

Born in Sin?

Calvinism in Light of Scripture

Kerry Duke

Are we born sinners? Is the sin of Adam passed down to every human being in every generation?

Most people who profess to be Christians say *yes*. Roman Catholics strongly believe it. Original sin is a key concept in Catholic theology. The majority of Protestant denominations also believe we are born with a “sinful nature,” a depraved soul, or, under the condemnation of sin. I grew up in a Protestant church. I remember one of the pastors saying, “Man is a sinner by nature and not by choice.”

This doctrine is stated in various ways. There are different versions of it. It has been around for hundreds of years. Theologians from many churches have modified it and revised it. So, if you ask someone what they mean by original sin, the answer will depend on what church they attend, or, what they’ve been reading.

But in spite of the evolution of this doctrine, there are some basic features that are the same. And, there is a history behind it. In this discussion, we will look at what two influential theologians said about it — one a Catholic; the other a Protestant. These men were like fountainheads or wellsprings of religious belief, especially in their view of original sin.

One of these was John Calvin. Most Protestant churches have been influenced by his teaching to some degree. Here is how Calvin himself defined original sin: “Original sin, then, may be defined as a hereditary corruption and depravity of our nature, extending to all the parts of the soul, which first makes us obnoxious to the wrath of God, and then produces in us works which in scripture are termed works of the flesh.”

That is pure Calvinism. If you’ve never read these words before, you might be surprised at how bold and blunt Calvin was, even if you believe in some version of original sin. And, if you believe in this concept, you need to think about where this doctrine came from. You need to ask for biblical proof of it. You need to examine how and why this belief came to be. On the other hand, if you don’t believe in original sin, you need to understand its meaning. Why? Because not only do most churches teach it, but also because it is underneath many discussions about salvation. How can we talk about salvation from sin if we don’t even agree on what sin *is*? How can we discuss “What must I do to be saved” if we don’t agree on the answer to the question, “What did I do to become a sinner?”

This is why we should spend some time with John Calvin. We’re not talking about books others have written about Calvin’s teaching. We will go to the head of the stream, to John Calvin himself. He left behind many pages of his thinking, but we will go to his famous work on systematic theology, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In other words, let’s spend some time looking at some original sources on original sin.

Before we look deeper into Calvin’s doctrine of original sin, we need to talk about an ancient writer who had a strong influence on Calvin’s thinking. That theologian was Augustine (354-430 A.D.). Augustine was a prolific author with a troubled past; he became one of the most influential thinkers in Catholic and even Protestant theology. He spent his earlier years living a life of sin; he talks openly about this in his book *Confessions*. Eventually he joined the Manichean religion. This cult followed the teaching of Mani, who lived in the 3rd century B.C. One of the identifying doctrines of the Manicheans was the belief that good and evil are both eternal. They said evil had no beginning; it has always existed just as good has always existed.

Augustine joined this group when he was about 20 and remained in it for about 8 or 9 years. When he converted to Catholicism a few years later under the influence of Ambrose, he soon began writing. He had a keen interest in refuting the claims of the Manicheans. Since one of their cornerstone beliefs was the co-eternality of good and evil, Augustine set his sights on disproving this idea.

The book he produced on the nature of good and evil is *The City of God*. This work is Augustine's attempt to address the most perplexing of all issues: the problem of evil. If God is all-powerful and perfect in love, how can evil exist? In particular, Augustine tackled the question of how evil *began*. *The City of God* traces the history of evil from its origin to the final victory over evil at the judgment.

But when Augustine discusses the beginning of sin and how it could have occurred under the eye of the all-powerful, all-loving God, he does not start with the sin of Adam and Eve. He begins with the sin of some of the angels, one of whom appears to have been Satan. He had already decided that the Manichean belief that evil is eternal was false. But how could evil *begin*? Augustine rejected the idea that God created evil, and in this he was right. He also said the angels had free will; some chose to obey God and some chose to disobey Him. In this he was right also. The Bible talks specifically about these angels sinning in II Peter 2:4 and Jude 6; other passages such as Matthew 25:41 mention them. But when Augustine considered the question "How could the angels have sinned in the presence of an all-powerful God?", the free will defense was not enough to satisfy him. He believed these angels must have had some kind of defect which the other angels did not have.

Here is what Augustine said in the *City of God*. He discusses the sin of angels as the logical starting point in the problem of evil. He talks about the blessed state of these angels when they were created. But what about their future? Did they know whether they would remain in favor with God? Augustine believed some angels were sure they would remain blessed while others did not have this certainty. He believed the angels were not created equally. "But who can determine to what extent they were partakers of that wisdom before they fell? And how shall we say that they participated in it equally with those who through it are truly and fully blessed, resting in a true certainty of eternal felicity? For if they had equally participated in this true knowledge, then the evil angels would have remained eternally blessed equally with the good, because they were equally expectant of it" (*City of God*, 11.11). He also said, "...when the angels were created, some were created in ignorance either of their perseverance or their fall, while others were most certainly assured of the eternity of their felicity..." (*City of God*, 11.13). He went on to explain "And because the evil angels could not be certain of that, since their blessedness was destined to come to an end, it follows either that the angels were unequal, or that, if equal, the good angels were assured of the eternity of their blessedness after the perdition of the others..." (*City of God*, 11.13).

Augustine said evil angels sinned because of their free will. But if that was the case, then why did he suggest a prior influence, if not a prior cause, of their sin? On one hand, he said the angels sinned by choice. But on the other hand, he thought something else had to be responsible, at least in part.

This was the groundwork for John Calvin's later teaching on predestination and original sin. Augustine said *angels* were not created equally; Calvin took this a step further and taught that *people* are not created equally. But there is more to Augustine's influence on John Calvin.

