CHALLENGES IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

IN ADAM'S FALL

A Meditation on the Christian Doctrine of Original Sin

Ian A. McFarland

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In Adam’s Fall: A Meditation on the Christian Doctrine of Original Sin

Ian A. McFarlan

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Ian A. McFarland

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For my teachers

Preface

First published in Boston in around 1690, the *New England Primer* shaped the education of generations of children throughout North America, with total sales over the nearly two hundred years it remained in print estimated in the millions. Its most famous feature was its alphabet pages: a series of rhyming couplets, accompanied by woodcut illustrations, used to teach the letters. The first of these (and the only one never changed in any of the *Primer*'s many editions) gave a concise summary of the Western Christian doctrine of original sin: "In Adam's Fall/We Sinned all." Because once upon a time Adam sinned, all of us in the present are sinners.

In contemporary North America, this doctrine has none of the resonance with popular culture that once made it a natural reference point for teaching basic literacy. Its key terms are little used outside of churches and often little valued even within them. At the same time, few doctrines continue to excite as much passion among believers and non – believers alike. While traditional beliefs about the Trinity or justification are easily passed over as bits of theological esoterica, talk of original sin invariably elicits a strong – and overwhelmingly negative – response even among those who identify themselves as Christian. The idea that we are all guilty because of an ancestor's misdeed is viewed as morally outrageous and historically incredible, summing up for many everything that is wrong with Christianity.

It is the aim of this book to challenge that perception. In my previous work on the doctrine of the human person ("theological anthropology" in the technical jargon of systematic theology), one of my central aims was to overcome what appears to me a Hobson's choice latent in the tradition. On the one hand, Christians have tried to defend human equality before God by identifying some

feature common to all human beings (e.g., reason, freedom, self-consciousness) as the ground of God's regard for us – of our "personhood." One consequence of this strategy is to render the differences between human beings theologically unimportant, notwithstanding the fact that in human relationships it is precisely that which is distinctive about others that catalyzes our love for them. On the other hand, where human difference is taken seriously, it is all too readily taken as evidence that all human beings are not equal. I have argued that the horns of this dilemma can be avoided by rooting anthropology in Christology: if the basis of our "personhood" is not any quality we possess (whether in equal or different measure), but simply the fact that God in Christ addresses us *as* persons – speaking to us in time the same Word spoken eternally within the Trinity – then acknowledgment of human difference and human equality no longer stand in tension with one another. As members of Christ's body, we all are equal as recipients of Christ's call, but utterly distinct in that to which we are called.[1]

But if life "in Christ" is a matter of God's incorporating us into the divine life by making us equal but mutually unsubstitutable members of Christ's body, what of life "in Adam" – our state apart from or prior to redemption? Here, too, the Christian tradition has wanted to affirm a kind of equality, but one based on a defect – sin – rather than any positive feature of human nature. In the Western churches this defect has traditionally been further qualified as *original* sin – a congenital resistance to and alienation from God that, while not intrinsic to human nature as such, is now characteristic of all human beings by virtue of the fact that the first human beings disobeyed God's command: "In Adam's fall/we sinned all."

The chapters that follow are my attempt to examine this dimension of human equality before God, in the conviction that the doctrine of original sin, though one of the most

unsettling aspects of Christian teaching, is also stimulating and productive for the life of faith. In reaction to a wide range of criticisms leveled against the idea of original sin, a number of Christian theologians in the modern period have attempted to develop a doctrine of sin in which the idea of original sin is heavily qualified or even rejected. Against these perspectives, I will argue that it is not only theologically defensible, but inseparable from the confession of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Indeed, I will defend the doctrine in what is arguably its most extreme form, as developed by Augustine and later defended in the Reformed theological tradition under the designation of "total depravity" – the claim that no aspect of our humanity is untouched by sin. Yet what follows is not simply a restatement of earlier positions, because modern critics raise questions that cannot be ignored about how the doctrine has been defended and deployed in the past, even if (as I shall try to show) these questions can be answered in ways that confirm the place of original sin within the logic of Christian faith.

