourselves for our sins, and express this self-reproach to others? What does it mean to live as a responsible Christian in the world?

The Westminster Shorter Catechism defines sin as “any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God”.¹ God’s law is summarized in the Decalogue but is not limited to it; divine precepts and prohibitions are found throughout the Bible in Old and New Testaments. Divine law was given to man even before its formal arrangement at Sinai;² we see the need to obey God (Gen. 2:16-17, 3), and refrain from murder (Gen. 4:1-16) and Sabbath-breaking (Exod. 16:4-30). This distribution of law throughout the Bible is to be expected: God’s law is a revelation of his attributes in their various manifestations through scripture. Man displays the image of God when in obedience to God’s law. Christ, who is without sin (2 Cor. 5:21, Heb. 4:15, etc.) and perfectly obedient to the law (Rom. 5:16-21), is – as a man – the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4).³ Hence, Christ’s morality shows us whom God is. By extension, man displays ugliness and ignorance of God when sinning against God’s law. Sin is therefore a want of morality and a defacing of the divine image. Attempts in the twentieth century to recast Christian morality, for example, by making agape love the singular driving moral principle of the Christian life,⁴ have not gained much traction in the confessional reformed world. Having established the biblical basis of sin, and starting from the confessional position that the Bible is the word of God, this paper does not significantly engage with the philosophical denial of the concept of sin. There does not appear to be any work that denies that the Bible contains a concept of sin. A rejection of the concept of sin altogether is a philosophical position and a departure from Christian theology.

The essay proceeds as follows. Firstly, personal responsibility for original sin is examined as this, historically, was the centre of the debate. Secondly, the orthodoxy of contrition and personal responsibility for actual sin is demonstrated by comparing the textbook doctrines of Calvin and Berkhof with David’s penitential expressions in Psalm 51. Thirdly, two contemporary problems with contrition and personal responsibility are highlighted to show the importance of a sense of proportionality of sin and balance with other biblical expressions.

¹ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, 1647, Q/A 14.

² Robert C. Harbach, ‘Dispensationalism and The Law Before Sinai’, *Standard Bearer*, 43.18 (1967).

³ John M. Brentnall, ‘The Image of God in Man’, *Banner of Truth Magazine*, 68 (1969), pp. 21–26.

⁴ Joseph F. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1966).

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR ORIGINAL SIN

Responsibility and the Fall

The first chapters of Genesis introduce the theological and psychological concept of responsibility. The Garden of Eden was an idyll designed by God for man's habitation (Gen. 2:8-17). Order prevailed: man was given woman to help (2:18-25) in his responsibilities of tending the garden (2:15) and exercising dominion over the creatures (1:26-31). Adam disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit (3:1-7). When questioned by God, Adam answers, "the woman whom thou [God] gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat" (3:12). In doing so, he obviates responsibility by placing it – immediately – on the woman, and – proximately – on God himself.⁵ The consequence of Adam's actions is that God ejects and debars mankind from the orderly perfection of Eden and causes them instead to live in a chaotic and toilsome world that God has cursed. Adam's neglect of his limited and pleasant initial responsibilities introduces his family into a world of chaos in which he is no longer able to fully discharge his responsibilities, and in which his responsibilities are now multiplied and laborious. The concept of responsibility is thus critical to the doctrine of the fall and the concept of original sin.

It is proper to observe, in passing, that his neglect of his responsibilities is only one part of Adam's original sin. It includes unbelief in God's word, pride, an implicit desire to usurp God, an unholy satisfaction in eating the forbidden fruit, a hatred of God's rule, of providence, and of predestination.⁶ One can indeed demonstrate that the original sin included sins against all the categories of the Decalogue.⁷ Yet at its core was revolt against God,⁸ and therefore revolt against the Divine is the anthropomorphic orientation that leads to the neglect of responsibility. By contrast, a right standing before God involves the maintenance of one's responsibilities.

⁵ Jordan B. Peterson, 'Lecture IV: Adam and Eve: Self-Consciousness, Evil, and Death Transcript', in *The Psychological Significance of the Biblical Stories*, 2017 <<https://www.jordanbpeterson.com/transcripts/biblical-series-iv/>> [accessed 12 June 2023].

⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Banner of Truth, 1963), pp. 222–23.

⁷ For example, by following Satan and Eve in opposition to God, Adam placed them and his own desires foremost and failed to have God as his God and ruler: a sin against the First Commandment.