Augustine just could not understand how evil could ever begin in the sight of a perfect, all-powerful God. He turned his attention to the very word “evil” and adopted an idea that others before him had taught. It is a hard concept to understand—mainly because it is not a sound idea.

Let’s start with a question. Would you say that to exist is good? Is existence a good thing? Ancient teachers before Augustine said yes. Origen, who lived from 185—253 A.D., was a very influential theologian. He taught the view we are about to discuss. But long before Origen and Augustine, a philosopher named Plotinus speculated about existence (the existence of anything, everything). Plotinus lived in the third century B.C. As with other Greek philosophers, his theories are just plain absurd. But if you want to understand the roots of Catholic and Protestant teaching about original sin and salvation, it will help if you know a little about this important link.

Plotinus called “God” the “One.” He said everything else proceeds from the One. All that exists *flows* from the One, or, *emanates* from the One. The highest levels of existence are the beings or things that are closest to the One in their nature. Then there is a lower level, a lower level, and so on until we come to the lowest level, which is matter. After matter there is just nothing, non-existence. Plotinus used the light of the sun as an illustration. The “One” is like the sun. The sun gives light which is most bright near the sun. Then as the light shines farther and farther away from the sun, it becomes more dim. The light finally reaches a point of darkness, which is non-existence.

The upshot of this metaphor is that if existence is good, then non-existence is evil. Evil, then, is not something that exists in a positive way; it is the absence of good. Augustine and others applied this theory in this way: they asked, “What is darkness?” Their answer was: Darkness is not really “something”; it is the absence of light. Or, they would ask, “What is sickness?” They answered, “Sickness is the absence of health.” So, when they looked at the idea of evil, they said, “And what is evil? It is the absence or the lack of good. It is not something that positively exists, but a privation, or an absence, of good.” This view, which is the true essence of original sin in Catholic and Protestant theology, is called *privatio boni*, which is Latin for “privation of good” or “absence of good.”

This view was very appealing to Augustine. He couldn’t understand how or why evil can exist when it is opposed to the all-powerful God. The idea of evil as *privatio boni* made sense to him. He had been a Manichean but he couldn’t believe any longer that evil was eternal, that it had always existed. But if evil is not eternal, then how did it come to exist? Augustine said it doesn’t really exist at all.

The concept of evil as *privatio boni* may appeal to some on a philosophical level, but it is just plain absurd from a common sense and a scriptural point of view. Sin is evil. The Devil is evil. Murder and pride and lying are evil. They are not just the *absence* of goodness. They really *exist*. Anyone who believes this view has to redefine the concept of *existence*.

What does this have to do with Calvinism, especially the doctrine of original sin? Augustine started with the sin of angels. He was puzzled about how they could have sinned and given evil a beginning. So, he said some angels had a *defect*. They did not have the knowledge other angels had. So, the source of evil was a *deprivation* of something good. Let me remind you that at this point we are not trying to refute Augustine; we are trying to understand him. It’s important to know that “sin,” in his thinking, is not about what evil *is*; it is about what evil is *not*.

When Augustine examined the first sin of human beings, he looked through the lenses of *privatio boni*. “As soon as our first parents had transgressed the commandment, divine grace forsook them...They experienced a new motion of their flesh...” (*City of God*, 13. 13). “Their

nature was deteriorated in proportion to the greatness of the condemnation of their sin...human nature was in his person vitiated and altered to such an extent, that he suffered in his members the warring of disobedient lust..." (*City of God*, 13.3). As a result, "Whatsoever sprang from their stock should also be punished with the same death" (*Ibid.*). "Man, being of his own will corrupted, and justly condemned, begot corrupted and condemned children... Man could not be born of man in any other state" (*Ibid.*, XIII.14).

The only cure for this depraved nature is a working of divine grace: "Unless divine grace aid us, we cannot love nor delight in true righteousness" (*City of God*, XIII.5). "And thus, from the bad use of free will, there originated the whole train of evil, which, with its concatenation of miseries, convoys the human race from its depraved origin, as from a corrupt root, on to the destruction of the second death, which has no end, those only being excepted who are freed by the grace of God" (*City of God*, XIV.14). Augustine applied the idea of *privatio boni* to this inherited condition. "Original sin" is the absence of the grace and goodness that God created Adam and Eve with; it is the lack or deprivation of the virtuous state Adam and Eve had before they sinned but lost when they disobeyed God according to Augustine.

Now let's turn to John Calvin. What did Calvin say about the nature of evil, and, original sin? His most systematic presentation of what has become known as Calvinism is found in his 1,300 page work the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. It is the most definitive statement of his beliefs. Calvin wrote other volumes, but we will confine this discussion to the *Institutes* because it is the primary source of Calvinism.

The term "Calvinism" is a broader term today. Calvinistic theology has evolved over the last 500 years. There are various degrees and types of Calvinistic thinking both in Reformed and non-Reformed churches. It is not my intention to examine and compare these differences. My purpose is to discuss what Calvin himself said about original sin.

What is Calvinism? Many point to the TULIP acrostic as an outline of its main teachings: T—total hereditary depravity; U—unconditional election; L—limited atonement; I—irresistible grace; P—perseverance of the saints. This is a helpful description of the key points of Calvin's doctrine. However, Calvin *did not* invent the TULIP acronym. That was coined later. There is a much simpler and more accurate way to get to the bottom of what Calvinism really is. It is actually found in the first line of the opening chapter of the *Institutes*: "Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and ourselves" (Book I, 1.1). These two things are the foundation of Calvinism: his concept of God and his concept of man; in other words, the nature of God and the nature of man. Everything else in his theology is built upon these premises. To Calvin, God is Sovereign, and that attribute is above all other considerations about God. He believed that God is the all-powerful, all-knowing, omnibenevolent God, but his favorite description was that God is Sovereign, He rules the Creation in such a way that nothing — good or bad — happens without his will. As for man, Calvin believed that we are devoid of any capacity to do good. Our nature is evil. We are born this way. So while the TULIP summary is a helpful way to remember the main tenets of Calvinism, its 5 points merely repeat or unfold what Calvin said in the opening words of the *Institutes*. If you understand what Calvin believed about the nature of God and the nature of man, then you will be in a better position to understand his whole system of theology.