The course I will follow in making this argument falls into three parts. The first is primarily diagnostic: in Chapter 1 I will lay out some of the issues connected with sin-talk in general, after which I will proceed in Chapter 2 both to discuss the development of the doctrine of original sin and to review some of the ways it has been defended, criticized, and modified over the centuries. In the process, I isolate three particularly trenchant objections to the idea that human beings are congenital sinners: first, that it cannot be squared with the best current science regarding the origin and development either of the human species (phylogeny) or of the individual human being (ontogeny); second, that it undermines basic Christian convictions regarding human freedom and thus promotes either moral indifference or despair; and third, that it vitiates the pursuit of justice in

society by excusing systemic sins as inevitable and accusing those who resist them of sinful presumption.

Though it is in many respects the heart of my argument, the book's second part does not deal directly with the doctrine of original sin at all. Instead, it serves as something of a ground – clearing operation, in which I elaborate some basic principles of theological anthropology that provide the conceptual basis for my reconstruction of the doctrine of original sin in Part III. Specifically, I seek to counter the idea that the will is the source of human identity and freedom by developing an alternative anthropology, in which the will does not have this determinative role. Drawing on the thought of Augustine in Chapter 3 and Maximus the Confessor in Chapter 4, I argue that Christians have both good reasons and effective theological resources for making just this move. Though developing their respective positions in response to significantly different theological concerns, both figures challenge the equation of free will with the power of self – determination in favor of an anthropology in which the will's freedom lies in its being so drawn to the proper end of human nature as to draw human nature as a whole to its proper end. Within this framework God rather than the will is the source of individual identity, since it is God whose call defines the good for a person; nevertheless, it remains the case that individual identity is only realized through the will, as I claim – or fail to claim – God's will for my life as my own. This idea is developed in Chapter 5, where I undertake an analysis of seemingly esoteric debates in the tradition over whether the human nature assumed by Christ was fallen or unfallen in order to bring into relief the ontological oddity of the will as that aspect of human nature by virtue of which individual identity, though not a matter of libertarian self – determination, remains ineluctably our own.

Building on this understanding of the will, I proceed in the third part of the book to answer the principal objections to the doctrine of original sin outlined at the end of Part I. Chapter 6 addresses the question of the coherence of the doctrines of the fall and original sin with natural history, arguing that the doctrine does not depend either on the literal truth of Genesis 1–3 or on a biological theory of inherited sin. In Chapter 7 I turn to the question of the compatibility of Augustinian doctrine with fundamental Christian convictions regarding human freedom and responsibility. Using the anthropology developed in Part II, I argue that it is possible to affirm a complicity in sin shared by all human beings as personal agents who cannot disown their actions, without reducing this complicity to a matter of choice for which the agent is appropriately blamed. Finally, Chapter 8 counters the charge that the doctrine of original sin promotes social conservatism by arguing that appreciating the depths of human sinfulness actually serves as a prod to disrupt complacency in the face of the status quo. Because sin is recognized only as it is overcome, we can know our sin only as we attend to those whose suffering discloses to us both how we sin and how we must change if we are genuinely to repent of it. In short, the argument moves from the question of how it is that we are all sinners *ontologically* (Chapter 6), to an analysis of what it means for us all to be sinners *existentially* (Chapter 7), to reflection on how to acknowledge and address our sinfulness *vocationally* (Chapter 8).

The anthropology in terms of which this defense of original sin is constructed cuts against some of the most deeply held convictions of post industrial consumer culture, which all too often equates humanity with what philosophers call “freedom of indifference,” but which is more immediately comprehensible in market terms as “freedom of choice.” A refusal to define human being in these terms is fundamental

to the argument that follows. This refusal is rooted in the conviction that to succumb to the market's vision of humanity is to betray the good news of Jesus Christ, which is that we have been chosen and not that we have done the choosing. This is not to deny that we quite obviously do choose all manner of things, still less to suggest that our relationship to God in Christ is anything other than free; but it is to insist that while we love God and thereby are most truly and properly human – freely, that love, like all love, is, in its joy and freedom, beyond our capacity to choose.

Note

[1] See Ian A. McFarland, *Difference and Identity: A Theological Anthropology* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001) and *The Divine Image: Envisioning the Invisible God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005).