⁸ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 222; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by Henry Beveridge (Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 2.1.4.

The Transmission of Original Sin

Orthodox theology understands that the effects of Adam's original sin are transmitted to his posterity. In the patristic era, Pelagius affirmed that a child is born without original sin and baptismal grace resistibly inclines the child to spiritual good.⁹ Commenting on Romans 5:12, he argues that the propagation of sin and death from Adam to the rest of humanity is by example and, citing Luke 20:38, explains that death did not pass to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, nor others who did not sin in the same way as Adam.¹⁰ Writing contemporaneously against Pelagius, Augustine argued that man, since the fall, is inclined to sin because the whole human race was in Adam and so he transmitted his sinfulness to his posterity. He argues from Romans 5:16, "for the judgement was by one unto condemnation, but the grace is of many offences unto justification", that Paul is contrasting the one original sin that brought condemnation with the many sins that are overcome by the grace of justification.¹¹ This must be distinguished from the Gnostic heresy that human nature is intrinsically sinful.¹² "God made man upright" (Ecclesiastes 7:29). The God-Man Christ is truly man (John 1:14, 19:30; Phil. 2:6-8), sharing the same human nature as Adam and us today, yet without sin (Heb. 4:15). For Augustine, humanity is not intrinsically sinful, but humanity since the fall possesses original sin. He leaves hazy the precise relational causality of sin between Adam and humanity,¹³ but clearly affirms that humans deriving from Adam are sinful because of Adam's original sin. In Augustine's system, God is not responsible for the propagation of original sin in man because original sin affects man's will so that it is now inclined to sin rather than to God: as man's choice of sin is simply consistent with the inclination of his fallen will, God cannot be blamed. The controversy between Augustinian and Pelagian views was debated in several church

⁹ Pier Franco Beatrice, 'The Pelagian Critique of the Doctrine of Original Sin', in *The Transmission of Sin: Augustine and the Pre-Augustinian Sources*, trans. by Adam Kamesar (Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 14–37, doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199751419.001.0001.

¹⁰ Pelagius, *Expositions of Thirteen Epistles of St Paul*, ed. by J. Armitage Robinson (Cambridge University Press, 1931), p. 45.

¹¹ 'On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants', in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 5*, ed. by Philip Schaff (Hendrickson, 1995), 1.11-1.17.

¹² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (C. Scribner, 1889), II, pp. 449–57.

¹³ Jesse Couenhoven, 'St. Augustine's Doctrine of Original Sin', *Augustinian Studies*, 36.2 (2005), pp. 359–96 (p. 368), doi:10.5840/augustudies200536221.

councils of the early fifth century and Pelagianism was declared heretical at the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD.¹⁴

The method of the transmission of original sin is important to the matter of personal responsibility for original sin and is closely connected with the doctrine of the origin of the human soul. Classical creationism argues that each soul is created by God and infused with the body at the point of conception; traducianism argues that souls are propagated from generation to generation from God's original creative work, either biologically in semen, or by the soul of the father physically or metaphysically propagating the soul of the son.¹⁵ A majority of Western church and, later, reformed theologians have adopted a creationist view, whilst a majority of Lutherans take traducian positions, but with significant minorities sitting outside these general alignments.¹⁶ Traducianists typically align with the realistic theory of the transmission of original sin, whilst creationists typically align with the imputation theory.¹⁷ The details of each theory differ slightly between theologians but the main features can be sketched; our purpose here is not to provide a systematic critique of each theory but they are outlined so that their impact on the question of personal responsibility for original sin can be understood. The realistic theory holds that each person descended from Adam shares in Adam's generic human nature and, as the human nature was corrupted by Adam, so each person shares in the corruption of original sin. The imputation theory relies more strongly on the federal headship of Adam as representative of all mankind (Christ excluded);¹⁸ because Adam failed his probation, the punitive effects extend to all those for whom he acted as federal representative.¹⁹

Moral Issues of the Transmission of Original Sin

Both theories of the transmission of original sin – realism and imputation – have objections levelled against them about the moral acceptability of holding progeny responsible for original sin. The arguments around

¹⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (C. Scribner, 1889), III, pp. 797–802.

¹⁵ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. by John Bolt, trans. by John Vriend (Baker Academic, 2004), II, pp. 580–88.

¹⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II, p. 580.