Here is what Calvin said about the Sovereignty of God. "Men do nothing save at the secret instigation of God, and do not discuss and deliberate on anything but what he has previously decreed with himself, and brings to pass by his secret direction" (*Institutes*, I, 18.1). "He testifies that he creates light and darkness, forms good and evil (Isa. 45:7); that no evil

happens which he hath not done (Amos 3:6)” (*Institutes*, I, 18.3). If we ask, how can God decree that evil will happen when He tells us not to do evil? Here is Calvin’s “answer”: “When we cannot comprehend how God can will that to be done which He forbids us to do, let us call to mind our imbecility” (*Institutes*, I, 18.3). In Calvinism, it is God, not man, who decides who is saved and who is lost. Calvin said, “All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation” (*Institutes*, III, 21.5). So Calvin’s answer to the question, “If God is all-powerful and all-loving, then why does evil exist?” is *because God is sovereign and He wills it!*

This brings us to the nature of man in Calvin’s thought, and, his view of the nature of evil. Notice how Calvin describes this and how he uses the same concepts Augustine taught.

In a section about original sin Calvin began with these words: “This is the hereditary corruption to which the early Christian writers gave the name of original sin, meaning by the term depravation of the nature formerly good and pure” (*Institutes*, II, 1.5). He said that when Adam sinned, he was “stripped of all his glory” and had “no remaining good in himself” (*Institutes*, II, 1.1). As a result, “Man is so enslaved by the yoke of sin, that he cannot of his own nature aim at good either in wish or actual pursuit” (*Institutes*, II, 4.1). “The mind of man is so entirely alienated from the righteousness of God that he cannot conceive, desire, or design anything but what is wicked, distorted, foul, impure, and iniquitous; that his heart is so thoroughly envenomed by sin that it can breathe out nothing but corruption and rottenness” (*Institutes*, II, 5.19). Again this is Calvinism from the mouth of Calvin himself.

Let’s look once more at Calvin’s own definition of original sin: “Original sin, then, may be defined as a hereditary corruption and depravity of our nature, extending to all the parts of the soul, which first makes us obnoxious to the wrath of God, and then produces in us works which in scripture are termed works of the flesh” (*Institutes*, II, 1.8).

What does all this have to do with Augustine and his teaching? In the *Institutes*, Calvin quoted Augustine far more than any other secular author. Why? There are two reasons. First, Calvin was writing against the Catholic Church. Catholics revered Augustine, so he used one of their heroes against them. Second, Calvin drew much of his thinking from Augustine. Consider a question that he raised in the *Institutes* about *how total depravity is transmitted* from parents to children.

One problem raised in Medieval times about the transmission of hereditary depravity was this: Is this corruption passed from the *body* of the parents to the child or through the *soul* of the parents to their children? In America during the 1800s, preachers used this argument in public debates with Calvinists. They pointed to Jesus as an example. The first horn of the dilemma was: if this inherited corruption is passed *physically* from the parents to the child, then what about Jesus? This would mean that Jesus was born in sin, because He was born physically of a woman (Galatians 4:4). He partook of “flesh and blood” (Hebrews 2:14). Of course, Catholics concocted the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception to get around this problem. That belief says Mary was conceived without original sin and thus, she had no depravity to pass on to Jesus. But Calvinists don’t believe this doctrine, and they are right in rejecting it. So Calvinistic preachers would not take this horn of the dilemma.

Pioneer preachers would then press the other alternative: is the corruption of original sin passed from the *soul* of the parents to the *soul* of the child? But this cannot be. God is the Father of spirits (Hebrews 12:9). God gives the spirit to a person at conception. The spirit is from God. God does not make spirits evil. He does not create spirits corrupt. Calvinistic preachers did not want to take hold of this horn of the dilemma either.

Interestingly, Calvin had already considered this dilemma long before these debates, and, he thought he had an answer. Is hereditary depravity passed through the body or the soul? Calvin said *neither*. He said, “The cause of the contagion is neither in the substance of the flesh nor the soul, but God was pleased to ordain that those gifts which he had bestowed on the first man, that man should lose as well for his descendants as for himself.” When Adam “lost what he had received, he lost not only for himself but for us all” (Book II, 1.7). So Calvin used Augustine’s definition of evil as *privatio boni*; he, like Augustine, said this “original sin” is not *something* that is passed from parent to child, but something that is *not*.

Many, even among those who believe in original sin and hereditary depravity, don’t realize this concept. Original sin is not about what we supposedly inherit; it is what we *do not inherit*—supernatural grace from God.

How can we obtain the grace Adam lost? Catholics would say through the sacraments; Calvinists would say through the irresistible working of the Holy Spirit—which, in Calvinism, is only for those whom God decrees to be saved.

This is the *meaning* of original sin according to two of its major proponents. Now we turn to the alleged *proof* of this doctrine.

What verses of Scripture are used to prove original sin?

Psalm 51:5 is one of the main texts in this issue.

