12. Original sin and human nature

Often heard: "Catholics say a newborn baby is guilty of Adam's sin and must be baptized to wash it away. But 'the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father' (Ezek 18:20)."
Also heard: "If babies are born without sin, why does David say 'in sin did my mother conceive me' (Ps 51:5)? And where does the Bible teach an 'age of accountability'?"

A fallen nature; condemnation comes with accountability

HELD BY Baptist Reformed Baptists: imputed guilt

Adam's fall affected the whole human race: everyone is born with a nature bent toward sin, and everyone who can make moral choices sins and stands condemned before God. The Baptist Faith and Message (2000) says Adam's posterity "inherit a nature and an environment inclined toward sin" and that "as soon as they are capable of moral action, they become transgressors and are under condemnation." Baptists differ on whether Adam's guilt is also inherited. Many Southern Baptists say it is not: the 2012 "Traditional Statement," signed by a group of Southern Baptist leaders but never adopted by the Convention, denies that Adam's sin "rendered any person guilty before he has personally sinned." Reformed (Particular) Baptists confess with the Second London Confession that "the guilt of the sin was imputed, and corrupted nature conveyed" to all Adam's descendants. On both views the remedy is the new birth through repentance and faith, not baptism, and most Baptists hold that infants who die are saved.

VERSES CITED

Rom 5:12–19; 1 Cor 15:22 ("in Adam all die"); Ps 51:5; Eph 2:1–3 ("by nature the children of wrath"); Gen 8:21; Jer 17:9; Rom 3:10–23. On

Original holiness lost; nature wounded, not destroyed

HELD BY Catholic Orthodox ancestral sin, not guilt

Adam received original holiness and justice "not for himself alone, but for all human nature," and by his sin lost them for all his descendants. Every human being is therefore conceived in original sin, except Christ and, by a unique privilege, Mary, who was preserved from it at her conception. Original sin is called "sin" only by analogy: it is "contracted" and not "committed," a state and not an act, and it is not a personal fault in anyone descended from Adam. It is the deprivation of original holiness and justice, but human nature "has not been totally corrupted": it is wounded, subject to ignorance, suffering and death, and inclined to sin (concupiscence). Baptism takes original sin away entirely, which is why the Church baptizes infants who have committed no personal sin. Concupiscence remains in the baptized as a struggle, but it is not itself sin and cannot harm those who resist it by the grace of Christ.

VERSES CITED

Gen 3; Rom 5:12 (Douay-Rheims: "in whom all have sinned"); 5:19 ("by one man's disobedience many were made sinners"); 1 Cor 15:21–22; Ps 51:5 (Douay Ps 50:7: "in sins did my mother conceive me"); Job 14:4; Eph 2:3; Wis 2:24; Rom

accountability: Deut 1:39 (children who "had no knowledge between good and evil"); Isa 7:16; Rom 7:9 ("I was alive without the law once"); Jas 4:17; Ezek 18:20; 2 Sam 12:23 ("I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me").

WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM

English Baptists inherited the Reformation's Augustinian doctrine: the Particular Baptists' Second London Confession (1677/1689), ch. 6, follows the Westminster Confession almost word for word, imputed guilt included. The General Baptists' Standard Confession (1660), art. X, already taught that infants who die before any actual transgression are subject only to "the first death" brought by Adam and will not suffer eternal punishment for Adam's sin. The Southern Baptist confession moved the same way: the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message said Adam's posterity "inherit a nature corrupt and in bondage to sin, are under condemnation"; the 1963 revision, kept in 2000, places condemnation after the capacity for moral action. Calvinist Baptists such as C. H. Spurgeon (sermon "Infant Salvation," 1861) also held that all who die in infancy are saved, but by election, not because they are innocent.