¹⁷ Gordon H. Clark, 'Traducianism', *The Trinity Review*, July–August (1982), pp. 1–7; Oliver D. Crisp, 'Pulling Traducianism out of the Shedd', *Ars Disputandi*, 6.1 (2006), pp. 265–87, doi:10.1080/15665399.2006.10819933.

¹⁸ Federal theology is not unique to the creation-imputation position, but it is relied on more heavily to explain the transmission of sin.

¹⁹ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 242–43.

why God decrees suffering are valid against realism. Why does God allow the children of Adam to suffer the effects of original sin? This inherited species guilt is suggested by Vorster to make sin an ontological reality as part of God's creation and, by extension, comes close to making God the author of sin,²⁰ and cites Bavinck's suggestion that sin is a defective moral condition rather than a substance. There are indeed ontological metaphors for sin.²¹ Furthermore, sin affects even amoral agents. The ground of the earth is cursed because of original sin (Gen. 3:17). The nature of this curse is not only that the physical creation suffers as humanity fails to undertake its stewardship responsibilities, but also that God causes the physical creation to give poor crop yields and raise harmful plants (3:18-19). There is therefore an amoral physical, material effect of sin. Yet the question of whether sin is material or immaterial does not strike at the heart of the moral issue. Whether God decreed a defective condition or ontological status in mankind, it is nonetheless God who decreed. He is sovereignly free to accomplish his will and, unlike us, does not change in response to external conditions over which he has no control because there are no such things in relation to him:²² he is omnipotent (Job 42:1-2, Ps. 115:3, Isa. 14:27, 43:13) and omnipresent (Ps. 139, John 8:58, Rev. 22:13). This confronts the theologian with the difficult question of reconciling – on the one hand – the biblical record concerning God's decree of the election and reprobation of individuals (John 6:37, Acts 13:48, Rom. 8:28, 9:18-23, Eph. 1:4, 2:8), and of the fall and other adverse providence (Eph. 1:11, 1 Sam. 2:6-7, Amos 3:6), with – on the other hand – the biblical record concerning the goodness, grace, and mercy of God,²³ and the free (Isa. 55:1, Rom. 5:15, 6:23, Ephesians 2:8) and indiscriminate (Isa. 55:1, Dan. 7:14, Luke 14:23, John 3:16, Rev. 5:9, 7:9) offer of salvation. These are compatible and uncontradictory parts of divine revelation,²⁴ but it is beyond this paper to explain their harmony. Calvin explains that God is not the proximate or second cause of sin,²⁵ which is to say that an individual sins willingly and is not compelled against their will to sin, but God's

²⁰ Nico Vorster, 'Guilt Concepts in Reformed Doctrines on Original Sin', *Journal of Reformed Theology*, 16.3 (2022), pp. 246–68 (p. 258), doi:10.1163/15697312-bja10034.

²¹ C. Owiredo, 'Sin Is a Person: Some Ontological Metaphors in the Bible', *Acta Theologica*, 41.1 (2021), doi:10.18820/23099089/actat.v41i1.6.

²² Arthur W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* (Baker, 1999).

²³ Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Baker, 1996).

²⁴ Arthur W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* (Baker, 1999); J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (InterVarsity Press, 2012).

²⁵ John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. by J. K. S. Reid (James Clarke, 1961), pp. 100–101, 123, 160.

“secret predestination” is the remote or first cause of all things.²⁶ Hence, God ordained the Fall without being the “author” of sin.²⁷ Commenting on Genesis 45:8, Calvin says:

God is the ruler, and, by his secret rein, directs [man’s] motions withersoever he pleases. At the same time, however, it must also be maintained, that God acts so far distinctly from them, that no vice can attach itself to his providence, and that his decrees have no affinity with the crimes of men.²⁸

He comments that the story of Joseph illustrates this doctrine: Joseph’s brethren proposed to destroy him, but God ordained this in order to provide Jacob’s family with food during a time of famine. Whilst commending its motive of preserving God’s goodness, Calvin strongly repudiates the introduction of the false dichotomy that God only permits but does not ordain the evils of men;²⁹ at the same time, he strongly asserts that the evils of men are only ordained by God for ultimate good.³⁰ Men are judged according to their failure from duty or contravention of God’s commandment and the fact that God brings their wickedness to an ultimately good issue does not exempt from guilt.³¹ Furthermore, whilst the details and terminology vary slightly, the basic argument – that God is the first-cause of all things but not the second-cause moral agent “author” of sin – has been the explanation of the standard works of reformed systematics since Calvin.³² The Westminster Confession states that the decree of God is the

²⁶ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. by John Owen (Calvin Translation Society, 1849), p. 376; *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*.