- KJV —“Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.”
- NKJV—“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.”
- ASV—“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.”
- ESV—“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.”
- NASB—“Behold, I was brought forth in guilt, and in sin my mother conceived me.”
- NIV—“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”

People who believe in original sin regard this verse as the strongest proof of the doctrine. The commentary of Keil and Delitzsch says concerning this verse, “The fact of hereditary sin is here more distinctly expressed than in any other passage in the Old Testament” (vol. 5, p. 367). Calvin said, “Surely there is no ambiguity in David’s confession” (*Institutes*, II. 1. 5).

Let’s consider some aspects of this verse.

First, going into the Hebrew and exegeting this verse won’t help much in this discussion. The English translations for the most part are accurate: The KJV, NKJV, ASV, and ESV follow the Hebrew more closely; the NIV, not surprisingly, gives its usual idiomatic translation which is why it is often quoted by those who teach original sin. I wouldn’t recommend the NIV, but, as we will see, *even if* the wording of the NIV in this verse were accurate, that still would not mean that it teaches original sin. More on that in just a few minutes.

What we have in Psalm 51:5 is common in the Old Testament, especially in poetical books like Psalms and Proverbs. It’s called Hebrew parallelism. That means there are two lines or statements. Sometimes the second line says basically the same thing as the first line. That’s called *synonymous* parallelism. Another kind is when the second line says the opposite of the first. We call that *antithetic* parallelism. Psalm 51:5 is a case of synonymous parallelism. Being

brought forth in iniquity is basically the same as being conceived in sin. Again, we're not looking at the application yet — just the wording. Incidentally, this shows that being a *person* doesn't just depend on being *born*. It also means that one has to be *conceived*. So it shows that *personhood* begins at conception.

The emphasis in this passage is on *David and his sin*. It is not about *his mother*. There is nothing in Scripture to support the idea that David's mother was such a sinful woman. In the context David talks about "my transgressions" (v. 1), "my iniquity...my sin" (v. 2), "my transgressions" (v. 3); and then we have that famous statement; "Against you, you only, have I sinned" (v.4). He is talking about *his* sinfulness, not his mother's.

David is also not talking about *the sinfulness of mankind*. He is not saying that he was born into a sinful environment. Again, the emphasis throughout the context is on *his sin*, not the sinfulness of the human race in general. So he is not saying that he was simply born into a *sinful world*.

The title the ancient Jews gave to Psalm 51 is "A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone into Bathsheba." This was an ancient Jewish tradition. If this Psalm is *not* specifically about this episode in David's life, it still shows his remorse about his sins in general. On the other hand, if he did write it about his sin with Bathsheba, it is not surprising that he spoke in such strong terms. The guilt he felt must have seemed overwhelming. He committed adultery with the wife of a soldier who was very loyal to David. Then he had that soldier killed. David had trouble in his family for the rest of his life. The first tragedy was the death of the child he had with Bathsheba. Then one of his sons raped David's daughter. Then another son of David killed that son. Then that son—Absalom— started a war that divided the nation. In the end, the head of David's army killed Absalom against the direct order of the king. Finally, toward the close of his life when he was old and feeble, David's son Adonijah tried to take the throne. Nathan the prophet had told David, "the sword will never depart from your house" (II Samuel 12:10). Those fateful words haunted David for the rest of his life.

How could anyone bear this much guilt, especially with the constant painful reminders in his own family? Nathan the prophet told David that God had forgiven him, but he had to live with the consequences of his sin for the rest of his life.

David often pours out his heart to God in this book. These Psalms are called penitential Psalms because David shows deep regret for his sins. Psalm 51 is a Psalm of deep remorse and repentance. The complement to these Psalms is another type known as Psalms of forgiveness. Psalm 32 is a good example. Psalm 51 also has the element of divine forgiveness. These Psalms are very personal and emotional.

This brings us to another aspect of the Psalms that we must remember if we are to understand Psalm 51:5. Psalms is a book of Hebrew poetry. Some of it is literal, but much of it is filled with figures of speech and symbols of all kinds. One of these figures is the *hyperbole*, an intentional overstatement, a deliberate exaggeration for emphasis. This figure is not to be taken literally. For instance, in Psalm 6:6, David's heart is breaking (which is a figure of speech in modern times). He said, "I am weary with groaning, All night I make my bed swim; I drench my couch with tears." Would anyone say David cried enough tears to make his bed float? We understand what he means. This is not literal.

But a closer example is Psalm 58:3—"The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies." Does anyone who believes in original sin think this means newborn infants are so evil that they start lying the moment they're born? This cannot be literal. It is a hyperbole. Newborn babies don't lie; they can't even talk. This is a figurative

way of describing how evil these adult people are. They are so thoroughly sinful that their whole life is one of continual evil. It is as if they began to speak lies as soon as they were born — figuratively speaking. It's even more obvious that Psalm 58:3 is figurative when you look at the next verse: "Their poison is like the poison of a serpent; they are like the deaf cobra that stops its ear" (v.4). If verse 4 is not literal, then neither is verse 3. And, if Psalm 58:3 is figurative, then so is Psalm 51:5.

Psalm 51:5 is a hyperbole. David is expressing deep feelings of remorse in the language of Hebrew poetry. Psalm 51:5 is not any more literal than Psalm 58:3. Both are cases of hyperbole. David was so overwhelmed with grief for his sin that he is saying, in a highly figurative way, that his whole life was stained by his sin. It was *as if* he was sinful since the moment he was conceived, just like he spoke similarly of the wicked in Psalm 58:3. This is how the Hebrews spoke and wrote. Look again at Psalm 51. After verse 5 he pleads for forgiveness—again, in very figurative speech: "Purge me with hyssop" (v. 7); "make me hear joy and gladness, *that the bones you have broken may rejoice*" (v.8).

In Psalm 51:5, David is poetically describing how he *felt*, not literally stating the history of his sin.