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At points throughout the book, text from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible has been used. New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Part I

Setting the Stage: The Problem of Original Sin

1

Creation Gone Wrong: Thinking about Sin

At bottom, talk about sin (or, in the technical jargon of Christian dogmatics, hamartiology) is rooted in the twin convictions that things are not right in the world, and that human beings are deeply implicated in what has gone wrong. Stated in these terms, sin-talk may not seem especially controversial. It is hard to imagine many who live in the modern world, marked as it is by the realities of extreme and chronic poverty, environmental degradation, terrorism, torture, and war, who would not be willing to affirm as much. Christians, however (especially those whose roots lie in the Latin or Western tradition of the church), have tended to go considerably farther. They talk about *original* sin, claiming on the one hand that human beings' implication in sin is both congenital and irresistible, and on the other that every human being nevertheless remains accountable for her sin. That set of claims tends to meet considerable resistance, and it is the aim of this book to explore and respond to it.

A Doctrine Grown Strange

For centuries few beliefs were more widely and deeply held in Western society than the doctrine of original sin. There was, of course, plenty of disagreement with respect to detail. Catholics and Protestants differed over the character and effects of original sin after baptism. And many groups

tracing their lineage back to the radicals of the Reformation era attacked the idea that persons could be damned on the basis of original sin alone, leading them to reject the practice of baptizing infants. But very few would have seen no truth whatever in the opening couplet of the *New England Primer*, “In Adam’s Fall/We Sinned all.”[1] Even Immanuel Kant, champion of Enlightenment and relentless critic of traditional forms of Christian teaching, retained a place in his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* for a doctrine of radical evil that bears a notable resemblance to original sin.

By contrast, one is hard pressed to find much interest in – let alone enthusiasm for – the doctrine of original sin in present – day Western culture. This changed situation is, of course, bound up with the weakening of the power and influence of the churches in Europe and the Americas over the last two centuries, but even among committed Christians original sin has lost much of its hold on the imagination.[2] Although in one form or another it remains the official teaching of many denominations, it has ceased practically to be a central tenet of Christian belief even in those churches that are formally committed to it. And though (especially in the United States) Christians of all persuasions continue to be very active in seeking to influence public policy, their language is shaped by images of personal autonomy and individual freedom worlds removed from the idea of universal solidarity in sin.

Interestingly, however, this shift away from original sin has not in any sense been accompanied by a diminished sense of the power of evil in the world. On the contrary, the language of Christians, from liberation theologians on the left to premillennial dispensationalists on the right, is marked by a profound sense of the many ways evil impinges on human existence. And while it may be the case that such movements pay particular attention to evil’s supra-personal

(i.e., social or cosmic) dimensions, it is far from clear that this has in any way displaced the call for individual transformation. Christians remain committed to the message, “Repent and believe” (Mark 1:15), but they are not typically inclined to develop it in terms of a doctrine of original sin. Why not?

One obvious answer is that the doctrine of original sin is simply not gospel, or good news. It is tempting to dismiss this consideration as nothing more than a sign of the church’s collective failure of nerve – a market-driven desire to avoid some of the more depressing elements of the Christian tradition. But there is more at stake here than mere salesmanship. It is true that the doctrine of original sin is not the gospel; and because it is not, there *is* something problematic about making it a defining feature of the church’s proclamation. In his prison letters, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was highly critical of those styles of evangelistic preaching that seek first to persuade people how wretched and miserable they are and only then introduce Jesus Christ as the cure for their condition. He called it “religious blackmail” and thought it both ignoble and completely inconsistent with Jesus’ own preaching.[3] In line with what will be an important claim of this book, Bonhoeffer objected that such preaching confused sin with personal weakness or guilt.[4] This confusion, Bonhoeffer argued, failed to reckon with the fact that Jesus’ own preaching was not predicated on searching out his hearers’ flaws but rather addressed them in their entirety.