²⁷ Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*.

²⁸ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses, Called Genesis*, trans. by John King (Eerdmans, 1948), II, p. 379.

²⁹ Although Calvin uses the terms “decree”, “ordain”, “counsel”, and “will” interchangeably in his commentary on Genesis 45:8, I have chosen “ordain” for clarity of argument. Modern systematic theology does make semantic distinctions between these terms, but it is not necessary to explore them here.

³⁰ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses, Called Genesis*, II, p. 378.

³¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses, Called Genesis*, trans. by John King (Eerdmans, 1948), II, p. 379.

³² Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. by James T. Dennison, trans. by George Musgrave Giger (P&R Publishing, 1992), I, 6.5-6.8; Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, trans. by William Crookshank (T. Tegg, 1837), 8.15-8.29; Robert L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd edn (Presbyterian Publishing Company, 1878); Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 1.6.C.

first cause by which all providence comes to pass, yet the outworking of providence is by second causes such that God is not the author of sin.³³

Thus, the argument that traducian personal responsibility for original sin ultimately makes God, as creator, also the author of sin, is misleading because it defines “author” differently from its historical definition as the second-cause moral agent or “doer” of sin. Certainly, God ordained all that comes to pass in creation and providence. Sin did not exist prior to creation and does not have an existence independent of God: if sin were self-existent, it would itself be a god, which is a blasphemous denial of the uniqueness of God, so God must be the logical first cause of sin. Yet he is so with intrinsic holiness, and never with a malevolent motive but only for his own glory and the ultimate good.

Moral objections to the creation-imputation theory of the transmission of sin are more numerous. Reformation-era Socinianism taught the moral impossibility that one person’s merit or demerit should be transferred to another.³⁴ Particularly in their sights was the justifying imputation of Christ’s righteousness, but the impossibility of others receiving the guilt of Adam’s sin was argued too. Placeus argued that man inherits a sinful disposition, rather than sin, from Adam, and it is the inheritance of a sinful disposition that renders man liable to divine punishment.³⁵ The emergent federal theology of the seventeenth century taught that man is condemned both for imputed original sin and the actual sins he commits; the Placean mediate imputation theory gained traction in some quarters of the reformed world that were uncomfortable with what they perceived as an excessive emphasis in federal theology on the condemnation of imputed original sin. Hodge, a creation-imputationist, acknowledges that the main objection to immediate imputation is the moral problem of God’s transferring personal responsibility for enduring the punishment of sin committed by another.³⁶ Vorster echoes this, arguing that “the most basic condition of justice, namely, that guilt is nontransferable” is violated.³⁷ Interestingly, Vorster’s 2022 position that guilt is nontransferable appears to be a departure from his statements of 2015:

God’s omnipotence entails that he is indeed capable to establish the contingency of second causes in order to preserve the integrity of creaturely real-

³³ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1647, 5.2.

³⁴ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Studies in Theology* (Oxford University Press, 1932), pp. 305–6.

³⁵ Warfield, *Studies in Theology*, pp. 306–9.

³⁶ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1940), II, 2.8.9.

³⁷ Vorster, ‘Guilt Concepts in Reformed Doctrines on Original Sin’, p. 256.

ity. Calvin's explanation of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility is complex but intelligible.³⁸

One solution offered to this problem is to detach the doctrine of original sin from a literal understanding of the Fall in Genesis 3, which allows the doctrine of original sin to be recast as conceptualizing a universal responsibility of sin and enabling action against injustice.³⁹ However, although Baard states a sympathy with the Heidelberg Catechism, she also writes as one speaking "the liberation theology language of structural sin". The highly contextual hermeneutics of liberation theology, in which the Bible is only one source of knowledge and to be interpreted in the light of experience,⁴⁰ is incompatible with the redemptive-historical hermeneutics of confessional reformed theology in which the Bible is the only inspired, infallible, and inerrant source of knowledge, and to which other sources are secondary.⁴¹ These fundamentally different starting points with respect to the use of the Bible make it difficult to find common ground. The solution offered by Baard works within the presuppositions of liberation theology but is not compatible with confessional reformed theology.