Paul used a hyperbole to express his humble gratitude for being a saint and an apostle in light of his past life of persecuting Christians. In Ephesians 3:8, Paul said he was "less than the least of all the saints." *Literally*, you can't be less than the least. But we understand what Paul meant. We should use the same common sense when we read Psalm 51:5.

A similar verse is Isaiah 48:8. In this section of Isaiah, the prophet is addressing future Jews who are in Babylon. In chapters 40-66, Isaiah says the Lord will bring these Jews back to their homeland, Jerusalem. But a few times he also reminds them that their sins caused them to be in Babylon. That is the context of Isaiah 48:8. In that verse God told the Jews, "You were called a transgressor from the womb." The NKJV and the ASV read "called a transgressor from the womb." The ESV says, "From before birth you were called a rebel." It is strange that the ESV would translate the Hebrew "from before birth." In the first place, "from the womb" is a closer translation of the Hebrew *mibeten*. In the second place, the Hebrew is the same in other verses in this book. Isaiah 44:2 and 24 and Isaiah 49:1 and 5 all have *mibeten*, yet in all these verses the ESV translates it "from the womb."

Some who are against the Calvinistic interpretation of this verse call attention to the word "called" in Isaiah 48:8. They argue that this verse only says that others *called* them transgressors from the womb, but in actuality they were not. But this reasoning will not work. The word "called" in the Old Testament and New Testament is often the same as saying that something *is* or *was*. For instance, Isaiah 9:6 says that the Messiah would be "called" Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. He was not simply "called" these things; He *is* these things. In Isaiah 62:5, God said the nation of Judah would be "called" Hephzibah and Beulah which mean "delight" and "married." This means they *were* God's delight and His spiritual bride. In Isaiah 48:8, being "called a transgressor" means the nation *was* a transgressor.

This statement in Isaiah is like Psalm 51:5. It is a hyperbole. Children do not literally transgress from the time they are born. Little babies do not sin the moment they are born. They grow into young men and women and choose for themselves between right and wrong.

This passage is about the Hebrew *nation*. Being a transgressor since birth means they, as a nation, had been sinful from their birth as a nation. But again, this is a hyperbole. We know this because in the next chapter the prophet said God *accepted* the nation of Israel *from the*

beginning: “The Lord has called Me from the womb; from the matrix of My mother He has made mention of My name” (Isaiah 49:1). At that time, Israel was a chosen people, not a rejected nation. This is clear in Isaiah 49:2-5. Yet in Isaiah 49:1 and 5 Isaiah uses the same Hebrew expression to say *the Jews were chosen and were His servant from the womb*. There is no contradiction. The prophet is using the expression in a figurative way — as a hyperbole to describe the history of the Jewish nation from two different points of view. So it is not right to use a verse which is about the history of a nation in a figurative sense to teach a literal doctrine of human nature. Isaiah 48:8 is not an image based on what literally happens to individuals at birth. It’s simply a figurative description of the Jewish nation in the tone of a hyperbole.

Sometimes those who teach original sin point to Genesis 8:21. This is where God said, “The imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth.” This verse says nothing about man’s heart being evil from *birth*. It says *from his youth*. This word, which in Hebrew is *neurim*, is a broad word in the span of life it can cover. It often refers to young adults, not to infants or small children. For instance, the Bible often speaks of a man and the wife of his “youth” (Proverbs 5:18; Mal. 2:14-15). These verses use the same Hebrew word — *neurim*. Genesis 8:21 simply means that people begin to sin in their younger years. It does not give a definite number of years but it certainly does not mean people are in sin from day one. Besides this, Genesis 8:21 does not say man’s *heart* is evil from youth; it says the *imagination* of his heart is evil from his youth. The word *imagination* is from the word *yetzer*. This word refers to something that is formed or framed by *design*. For instance, in Isaiah 29:16 it refers to a potter *framing* a vessel of clay. Isaiah also speaks of a person whose mind is *stayed—yetzer—on God* (Isaiah 26:3). This is one who has made a *firm decision* to serve God, not a newborn infant.

Another verse that is used to teach original sin is Job 14:4. This is also a weak argument. In this verse Job is talking to God. He thought the Lord was punishing him for no good reason. He wanted to talk with God, but in this section he felt too lowly. He was just a frail, mortal man. How could he stand before a holy God? And what hope is there for a man being righteous before God? “Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? No one” (Job 14:4).

First of all, Job is expressing his thoughts and feelings out of anguish of soul. Not everything he says in this book is correct. So it is not good interpretation to build a case on this verse, or even this verse in conjunction with others. Job is simply saying that man is unclean. That does not mean man is *born* unclean. Job is asking God how He can judge a man like himself so harshly. After all, Job said, I am just a fading flower, a fleeting shadow (Job 14:1-2). This verse has nothing to do with an *inherited nature*.

There are some verses in the New Testament that deserve attention. One of these is Ephesians 2:3. In this verse Paul told the Christians at Ephesus that we “were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.” As always, it is vital that we see the context. That context begins in Ephesians 2:1: “And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.”

The issue here is the meaning of the words in verse 3: we “were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.” This “wrath” is the wrath of God. Paul said they were all under the wrath or condemnation of God — *by nature*. Those who teach the traditional view of original sin say this is human nature, the nature each person has from birth (or conception). Is this what Paul taught?

The first step, again, is to look at the context. Paul is talking about the sinfulness of the Gentiles and Jews before conversion. He addresses the Gentiles in the church at Ephesus in verse two. They walked or lived according to the way of the world. Notice that Paul describes them as “children of disobedience.” This is equal to the expression “children of wrath” in verse 3; the children of wrath *are* the children of disobedience. They were children of wrath because they were children of disobedience; they were under the wrath of God because they disobeyed God. Babies and little children do not disobey God, so they cannot be children of wrath. We *choose* to obey or disobey God when we are old enough to understand, and from that time God holds us responsible. But an infant is not a child of disobedience.