Yet if it is wrong to place original sin at the center of the gospel message, I will argue that it remains an important feature of the Christian understanding of the human condition and thus a crucial part of that message. Before addressing the topic of original sin in particular, however, it is necessary to clarify what it means to speak of sin in general – and that task presents significant challenges of its

own. After all, in contemporary Western culture the word “sin” is used seriously (i.e., to name something genuinely fatal to human existence rather than a penchant for rich desserts) only within the church – and even there its use is not uncontested. Again, this reluctance to talk about sin cannot simply be attributed to the fact that people inside or outside the church lack a strong sense of right and wrong or are indifferent to the power of evil. Instead, it reflects profound uneasiness with the connotations of the word “sin” that is arguably a problem of the churches’ own making. The fact that Christians often have focused their sin-talk on issues of marginal moral significance (e.g., smoking, dancing, playing cards) – so that the churches most vehement in their denunciations of “sin” have often seemed unconcerned about war, poverty, or racism – has contributed to the sense that the concept of sin, far from contributing to the identification of and resistance to evil, only serves to distract attention from “the weightier matters of the law” (Matt. 23:23).[5] In light of this situation, recovery of the doctrine of original sin needs to begin with an appreciation of some of the ways in which the way the idea of sin is used in Christian Scripture challenges popular understanding of the concept.

Biblical Configurations of Sin

The consumerist anthropology that shapes so much of contemporary Western culture is predicated on a model of freedom in which choice is determined exclusively by the will of the chooser. To be sure, possible objects of choice are constrained by material circumstances (e.g., a person with neither money nor credit cannot buy a hat), and the choices one makes may entail consequences that are not themselves desired by the chooser (e.g., someone who steals a hat is subject to arrest); but the act of choosing

itself is conceived as radically private and autonomous: the individual is finally responsible only to herself for what she chooses. Within the consumerist paradigm, a person's choices will certainly affect other people and will themselves be affected by other people's advice and opinions; but however much such relationships may impact the calculus of choice, they remain external to the act of choosing, which can always be abstracted from them as a decision that is essentially by and for the self.[6] The moral character of an individual's acts is, correspondingly, determined by assessment of her capacities and intentions.[7]

Unintentional sin

Christian language of sin challenges the private character of choice, because it locates human deeds within a context of a relationship with God that is prior to and independent of any human choosing. This is not to suggest that the theological concept of sin is univocal. The Old Testament speaks of sin in various ways, distinguishing, for example, between active rebellion (*pāša*) against God (e.g., Amos 4:4) and a more passive failure to attain some good (*hātāʹ*) through error or ignorance (e.g., Gen. 20:6).[8] In no case, however, is sin reducible to a purely private decision about personal behavior. Indeed, the Old Testament also includes what to modern ears sounds like a contradiction in terms: unintentional sin (*šegāgāh*). Though the fact that such sin is unintentional means that it falls outside the power of choice, it nevertheless renders the individual who committed it culpable in a way that requires ritual expiation (see Lev. 4:1–5; 19; Num. 15:22–30; cf. Ezek. 45:20).

In order to appreciate how radically this differs from modern sensibilities, it is important to recognize that the Old Testament category of unintentional sin is not reducible to culpable ignorance, as though the offending party's fault

could be attributed to her having failed to take account of a particular moral or legal principle that she ought to have known. If that were the case, the sin could still be interpreted in terms of autonomous choice – something that could have been avoided had the person's moral calculations been more thorough.[9] Instead, in terms of content, unintentional sin refers to "any one of the things which the Lord has commanded not to be done" (Lev. 4:2, 13, 22, 27). In this way, the category of unintentional sin suggests that the model of moral calculus is inadequate precisely because it conflates human responsibility *for* sin with the conscious choosing *of* sin. Some sins may well be deliberately chosen (Num. 15:30 contrasts unintentional sins with sins committed "with a high hand"), but the range of terms employed for sin in the Old Testament suggests that sin cannot simply be equated with conscious choice. Instead, it seems better understood as any human action that deviates from God's will, whatever the particular combination of factors that may have contributed to it. In this way, the Old Testament suggests that sin be identified in terms of the character and quality of one's relationships with God and neighbor. One can, correspondingly, be convicted of sin when one's action damages those relationships, even where that damage was not freely chosen.