Vorster states that "the biblical credentials of original guilt seem to be weak" but, arguing that only Romans 5:12-21 comes close to teaching this doctrine, reviews only this text in evaluating the biblical credentials of original guilt.⁴² This argument does not discriminate between realist and imputationist theories of the transmission of original sin, but simply questions the biblical proof for original guilt. It is, however, disingenuous. Along with Romans 5, Calvin argues that David's confession in Psalm 51:5 is unambiguous: "I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me",⁴³ Calvin goes on to argue from Job 14:4 that a clean thing cannot be brought from an unclean so, as Adam is unclean, so must we be. This inheritance of original sin explains how fallen men are "by nature the children of wrath" (Eph. 2:3).⁴⁴ Edwards supplies Genesis 8:21,

³⁸ Nico Vorster, 'Assessing the Consistency of John Calvin's Doctrine on Human Sinfulness', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 71.3 (2015), doi:10.4102/hts.v71i3.2886.

³⁹ R.S. Baard, 'The Heidelberg Catechism on Human Sin and Misery', *Acta Theologica*, 20.1 (2016), p. 86, doi:10.4314/actat.v20i1.6S.

⁴⁰ Gustavo Gutierrez, 'The Task and Content of Liberation Theology', in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, trans. by Judith Condor (Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 8.

⁴¹ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chap. 1.

⁴² Vorster, 'Guilt Concepts in Reformed Doctrines on Original Sin', p. 256.

⁴³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.5.

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.6.

“the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth” and observes that the Hebrew root נָעוּר means a youth beginning at infancy.⁴⁵ Similarly, “the wicked are estranged from the womb” (Ps. 58:3).⁴⁶ In-utero children are incapable of actual sin, so the estrangement must be due to another form of wickedness: original sin. Calvin and Hodge offer 1 Corinthians 15:21-22, “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” as further support for original guilt.⁴⁷ There is therefore sufficient evidence to conclude that the Bible unequivocally teaches that mankind is responsible for original sin. Hodge, recognizing the objection that one should be punished for another’s sin, says that it is nonetheless “vain [...] to deny the fact”, but it is done according to God’s goodness and to sustain the authority of his law as a display of righteousness.⁴⁸

However, truth is not always sufficient cause to engender appreciation of a doctrine. Even if the Bible does teach that we bear the guilt of original sin, does it not violate the principle of the nontransferability of guilt? Two answers may be offered. Firstly, the argument of divine simplicity, that God is himself the definition of his attributes,⁴⁹ means that our understanding of justice must be derived from him.⁵⁰ He reveals his own goodness and justice in the Bible⁵¹ and, as the source and fountain of all truth, cannot be defined by concepts of these things outside his biblical self-revelation.⁵² Ergo, the doctrine of man’s responsibility for original sin can be said to be good and just because it is the will of God who is intrinsically good and just. This line of argument returns us to the earlier discussion on divine causality in providence. Secondly, the transference of guilt is fundamental to orthodox Protestant soteriology. Christ bore the sins of his people (Matt. 8:17, 1 Pet. 2:24), which is to say that sin and, therefore, guilt were transferred from his people to Christ. His atoning death pays the judicial penalty for these sins and so his people are rendered not guilty. Furthermore, his perfectly obedient life is imputed to them so that God

⁴⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended* (C. and G. Carvill, 1828), p. 142.

⁴⁶ Edwards, *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended*, p. 144.

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.6; Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, II, 2.8.9.

⁴⁸ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, II, 2.8.9.

⁴⁹ Steven J Duby, ‘Divine Simplicity, Divine Freedom, and the Contingency of Creation: Dogmatic Responses to Some Analytic Questions’, *Journal of Reformed Theology*, 6.2 (2012), pp. 115–42, doi:10.1163/15697312-12341234.

⁵⁰ Gordon H. Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, ed. by Lucius Garvin (Riverside Press, 1957), pp. 208–10.

⁵¹ John Owen, ‘An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews’, in *The Works of John Owen*, Vol. 19 (T&T Clark, 1862), pp. 90–91.

⁵² Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, pp. 254–55.

views them not only as guiltless but as positively righteous (Rom. 5:17-19), as if they had personally obeyed in the way that Christ obeyed. In other words, without transference there is no atonement, so the divine ordination of transference should be a cause for jubilation, not consternation!