Verse 3 is even clearer. Paul said “we also,” that is, Jews, lived in the lust of the flesh and fulfilled the desires of the *flesh* and of the *mind*. They were tempted in body and mind to sin, and they gave in to these desires. How on earth can anyone believe an infant or little child can do this?

The context is a *chosen lifestyle*, not an inherited condition. The result was spiritual death — they were “dead in sins” (verses 1 and 5). This is why he said they were “children of wrath.”

This was their *chosen* nature, not their innate condition. The word *nature* is from the word *phusis*. It often refers to the nature God gave to a part of His creation. It means this in Romans 1, 2, and 11. But it can also mean the nature a person *acquires* by choice and habit. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 11:14 that *nature itself* teaches that long hair on a man is a shame. What is there in the creation that teaches this? How can a man know just by looking at the world with its plants, and animals, and people — that it is not *moral* for a man to have long hair? And, if a man having long hair is against God’s natural law, how could permit Samson not to cut his hair through the Nazarite vow?

The key is in the word *nature*. This word in 1 Corinthians 11:14 means practice or custom in a society. In Ephesians 2:3, it means what we call in English “second nature” — not a nature or condition we are born with, but the state of a person who practices sin so long that it comes *naturally* to him.

Romans 5:12 is another key verse in this controversy. Paul said, “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned.” Sin did not *begin* with Adam. It began with the angels that sinned. It *entered* the world through one man, Adam.

Before we look at the rest of this verse, let’s pause and consider this question: How did sin enter the world? Adam and Eve were not born in sin; they weren’t born at all. They had no spiritual depravity. They didn’t inherit original sin. They were not made with an “inclination” toward sin. So how did they become sinners? The answer is clear: they chose to sin of their own free, uncorrupted will! The question that logically follows is equally plain: If Adam and Eve sinned of their own will, without the influence of innate depravity, then why is this not possible for us? If it was not necessary for them to have a depraved nature in order to sin, then why is it a necessary part of our sinfulness? Those who teach original sin have never been able to explain this. Augustine labored to explain how some angels sinned before Adam. Calvin spent his life trying to show how every human being after Adam becomes a sinner. But neither of them spent much time explaining how and why Adam and Eve sinned. Calvin’s commentary on Romans 5:12 says nothing about this. In the *Institutes* (I. 15.8), Calvin admits that Adam and Eve originally had no corruption and that they chose to sin: “At first every part of the soul was formed to rectitude. There was soundness of mind and freedom of will to choose the good.” But, Calvin said even this will was not enough to keep Adam from sinning. That would have taken an

act of God. So why didn't God give him enough virtue to keep him from sinning (I'm speaking like Calvin spoke)? He answers, "why he did not sustain him by virtue of perseverance is hidden in His counsel." This is what Calvin does every time there is an inconsistency in His doctrine. He just says God knows and we don't. There are times when we must confess our ignorance before God, but it is not right for Calvin to run for cover like this when his false theology contradicts itself.

Let's take this matter a step further. Calvin admits that Adam and Eve lived for a time without sinning. We don't know how long that time was. It could have been days, months, or years. But up until the time they chose to sin, they lived a virtuous life. They had virtue from God, but, Calvin said, not enough virtue to persevere. This brings up a question. If God gave Adam grace, and it was not enough to cause him to persevere (I'm using Calvin's word—persevere), then how can Calvinists know that when God gives grace to the elect, they *will* persevere and never fall?

Let's continue in Romans 5:12. When sin entered the world, death entered with it. This is spiritual death, not physical death. The context of Romans 1-6 is justification from sin. Chapter 5 is about being dead *in sin because of sin*. Chapter 6 begins with how we become dead *to sin* when we are baptized into Christ. Throughout this section, beginning in Romans 5:12 and continuing through chapter 8, Paul often contrasts spiritual death and spiritual life. For example, in Romans 5:17 Paul said, "For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ." If "life" in this verse is spiritual life, then "death" is also spiritual.

In Romans 5:12, Adam brought spiritual ruin or death when he sinned. That is what God meant when he said, "In the day you eat of it you will surely die" (Gen. 2:16-17).

Romans 5:12 does not say death passed to all men because Adam sinned. It says death passes to all men because all have sinned. If Adam sinned and brought death of his own will, without hereditary depravity, then why is it hard to believe that we sin and bring death upon ourselves of our own will and not because we are born sinners? To put it another way, sin and death entered the world through the free choice of one man, and sin and death spread to all men because all men sin of their choice.

There is much more that needs to be said about the verses that follow in Romans 5. But that would have to be another lesson. We do need to look at verse 19, however. Paul said, "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous." You might ask, "Doesn't this mean that Adam caused us to be sinners, and that his sin is passed on to us?" Calvinists claim this verse denies actual free will; they say Paul taught both original sin and (their doctrine of) divine election in this one verse: By one man's (Adam's) disobedience many were made sinners, and by one Man's (Christ's) obedience many will be made righteous. It is clear that, in regard to human will, whatever Paul means in the first part is what he means in the second, and vice-versa. If we are made sinners without choosing, then we are made righteous without choosing. But if we choose to be made righteous, then we choose to be made sinners. If one is conditional, so is the other. Now, it is clear that we *choose* to be saved. Otherwise, Peter's words, "Be saved from this perverse generation" in Acts 2:40 would make no sense. In the context of Romans 5:12-19, Romans 5:1 says we are justified by faith. We choose to believe; the Bible says, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). How could and why would God tell us to do something we cannot do? Romans 6:1-6, which is just after the words we are discussing, says that we are baptized into

Christ. But baptism is a *command* (Acts 2:38; 10:48), and a command implies choice. Therefore, since we are righteous or justified by God as a result of our own will, we are also sinners and condemned by God by our choice.

