

ORIGINAL SIN

By

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FOREWORD

We are indebted to A. W. Stephenson, Principal Emeritus, for this concise, deliberate statement.

A. W. Stephenson, a former editor of Austral Graded Lessons and the Australian Christian, has retired from the principalship of the Woolwich Bible College after twenty years in office.

"A. W." is a man of deep insight for the Word of God--with a scholarly background. He has shaped the lives of many ministers, missionaries and Christian workers.

We pay tribute to his leadership and deep devotion to Christ as we publish this important statement.

What he says here has far reaching implications for all thinking Churchmen.

Bruce Armstrong.
For the Publishers
ESSAY COMPOSITION

Why was the practice of baptizing infants introduced into the church?

It goes back to a view of some early church teachers that babies were born sinners. To save them from eternal damnation and to give them the benefits of baptism, it was urged that infants ought to be baptized. This doctrine of children being born sinners had been accepted without any real justification. One false teaching introduced another. If we search the scriptures we shall find no teaching urging that children be baptized. There is no commandment to that end. There is no example of an infant being baptized. To try and justify this custom, some have urged that, in the baptism of households referred to in the Book of Acts we have grounds for such action. A scholar like Karl Barth, who belonged to a communion that practiced infant baptism, declared that it was a very poor basis for such a doctrine and he rejected the custom as unscriptural.

We now set out the teaching which we find in the Bible concerning the state of a new-born child in the sight of God. We shall quote from the Jerusalem Bible and refer to some of the notes given in that Bible. It will show just what some scholars have to say, despite the practices in the churches.

God Set Men Limits in Behavior

God made man good in His sight. Man lived in harmony and in fellowship with God. God desired the best life possible for man. He sought to warn him of dangers that could destroy man. Man was given the freedom to eat of all the fruit that grew about him: that is all that was good for him. But one exception was made. He was not to eat of the, fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In other words, God set a limit on what man may do.

In this story of man's creation which comes to us from the Book of Genesis, we are presented with the rules of the moral life that man ought to live in God's sight.

There would have been many experiences that would have warned man that his freedom to act is limited. If he came to fire, he would learn not to touch it, otherwise he would suffer physical pain. Other experiences in life would have brought him pleasure, and these could be enjoyed. But such actions that bring pain and pleasure are not the same as those that involve moral action and decision. A dog can learn to perform actions so as to avoid pain and to gain pleasure. A little child, even a baby, may likewise be trained to respond to calls that bring pleasure or to react against sounds that warn of danger and some painful experience. But this, while being good for training, and is essential, is not what is to be classed as moral action. The moral decision requires a knowledge of a choice that involves what is right or wrong.

The Nature of Man's Being Calls for a Moral Law.

A moral act is not always what a man thinks is right or wrong, but it is what God has laid down as right or wrong for the well-being of man. God's rules are for the advantage of man in the long run. It may also be what men in general, because of their past experience and relationship with God, have laid down to be right or wrong, and which the individual's own conscience approves as being right or wrong. A standard is set before man: it is a standard that has its roots in God and in the holiness of God. Because man comes from God and is God's child, he must act in harmony with the high state of his origin. This standard of moral life may come to man by direct revelation or indirectly by man's use of his divine gift of reasoning and in co-operation with other men.¹ The moral life is what is imposed on man because of his divine nature: it is what God requires of man. No man can live to himself, separated from God completely, or from other men, and live satisfactorily.

Man is a being who comes from God and belongs to God and is responsible to God and is to return to God to give an account of his deeds before God. While man is free and may choose whether he goes God's way or not, nevertheless he will be held responsible

before God and is under obligation before God to go God's way, even if he chooses not to go that way.

There is a Need for *Knowledge of Law*.

A person cannot be held responsible for an action if there is no law given to him to act this way or that. Adam and Eve were told what the limits were of their actions in the Garden. It was clear that they were forbidden to eat of one of the trees in the Garden, but they disregarded the instruction, and listened to the reasonings of one who suggested that the consequences would not be as it had been told them. They thought they could do what they were told *not* to do, and get away with it.

It is clear they were both well aware of what they ought to do and ought not to do. They knew the rules. They disobeyed the commands and they thought they could escape the consequences laid down by God. They tried to reason a way out of the consequences laid down by God. They deceived themselves and thought that the results would not come on them as God had set out. This is the way men still try to justify their actions when they act foolishly and sinfully today. They try to make black look white, and to make the evil look good in their sight.

The consequences that followed this sin of Adam and Eve are very evident. Not only did they suffer, but their children also suffered. This suffering of the children was a *consequence* of the parents' sin and not of the children's.

We must not confuse the *act* of sin with the *results* of sin. While Adam and Eve sinned, and were guilty of the act, their children suffered the consequence, or results, of the sin of the parents, even before they were old enough to decide between what is right or wrong. However, the children cannot be held guilty for the actions of the parents, even if they do suffer for them.

No Law, No Sin.