Original Sin and Contrition

In the Bible, expressions of contrition or repentance for original sin are limited. In Psalm 51, David pleads for the Lord's washing and forgiveness of his sins and for the restoration of a right relationship between him and God. In this context, David acknowledges "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps. 51:5). This is language of lamentation for original sin and, in the sense that David is reproaching his own condition, is self-reproach, but it is not a strong statement of repentant ownership of original sin in the way that many of his other petitions in the same Psalm are with respect to actual sin.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR ACTUAL SIN

The Knowledge of Actual Sins

Unlike with original sin, in which our temporal distance and lack of personal agency in Adam's sin can encourage more philosophical reflection in abstraction from the Bible,⁵³ theological questions of personal morality confront us daily and have significant practical implications. Perhaps because humans are so intimately acquainted with their own failings and those of others, even if they repudiate the implicit reference to the divine in the terminology of "sin",⁵⁴ theologians and philosophers are generally readier to acknowledge something approaching the actual sin concepts of personal and corporate (collective) moral failure.

The light of nature, or natural revelation, teaches us about God's glory and how to relate to him (Rom. 1:20),⁵⁵ including the teaching of personal responsibility. Solomon tells us to examine the way of the ant, who eschews sloth, and is diligent (Prov. 6:6-8). In the sensorimotor stage of cognitive development, children learn physical responsibility by interacting with their environment.⁵⁶ Principally though, as we have seen, it is by

⁵³ Philip L. Quinn, 'In Adam's Fall, We Sinned All', *Philosophical Topics*, 16.2 (1988), pp. 89–118 (pp. 89–90), doi:<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43154029>.

⁵⁴ S. Richard Bellrock, 'Sin Does Not Exist: And Believing That It Does Is Ruining Us', *Sunstone*, 2019 <<https://sunstone.org/sin-does-not-exist/>> [accessed 18 July 2023].

⁵⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.1.

⁵⁶ Bärbel Inhelder, 'The Sensorimotor Origins of Knowledge', in *Piaget and His School: A Reader in Developmental Psychology*, ed. by Bärbel Inhelder, Harold

looking at oneself through the lens of the precepts and proscriptions of the Bible, that is to say through the law, that a person becomes aware of their status as a sinner and of specific sins.⁵⁷

Irresponsible Reactions to Sin

It provides some examples of people failing to take proper responsibility for their sin. The example of Adam is already given above: rather than taking responsibility, he blames his wife, and God. Sinners confronted with their sins can harden their hearts. Pharaoh oppressed the Hebrew people (Exod. 5) and, although God sent plagues to warn him to turn from his sin (Exod. 7-12), he only hardened his heart against them – and was eventually destroyed (Exod. 14). Paul writes soberly to the Romans that those who continue persistently in a course of known sin, “with a high hand” (Numbers 15:30), are given over to reprobacy (Rom. 1:20-32). Sinners can also respond at the other extreme: to despair when confronted with their sins. Ahithophel was a gifted counsellor of David who, later in life, rebelled against David in the insurrection of his son, Absalom. God outworked providence such that Ahithophel’s advice was not followed, so he returned home, set his house in order, and hung himself (1 Sam. 7:23). Ahithophel’s story shows that the irresponsible use, or misuse, of gifts is itself sin, alongside showing his irresponsible response to his sin. Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver (Luke 22) but “was seized with remorse” such that he returned the silver and hanged himself (Matt. 27:1-10). These examples of suicide are extreme, but they show that a person may be irresponsible for their sins by mis-reacting as well as under-reacting.

Repentance: The Responsible Reaction to Sin

The responsible reaction to sin is repentance. David sinned grievously by committing adultery with Bathsheba and then sending her husband, Uriah the Hittite, to his death on the battlefield (2 Sam. 11:1-17); for a time thereafter, he appears unconcerned. But when Nathan confronts him, David recognizes his sin (12:13). Nathan warns David that God shall cause the death of the child as judgement against the sin (12:14) and, whilst David cries and prays for him to be spared (12:16-17), he accepts God’s judgement as righteous (12:20-23). The title of Psalm 51 tells that it was written by David when confronted by Nathan after his sin with Bathsheba. In the Psalm, David does not give excuses for his sins but

H. Chipman, and Charles Zwingmann (Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 1976), pp. 150–65, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-46323-5>.

⁵⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.6.

acknowledges them (Ps. 51:3-4, 6). He pleads repeatedly for cleansing from his sins (vv. 2, 7, 9-10), and for God to blot out the judicial aspect of his transgressions (vv.1, 3, 14). He prays for renewed obedience (v. 10) by the upholding of the Spirit (v. 12). David understands that other works, or worship, that he has done cannot cancel out his sin:

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise (Ps. 51:17).