You may ask, “But why does Romans 5:19 say we are *made* sinners by Adam’s sin?” Again, we should ask the same question about the last part: “Why does it say that we are *made* righteous by Jesus’ death?” It is contrary to Bible teaching to say that God, without any choice of our own, makes us righteous by the very act of Jesus’ death and nothing more. Notice what Hebrews 5:8-9 says: “Though He was a Son, yet he learned *obedience* by the things which he suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who *obey Him*.” Jesus obeyed the Father, and those who obey the Son will be saved. Jesus is the author or originator of salvation, and, He is the example we should follow. That is how we are made righteous. In the same way, Adam is the originator of sin among human beings. He set the train of sin in motion and mankind ever since has followed in his steps. That is how we are made sinners.

Calvinists make too much out of the word “made” in this verse. This is from the Greek word *kathistemi*. This word is used in Titus 1:5 where Paul told Titus to “appoint” (*kathistemi*) elders in every city. Titus certainly didn’t make them elders without their choice; Paul said in I Tim. 3:1, “If a man *desires*” the office or position of a bishop, he *desires* a good work. *Kathistemi* means to promote one to a higher position in Matthew 24:47 and to appoint priests to their work in Hebrews 5:1 and Hebrews 8:3. So, this word does not necessarily mean that man’s will is excluded. This word is used twice in Romans 5:19: we are “made” sinners or “made” righteous. In neither case does Paul exclude the free choice of man.

Perhaps a simple Old Testament example will make this clearer. Jeroboam was an evil king of Israel. He led the people into idolatry in I Kings 12. When a later king followed the path of Jeroboam, the Bible says that ruler “walked in the way of Jeroboam, and in his sin by which *he made Israel sin*” (I Kings 15:25,34; I Kings 16:19, 26). Did Jeroboam “make” the Israelites sin against or apart from their own will? Of course not. He led the way. He created the occasion. But his sin didn’t determine that the people would sin. That was their choice. So it was with Adam’s sin and so it is with ours.

Thus far we have looked at the history of the doctrine of original sin. We have also seen that Bible verses used to support it have been taken out of context. Now we are ready to examine the topic of sin and accountability from a broader view in the Scriptures. In so doing we will see that this doctrine is out of harmony with the Bible.

Are babies born in sin? No! Are little children totally depraved because they descended from Adam? No! In Matthew 18, when the disciples asked Jesus, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” the Lord set a small child before them and said, “Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3-4). In what way must we be like little children to enter the kingdom? We must be humble, not prideful. The *nature* of a child is humility, not pride. Remember that Calvin said this about infants: “their whole nature is, as it were, a seed-bed of sin, and therefore cannot be but odious and abominable to God” (*Institutes*, II. 2.8). Can you reconcile that statement with Jesus’ words? Jesus said their nature is such that you have to be like them to be saved, but Calvin said their nature is an abomination to God — even as infants! And this little child Jesus used was beyond the so-called “seed-bed” stage of original sin! There is another contrast that stands out: Calvin

talks about our “innate pride” (*Institutes*, I. 1.1), that is, we are by *nature* prideful. But Jesus said a child, by nature, is *humble*!

Jesus taught the same view of children in Matthew 19. When some brought little children to Jesus, His disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:14). What does Jesus mean by the words “of such” is the kingdom? “Of such” is from *toioutos*, which means to be of a certain character or nature. That character is the *humility* of a child just as we saw in Matthew 18:3-4. This is even more clear in Mark’s account in Mark 10. After He said “of such is the kingdom of God” (verse 14), Jesus explained, “Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it” (Mark 10:15). “Of such” is the kingdom means a person must *receive it as a little child*, not that such a person *is* a child.

The same innocence is taught in I Corinthians 14:20: “Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be men.” In this book Paul rebukes the church at Corinth. He tells them to stop acting like babies and act like men. But here, in I Corinthians 14:20, he says to imitate children in another way: in their attitude toward malice or evil. Why? Because children are pure and innocent when it comes to evil. They act selfishly — in fact, babies are self-centered. When they are hungry, they cry and they don’t care who hears them. But they don’t understand that they are causing a commotion. Their behavior is a response to how they feel. They don’t deliberately try to hurt anyone. So again we ask, how could their very nature be an abomination to God (as Calvin says) when Paul says we are to be like them in our attitude toward evil?

Deuteronomy 1:39 is an important verse on this topic. In this part of the book, Moses is recalling what the previous generation of Israelites did when they came to the border of the promised land 40 years earlier. They disobeyed God because they didn’t believe Him. As a result, God said they would die in the desert (except for Joshua and Caleb). But what about the little ones? Here is what Moses said: “Moreover your little ones and your children, who you say will be victims, who today have no knowledge of good and evil, they shall go in there...” The infants and little children were not held responsible for the rebellion of the adults. The adults chose unbelief. They chose to disobey. God punished them because they were accountable. But the children were not punished. They didn’t choose to disobey. They were free of guilt. Does this sound like they were totally depraved or even depraved at all?