Hereditary sin is truly sin and deserves God's wrath

HELD BY Lutheran · Reformed imputed guilt · Anglican Article IX · Methodist Article VII; prevenient grace

Since Adam's fall every person born in the natural way is born with sin: not only a weakness or a liability to death, but a true sin of origin, a corruption of the whole nature, inclined to evil and without true fear of and trust in God.

7:14–25 and Jas 1:14–15 (concupiscence); John 3:5.

EARLY CHURCH AND HISTORY

Irenaeus (c. 180) speaks of God, "whom indeed we had offended in the first Adam" (*Against Heresies* 5.16.3), and Cyprian's council (252 or 253) baptized newborns because to them are remitted "the sins of another." The doctrine was defined in the West against Pelagius, who reduced Adam's influence to bad example: Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings, the Council of Carthage (418) and the Second Council of Orange (529). The Council of Trent (Session 5, June 17, 1546) restated it against the Reformers, who in the Catholic reading identified original sin with an insurmountable concupiscence and held that it had destroyed human freedom (CCC 406). Trent expressly left Mary out of its decree.

CATECHISM AND COUNCILS

CCC 396–409, 416–419, 491, 1250, 1263–1264; Trent, Session 5, Decree on Original Sin, canons 1–5; Council of Orange (529); Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus* (1854).

The Lutheran, Reformed and Anglican confessions add that of itself it deserves God's wrath, and that it remains in the regenerate, though it is not imputed to those who believe and are baptized. The Reformed add that Adam's guilt is imputed to all his posterity because he stood as their covenant head. Methodists follow Wesley in confessing the corruption of every man's nature while teaching that God's prevenient grace reaches every person.

VERSES CITED

Rom 5:12–19; Ps 51:5; John 3:6; Eph 2:1–3; Rom 7:18–24; Gen 8:21

WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM

The Reformers restated Augustine's teaching against both Pelagian and late-medieval views, holding that original sin is more than the loss of original righteousness and that concupiscence in the baptized is itself sin, though forgiven.

CONFESSIONS AND DOCUMENTS

Augsburg Confession II; Formula of Concord, Epitome and Solid Declaration I; Westminster Confession 6.1–6; Heidelberg Catechism Q 7–8; Thirty-Nine Articles IX; Methodist Articles of Religion VII

THE FATHERS ON ADAM'S SIN AND INFANTS

Irenaeus of Lyons

c. AD 180

"God Himself, whom indeed we had offended in the first Adam."

Against Heresies 5.16.3

Cyprian of Carthage

AD 253

"To him are remitted, not his own sins, but the sins of another."

Letter 64.5 (Epistle 58.5 to Fidus in the Ante-Nicene Fathers numbering), on the newborn infant

Ambrose of Milan

c. AD 378

"In Adam I fell, in Adam I was cast out of Paradise, in Adam I died."

On the Death of Satyrus 2.6

Augustine of Hippo

AD 413–426

"For we all were in that one man, since we all were that one man."

City of God 13.14

John Chrysostom

late 4th century

"To me it seems to mean liable to punishment and condemned to death."

Homilies on Romans 10, on "many were made sinners" (Rom 5:19)

Gregory of Nyssa

late 4th century

"The innocent babe has no such plague before its soul's eyes."

On Infants' Early Deaths. Context: the "plague" is the ignorance that adults must be purged of; the innocent infant never admitted it.

Wording follows the public-domain translations in the Ante-Nicene and Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. The Latin Fathers stress solidarity with Adam's sin; the Greek Fathers stress death and corruption and speak of infants as innocent of personal sin.

Across the traditions

How each major tradition answers this question, in its own words and from its own documents.