The word translated “contrite” has the root כָּרַח meaning “to crush”.⁵⁸ The image given of repentance here is that it proceeds from a genuine internal sorrow for the sin committed such that the person’s heart is said to be broken on account of it. However, David does not pray to be kept in this crushed state, but to have the joy of his salvation returned to him (v. 12).

Calvin identifies three elements in repentance. Firstly, a spiritual transformation of the soul is required.⁵⁹ Secondly, it results from a sincere fear of God.⁶⁰ Thirdly, it will result in mortification of the flesh and quickening of the spirit.⁶¹ Calvin proceeds to dissect repentance into seven parts.⁶² Carefulness, such that the person pays more attention in the future to avoid becoming again entangled by sin. Apology, not excusing the sin, but acknowledging guilt and pleading and trusting in God’s mercy. Indignation, in which the person is offended with himself for his sin. Fear, from considering the sin, the deserved punishment, and God’s wrath against sin. Desire, or a diligence to do good. Zeal, for gospel grace. Finally, revenge, to gain the ultimate victory over sin despite the setback. Berkhof gives a simpler threefold division of the anatomy of repentance.⁶³ The intellectual element involves the recognition of sin as including personal guilt, defilement, and the need for grace. The emotional element involves a sorrow for sin committed against a just and holy God. The volitional element involves a change of will or purpose so that the person turns from sin, seeking pardon, cleansing, and obedience. Hence both Calvin and Berkhof locate concepts approximating contrition in their definitions of repentance. With Calvin, it is in the element of apology; with Berkhof, in the emotional element.

⁵⁸ William S. Plumer, *Studies in the Book of Psalms* (J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1866), p. 560.

⁵⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.6.

⁶⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.7.

⁶¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.8.

⁶² Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.15.

⁶³ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 486.

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES WITH PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND CONTRITION

Two contemporary issues highlight the importance of a biblically-balanced understanding of personal responsibility and contrition. Firstly, a growing philosophical movement denies contrition and responsibility, in part or altogether, which impacts how counselling is performed. Secondly, I argue that some in the reformed world are imbalanced in their expression of contrition to the neglect of other aspects of Christian piety such as assurance and joy.

Firstly, there is a growing body of thought that argues against responsibility and morality altogether. Responsibility, as a basic and indivisible concept, is argued to be created based on untenable assumptions about the world; if responsibility does not exist, then there cannot be any morality to which it is oriented.⁶⁴ Morality fitted the pre-scientific era “among gods and miracles and mysteries”.⁶⁵ This position readily acknowledges practical problems in terms of the maintenance of an ordered society without the concept of responsibility;⁶⁶ however, as has been shown, it is incompatible with the Bible. Others do not reject responsibility outright but identify problematic aspects to it. Shapiro distinguishes between moral and psychological responsibility.⁶⁷ Moral responsibility leads to self-reproach, which is not only a corrective expression of regret but also has punitive and morally denunciatory elements. The argument continues that “the premise of self-reproach is that one not only should have, but also might have, chosen to do otherwise”. I suggest that this is logically incoherent: a person never chooses to do otherwise than their choice. Nonetheless, it is argued, if a person’s choice was inevitable, they should not reproach themselves for it, but should see it through the therapeutically-advantageous lens of being an expression of will rather than an anomaly of will.⁶⁸ There is much in this argument with which the Christian can agree. The biblical doctrine of providence does lead, logically, to a Christian determinism in which God has foreordained all that comes to pass; yet men are not created as automatons but as self-

⁶⁴ Stephen Kershnar, *Total Collapse: The Case Against Responsibility and Morality* (Springer International Publishing, 2018), doi:10.1007/978-3-319-76950-9.

⁶⁵ Bruce N. Waller, *Against Moral Responsibility* (MIT Press, 2011), p. vii.

⁶⁶ Kershnar, *Total Collapse: The Case Against Responsibility and Morality*; Waller, *Against Moral Responsibility*.

⁶⁷ David Shapiro, ‘Self-Reproach and Personal Responsibility’, *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes*, 69.1 (2006), pp. 21–25, doi:10.1521/psyc.2006.69.1.21.