Similar language is found in Isaiah 7. The prophet talks about the span of time “before the child shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good” (Isa. 7:16). At birth and for a time afterward, a child does not have the knowledge to make this choice. That child *imitates* what he sees and hears; and, if the parents are good people, the small child repeats the good things they say and do. But he does not understand the nature of good and evil well enough to make him accountable to God. If his parents are bad, the child repeats their words and actions. But on the other hand, for example, if a two-year-old uses a profane word that his parents spoke, he is not guilty of sin. His parents are. But eventually a child develops in his understanding of right and wrong. He realizes that some things are against *the law of God*, not just contrary to parental rules. There is no exact age for everyone when this occurs, but we call it the “age of accountability” (or, discretion; or, discrimination). This is what Deuteronomy 1:39 is about.

Sin is a choice. The doctrine of original sin says man is a sinner by nature and not by choice, but the Bible does not teach this. Consider these verses. In Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Moses told the Israelites they had a choice. “See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil...I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore *choose* life...”

Later, Joshua said to the Israelite people, “And if it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...” (Josh. 24:15). Moses himself made a choice: “By faith Moses, when he came of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin” (Heb. 11:24-25).

How can anyone read these verses and say we do not have free will? How can anyone think that babies and little children, through no fault of their own, are born in sin and are an abomination before God?

Sin by its very nature involves choice. Sin is neither a defective state nor infection passed down from Adam. In the words of I John 3:4, “sin is lawlessness.” Sin is rebellion against the law of God; it is the transgression of the will of God. Sin is something you commit or *do*, not something you inherit.

Each person is responsible for his own actions, either good or bad. James said “each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin...” (James 1:14-15). We are responsible for our own sins, not the sins of others.

Ezekiel 18 is a powerful chapter on free will. In verses 5-9, he describes a just man who does what is lawful and right and shuns evil. But in verses 10-13, that same man has a son who is just the opposite of his father. He is evil, and he was not bad because he was born depraved. He was evil by choice just like his father was good by choice. This evil son robbed, committed adultery, and served idols. Babies and little children don’t do these things. They don’t even desire to do them. And, they don’t have an inherited propensity to sin that is like a ticking time bomb. This evil son was evil because he *chose* evil. That is what verse 13 means when it says, “His blood shall be upon him.” He and he alone is responsible for his spiritual condition.

Then there is a third generation in Ezekiel 18:14-17. Remember, this is the son of the evil man in verses 10-13 and the grandson of the good man in verses 5-9. What kind of man did he become? He became what he chose to be, just as all of us do. This son in verse 14 “sees all the sins which his father has done, and considers but does not do likewise.” This is an encouraging verse. It gives hope to children raised in bad homes by mean parents. The son in verse 14 saw what his father did and thought about it. He decided not to be like his father. “Like father, like son” is a proverb that is often true, but not always, especially in moral decisions.

The prophet then responds to the Jews. “Yet you say, ‘why should the son not bear the guilt of the father?’” (v.19). The answer is, “Because the son has done what is lawful and right.” Again, the emphasis is on what the son had *done*, not how he was *born*. Ezekiel continues, “The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself” (Ezek. 18:20). If there is a verse in the Bible that describes sin as an individual choice rather than an inherited condition, that is it.

But Ezekiel continues. He says a wicked man can turn from his sins (Ezek. 18:21-23). Then he says a righteous man can turn to evil (Ezek. 18:24). Then he restates these courses of behavior in verses 26-28. The point of all this was the house of Israel. They were in Babylonian captivity. They said it was not fair for God to punish them for what their fathers did. But Ezekiel told them they were in Babylon because of their own sins which they chose of their own will. And, he said they could use that same will to turn back to God. God told them, “Repent, and turn from all your transgressions” (Ezek. 18:30). Does that sound like they had a sinful nature that prevented them from turning to God of their own accord?

Calvinists can deny it all they want, but their theology is unjust and unbiblical. It is the height of injustice to blame someone for a wrong he didn't commit. The great book of Romans, which is often twisted to teach hereditary depravity and unconditional election, stresses in the early part of the book that God "will render to each one according to *his deeds*" (Rom 2:6). Paul also said in II Corinthians 5:10, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that *each one* may receive the things done in *his* body, according to what *he* has *done*, whether good or bad." Revelation 20:13 says, "And they were judged, each one according to *his works*." The Bible teaches individual responsibility for the commission of sin, not universal inheritance of a condition of sin.

As we stated in the beginning, this discussion is about the traditional Augustinian/Calvinistic version of original sin. Many Protestants, and even some Calvinistic/Reformed preachers, have moderated on this doctrine. It would be hard to find anyone today who believes, as Augustine did, that an unbaptized infant who dies will not go to heaven. But modern Catholics and Protestants still hold to the basic aspects of this old doctrine. And since it is not a biblical doctrine, it has led them to adopt other false beliefs and practices:

1. Catholics offer sacraments to give grace to worshippers — the grace that Adam lost.
2. Protestants say the only way to get back this grace is by faith alone which happens when the Holy Spirit regenerates the sinful nature.
3. Many say we cannot understand the Bible because of original sin and we must therefore have the illumination of the Spirit.
4. Catholics say original sin keeps us from interpreting the Bible correctly, and, as a result, only the Catholic Magisterium can declare the true meaning of Scripture.
5. Many Protestants believe in "once saved always saved" or the impossibility of falling from grace. Why? Because original sin says since we did not choose to be sinners, we can't choose to be saved. And, if we didn't do anything to *be* saved to begin with, then we can't do anything to *remain* saved.
6. Some in the Wesleyan tradition believe in "Entire Sanctification" or a "second work of grace." This is a work of the Holy Spirit that supposedly completely removes the roots of original sin that still remain after a person "gets saved." It is not a common view, but it is just one more false belief that flows from the common source of all these errors: the doctrine of original sin.

These are just a few of the far-reaching consequences of this doctrine. Ironically, it is the false doctrine of original sin that has actually been passed down from generation to generation.

But, as we have seen, each person decides to accept or reject it.