Though the vocabulary for sin in New Testament Greek is more limited than that of Old Testament Hebrew,[10] it, too, bears witness to a refusal to limit sin to conscious choices. In one of his more anguished reflections on the human situation, Paul writes:

> I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is not longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my

> flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. (Rom. 7:14–19)

While the interpretation of this passage remains disputed,[11] it is clear at least that Paul distinguishes between the good that he wants and the evil that he commits. It does not seem appropriate to interpret this disparity as a simple collapse of Paul's powers of choice, as though he found himself physically unable to keep his limbs from committing murder or adultery in a particular instance.[12] Aside from the fact that such a scenario flatly contradicts Paul's claim elsewhere that he was personally blameless with respect to God's law (Phil. 3:6), it implies a mind–body dualism that is inconsistent with Paul's overall anthropology. A better option seems to view the situation he describes as one in which the material consequences of his willing escape his control, so that the results of his actions go wrong in a way that bears little or no relation to his intentions.[13] In this respect, his sin, too, is unintentional – though not for that reason any less catastrophic.

In both the Levitical and Pauline contexts, unintentional sin opens up a perspective in which the sinfulness of an action is assessed primarily by reference to its external effects on one's relationships to God and neighbor. Insofar as the law is understood as the framework regulating those relationships, this conclusion appears consistent with the biblical definition of sin as "lawlessness" (*anomia*, 1 John 3:4). Crucially, this objective mode of assessment decouples the fact of sin from the sinner's internal dispositions. To be sure, sin is regarded differently depending on whether or not it is committed with "a high hand," but the fact that sin was unintended does not eliminate the sinner's responsibility. Though sin may not be within one's direct control, the fact that it is a matter of damaged or distorted

relationship means that the sinner cannot dissociate herself from the situation as a purely passive victim of circumstances. On the contrary, moving to the context of relationship in analyzing sin subverts any simple binarism according to which responsibility is assessed solely in terms of whether or not the sin was intentional. A person's responsibility is not dependent on the ability to exercise conscious control over her thoughts and actions, but rather derives from that fact that her agency cannot be abstracted from the network of interpersonal relationships in which she participates. Indeed, Jesus' insistence that the two great commandments are love of God and neighbor (Matt. 22:37 and pars.) suggests that this impossibility of abstracting oneself from one's relationships is central to his vision of what it means to be a moral agent. Quite contrary to the consumerist perspective, complicity in sin is a function of one's ineluctable participation in a web of relationships and is thus not simply reducible to the choices one makes.

Sin as external power

Though the idea of unintentional sin breaks the link between responsibility and conscious control, it nevertheless continues to operate with the model of sin as a particular act performed by an identifiable agent. Yet biblical language about sin goes considerably further in rubbing against modern sensibilities when it challenges even the apparently self-evident idea that sin is something a person does. In this context, it is worth noting that though the transgression of Adam and Eve is easily the most well known sin in the Bible, it is not named as a sin in Genesis. The first explicit reference to sin in Scripture comes only after humanity is expelled from Eden, in the story of Cain and Abel. When Cain grows angry because of the favor shown to Abel's offering, God warns him: "if you do not do well, sin [*hattā't*] is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must

master it" (Gen. 4:7).[14] The implication is that while a person may avoid committing sin in any given instance, at no point can she avoid reckoning with sin as a force at large in the world. In short, sin is not simply a kind of act people commit; it is a power that hovers around all human acting.

This way of characterizing sin is not limited to the primordial world of Genesis. In the verse that follows immediately on the passage quoted in the previous section, Paul makes the extraordinary claim that "if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me" (Rom. 7:20). As the subsequent verses of the letter make clear, Paul does not say this as a means of absolving himself from responsibility for his actions. His point is rather that his identity is inextricably bound up with the power of sin, so that he can describe his state as that of a person "sold under sin" and "a slave to the law of sin" (Rom. 7:20, 25). For Paul in these verses, sin does not merely threaten him in a way that he might (in line with the language of Gen. 4:7) in principle overcome, but presses on his agency with such force as to render him seemingly helpless to resist it.

In short, Paul's language in Romans 7 furthers the decoupling of sin from intentionality, with the imagery of sin as an external power that impinges on human action deepening appreciation for the ways in which human action is bound up with sin. Far from guaranteeing the kind of untrammeled control over themselves that allows them to be masters of their fate, human beings' status as agents actually renders them vulnerable to the power of sin, which (following the personification of sin found in places like Genesis 4 and Romans 7) seeks to appropriate their agency for its own ends. Taking this language seriously means recognizing that an understanding of sin informed by the full range of the biblical witness is not reducible to a list of prohibited acts. On the contrary, human beings' commission