⁶⁸ Shapiro, ‘Self-Reproach and Personal Responsibility’.

aware creatures conscious of setting their will to a course of action. The absence of alternative possibilities is not a conclusive argument against moral responsibility.⁶⁹ Also, a person's choices are indeed an expression of their will. The doctrines of original sin and total depravity teaches us that the unregenerate man's will is depraved by its corruption by sin whilst, in contrast, the doctrine of sanctification teaches that the regenerate man's will is dominantly influenced by the Spirit inclining it towards holiness. Yet the argument fails with the basic premise that punitive and morally denunciatory elements of self-reproach are problematic. A recognition of the justice of punishment for sin, and of the heinousness of sin, are well-established classical elements of Christian repentance. Intellectual and experiential knowledge of these elements are not problematic but God-given aides to enable sinners, recalling the pain of sin, to avoid it in the future. Undermining this is dangerous to Christian counselling and psychotherapy.

However, secondly, expression of contrition can be imbalanced. Confession of personal and corporate sin is a part of Christian piety rightly associated with personal responsibility. In some circles of the reformed churches, the phenomenon can be found of professing Christian men, engaged in public prayer, expressing such a sense of their sin that they are not only praying in contrition for repentance but indeed for regeneration. Also, in some continental reformed circles, men lead public prayer who are not professing to know Christ. Both practices are unsound. A person's prayers are ineffectual unless Christ conveys those prayers to God as their High Priestly intercessor (Rom. 8:34). Christ does not exercise this High Priestly office for everyone without exception but only for his people (John 17:9). Therefore, a person praying for regeneration is either praying for something they already possess but do not know that they possess, which logically means that their public profession is unsound: by their ecclesiastical profession they say they are born-again Christians, but by their prayers they say they are not. Or, they may be indeed be unregenerate people leading public prayer, and the unregenerate man does not truly desire regeneration (Rom. 3:10-12); a sincere desire for salvation is evidence of the saving operation of the Spirit in the soul. Whilst these are logical conclusions, I do not believe they tell the full story. I hypothesize that pietistical issues underpin this practice. Could it be that the prayers of such men are (poorly worded) expressions of self-reproach for sin stemming from a genuine faith and repentance towards God? In other words, do such prayers indicate one who genuinely believes that he needs

⁶⁹ John Martin Fischer, 'Recent Work on Moral Responsibility', *Ethics*, 110.1 (1999), pp. 93–139, doi:10.1086/233206.

to be regenerated (and is therefore presently unsaved), or do they indicate one who already believes himself to be regenerated but, due to inadequate theological reflection giving rise to erroneous petitions, coupled with a deep sense of personal responsibility for sin, is praying for repentance and restoration? I suggest that the latter is more probable, and the antidote is for precision in prayer to be encouraged.⁷⁰ As we have seen, penitential prayer is a fundamental part of contrition and thus a correct and vital response to sin. Penitential prayer is edifying to a congregation: instructive of repentance and free grace. Yet a congregation that dines too largely on a diet of penitential prayers is missing out on the many other aspects of Christian experience and is neglecting the variety of matters for which we are taught to pray throughout the Bible and patterned in the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13). Hosea, instructing Israel to repent, indeed commands contrition when he says,

O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity. Take with you words, and turn to the Lord: say unto him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously: so will we render the calves of our lips (Hos. 14:1-2).

Nonetheless, the Preacher in Ecclesiastes gives the wisdom of precision in prayer:

Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few (Eccles. 5:2).

CONCLUSION

Humanity is guilty in Adam and under the curse of original sin. Questions of the transmission of sin, whilst legitimate, do not affect the start and end points of the argument: God is sovereign to dispose of his creation as he wills, and he has ordained man to be responsible for original sin. Furthermore, biblical obedience requires that man repents of his sin, which involves taking personal responsibility for it, and exercising contrition over it. In contemporary thought, there is a growing movement away from responsibility and a scepticism about the utility of contrition. There can indeed be a biblically-unbalanced focus on negative sinful experi-

⁷⁰ C. Matthew McMahon, 'Where Oh Where Has the Precisionist Gone?', *A Puritan's Mind* <<https://www.apuritansmind.com/pastors-study/where-oh-where-has-the-precisionist-gone-by-dr-c-matthew-mcmahon/>> [accessed 27 October 2023].

ence in some contexts, but the antidote to this is the recovery of biblical doctrine on the proportionality of sin and the vast range of subjects over which to pray.

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