Catholic

Original sin is the deprivation of original holiness and justice, a sin "contracted" and not "committed": it wounds human nature without totally corrupting it and carries no personal fault. Baptism takes it away, though

Orthodox

Orthodox teaching often speaks of ancestral sin. The Orthodox Church in America teaches that all bear the consequences of Adam's sin, chief of which is death, but only Adam and Eve bear its guilt. Philaret's catechism says that from a father infected with sin comes "a posterity infected like

concupiscence remains, and Mary was preserved from it. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Catechism of the Catholic Church 396–409, 416–419, 491, 1250, 1263–1264; Council of Trent, Session V, Decree on Original Sin, canons 1–5.

him with sin, and like him mortal." The Confession of Dositheus speaks of "hereditary sin," but explains its burden as toil, sickness and bodily death, not actual sins.

Sources: Orthodox Church in America, Questions & Answers, "St. Augustine & Original Sin" and "Original Sin" (oca.org); Longer Catechism of St. Philaret, qq. 164–169; Confession of Dositheus (1672), decree 6.

Lutheran

Lutherans confess that since Adam's fall all born in the natural way are born with sin, "without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence," and that this vice of origin is truly sin, condemning those not born again through Baptism and the Holy Spirit. The Formula of Concord calls it so deep a corruption that nothing healthy remains, yet rejects as Manichean the claim, made by Matthias Flacius, that original sin is man's very substance: fallen nature is still God's creature.

Sources: Augsburg Confession, art. II; Formula of Concord, Epitome I.2, 8, 13, 19; F. Bente, Historical Introductions to the Book of Concord, ch. 15 (bookofconcord.org).

Reformed

Reformed confessions teach federal headship: the covenant was made with Adam "as a public person," so all mankind "sinned in him, and fell with him." His guilt is imputed and a corrupted nature conveyed to all his posterity, leaving them "utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good." The Heidelberg Catechism says the fall "has so poisoned our nature" that all are conceived and born in sin; Dort adds that without the Spirit no one is willing or able to return to God.

Sources: Westminster Confession 6.2–5; Westminster Larger Catechism Q 22; Heidelberg Catechism Q 7–8; Canons of Dort (1619), Third and Fourth Heads, arts. 1–3.

Anglican

Article IX says original sin "standeth not in the following of Adam" but is "the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man," by which he is very far gone from original righteousness and inclined to evil, so that in every person born it "deserveth God's wrath and damnation." The infection remains in the regenerate; there is no condemnation for those who believe and are baptized, yet concupiscence "hath of itself the nature of sin."

Sources: Thirty-Nine Articles (1571), arts. IX–X.

Methodist

Methodist Article VII keeps Anglican Article IX's definition, "the corruption of the nature of every man," "inclined to evil, and that continually," but drops the word "fault" and the clause on God's wrath and damnation. Wesley called man's total corruption the "first grand distinguishing point" between heathenism and Christianity, yet held that no one is left in "a state of mere nature": preventing grace reaches everyone, so no one sins for lack of grace.

Sources: Methodist Articles of Religion (1784), art. VII; Wesley, Sermon 44, Original Sin, III.1–2; Wesley, Sermon 85, On Working Out Our Own Salvation, III.4.

Baptist

Everyone inherits a nature and an environment inclined toward sin and becomes a transgressor, under condemnation, as soon as capable of moral action; Reformed Baptists also confess imputed guilt, and most Baptists hold that infants who die are saved. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Baptist Faith and Message (2000), art. III; Second London Baptist Confession (1677/1689), 6.3, 10.3.

Where it gets contested: Rom 5:12 is the hinge. The Latin Vulgate, followed by the Douay-Rheims, reads "in whom all have sinned," the reading Augustine used and Trent quotes; the Greek *eph' hō* is rendered in the KJV "for that all have sinned," which Orthodox and many Baptists take to mean that each person dies and sins for himself. Catholics answer that the doctrine does not hang on one translation: Rom 5:19 says many "were made sinners" through one man, and Cyprian's church baptized infants for the remission of sins long before Augustine. The word "guilt" is itself disputed: the Orthodox and many Baptists say Rome teaches inherited guilt, while Catholics point to CCC 405 (no "personal fault" in Adam's descendants), though Trent does speak of the "guilt of original sin" being remitted. Lutheran, Reformed and Anglican critics say Rome understates the damage, since for them the concupiscence that remains after baptism is truly sin (Westminster 6.5; Article IX). Catholics and Calvinists both ask the majority Baptist view where Scripture sets an age of accountability; its defenders answer with Deut 1:39 and Rom 7:9.

See also: Predestination and free will; Infant baptism; Baptism: saving or symbolic?; Immaculate Conception and Assumption; the state of grace; The Orthodox perspective.

Deeper study: the age of accountability and infants who die

No verse states directly what happens to infants who die. Each tradition reasons from its doctrine of original sin and from God's character, and the answers overlap more than the debate suggests.

Southern Baptist (majority)

Infants who die: Saved. Condemnation comes only "as soon as they are capable of moral action" (Baptist Faith and Message, art. III), the point usually called the age of accountability. No confession fixes an age, and it is held to vary with the child.

Grounds given: Deut 1:39; Isa 7:16; Rom 7:9; Jas 4:17; 2 Sam 12:23; Matt 19:14.

General Baptist (1660)

Infants who die: Saved. Infants "having not actually transgressed" are subject only to the first death, will be raised by the second Adam, and none will suffer eternal punishment in hell for Adam's sin (Standard Confession, art. X).

Grounds given: 1 Cor 15:22; Matt 19:14.

Particular Baptist and Reformed

Infants who die: "Elect infants dying in infancy are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit" (Second London Confession 10.3; Westminster 10.3). Dort tells godly parents "not to doubt the election and salvation" of their children who die in infancy (First Head, art. 17). Spurgeon held that all who die in infancy are elect.

Grounds given: Election and covenant, not innocence. Spurgeon: "we believe that the infant fell in the first Adam."

Catholic

Infants who die: Entrusted to God's mercy, with hope "that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism" (CCC 1261). Baptism remains the only means the Church knows that assures salvation, so it must not be delayed.

Grounds given: 1 Tim 2:4; Mark 10:14; John 3:5 (CCC 1257, 1261).

Greek Fathers

Infants who die: Not condemned, but their state is left to God. Gregory of Nazianzus held that they receive neither praise nor punishment; Gregory of Nyssa that the innocent infant shares in the life natural to it.

Grounds given: Reserve about what God has not revealed (summarised in ITC 2007, §§12–14).

How the Western answer developed

Pelagius, early 5th century: denied that Adam's sin was passed on and promised unbaptized infants "eternal life," though not the kingdom of God (ITC 2007, §15).

Augustine, c. 421: against Pelagius, taught that unbaptized infants are not saved, but that "the mildest punishment of all" falls on those who add no actual sin to original sin (*Enchiridion* 93).

Medieval theologians (Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus): held that such infants feel no pain and even enjoy a natural happiness, the state later called limbo (ITC 2007, §23). In 1794 Pius VI (*Auctorem fidei*) defended the Catholic schools' right to teach it against the Jansenist Synod of Pistoia, which had called it a "Pelagian fable."

Catechism, 1992: speaks only of entrusting these infants to God's mercy and of hope (CCC 1261).

International Theological Commission, 2007: *The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptised*, approved for publication by Cardinal William Levada with the consent of Benedict XVI, concluded that there are "serious theological and liturgical grounds for hope" that such infants are saved, "reasons for prayerful hope, rather than grounds for sure knowledge" (§102). It calls limbo "a possible theological opinion" (§41), distinguishes the long-standing "common doctrine" on these infants from the faith of the Church (§40), and stresses that this hope is no reason to delay baptism (§103).

> **Common ground:** Baptists, Reformed, Catholics and Orthodox all commend infants who die to the mercy of God. They differ on the grounds (innocence until accountability, election, or God's mercy beyond the sacrament) and on how certain that hope can be. The Catholic position has moved toward hope; the Baptist and Reformed confessions have long spoken with confidence.

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