Paul has laid down the rule that, where there is no law, there is no sin.² The law is given to reveal to man the sin that is in their action. So the law may be considered good in that it reveals to men what is evil. Paul declared that there was a time when he did not know the law.³ Under such a condition of life, he could not be convicted of sin: he then lived a life of innocence. At what period of Paul's life could this have been? We are told very clearly that Paul was a Pharisee and was trained in all the ways of the law. He was brought up a Jew and was aware of the law from the early days of his life. He had been circumcised on the eighth day. He was from birth brought up in a circle where the law was respected.

While this is very clear, nevertheless, he claims that there was a time in his life when he was not aware of the law. Since, according to Paul where there is no law, there is no sin, there was a period of his life when he was not under law and so not a sinner. This must have been at the time of his infancy and before he became aware of the law, then immediately sin sprang up.⁴

Paul Points to His Childhood's Innocency.

Paul, then, on his own argument sets out clearly the innocency of his early childhood. This fact must be kept in mind when he writes of the sin of Adam and the human race.

At that point Paul is aware of that fact. For he claims that while all are sinners, it is due to the fact that *each* person, once he comes to the knowledge of the law and then fails to keep it, becomes a sinner.⁵ When each of us reaches that point in life, we each sin. It is then our own decision. We can blame no other than ourselves. No doubt the bias to sin is there, but until we sin, we cannot be accounted as sinners. The sin that is in the world is the sin of each person who sins at the time he reaches the age of moral discretion. Every one sins, and none remains perfect, so all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.

Jesus and Little Children.

What Paul has declared is also made clear by the teaching of Jesus. When little children were being brought to him, the disciples set out to turn them away. But Jesus took action and said, "Do not forbid the children to come to me, for of such is the kingdom of heaven." At another time he set a little child in the midst of his disciples and said, "Verily I say unto you, Except you be converted, and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."

If men need to accept the humility of a little child so as to enter into the kingdom of heaven, then the child must be acknowledged as still in the kingdom of heaven. He has not yet left the Father's home, like the prodigal son. Only when the child has taken the decision to leave the Father's home is there need for him to again come to himself and to return home and to become again as a little child in humility and spirit.

James has made it clear what sin is and when it takes place. He wrote, "To him that *knows* to do good and does it not, to him it is sin." James 4:17. Sin requires *knowledge* of what is good and then the act of refusing to do what he knows is good. The child must come to the time in his experience when he becomes aware of the difference between good and evil and to come to know what is good.

This behavior must not be confused with the child's reaction to what brings pain or pleasure. This is nothing less than a kind of reflex action of the natural being. Even a fish can be taught to act in response to what brings it pain or pleasure. The moral act comes at a time of moral discretion and at an age when the meaning of what is right or wrong has become clear. Thus the child becomes aware of sin and then knows of the need to seek forgiveness and salvation.

Need of Forgiveness When There is Consciousness of Sin.

When Peter was asked by the Jews on the day of Pentecost what they must do to be saved, Peter replied, "You must repent and every one of you must be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children, and for those who are far away, for all those whom the Lord our God will call to himself."⁶ The promise that the Lord would forgive the sins of those who were present before Peter if they repented and were baptized could be claimed by their children if they too fulfilled the same conditions. The children would need to be somewhat mature to meet the conditions laid down.

Where There is No Sin: No Need for Forgiveness.

Innocent children are not in need of baptism because they have no sin to be forgiven. Children are not in need of baptism until they have reached the age of a knowledge of good or evil and when they have chosen evil. They need no baptism until they are sinners.

We must not confuse the *consequences* of the parents' sin with the parents' act of sin and its guilt. The parents' guilt is not passed on: it remains the burden of the parents. The parents are the sinners, and are responsible for the consequences of the sin passing on to the children. The young child is free from the parents' guilt. When the child, facing the moral challenge of the moral life, then, like each one of us, fails to live up to what he knows to be right, then he sins. He then has the sense of guilt and feels the need of the forgiveness of sin. Then it is that he must repent and turn to the Lord. This repentance and turning to the Lord are both set out dramatically in the act of baptism. This baptism is a death and burial of the old life and a rising to a new life in Christ.

Those who put forward the claim that children are sinners at birth and because their parents have sinned and because they are part of

the race of Adam, present passages of scripture from the Old Testament. The quotations are usually taken from the Psalms. David, after his sin with Bathsheba, seeks to excuse his actions by blaming his bias toward sin from the time of his birth. He does say that "I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me." The point that David is making is that his mother was a sinner. In that background of sin he was brought up. The alternate reading for the passage supports this view very strongly. Instead of reading that it was in sin his mother *conceived* him, it is "*warmed*" him. We may now read the passage: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother *warm* me."

This background of sin does have some bearing on the nature of a child; it may set the bias toward sin, but that is a far cry from declaring that the infant is a guilty sinner, even before birth. To support such an argument some quote from Genesis 8:21. In this passage it is said that God has declared that a man's heart is evil from ... The Jerusalem Bible gives the word "*infancy*" but the Authorized and the Revised Standard versions translate the word "*Youth*." This makes it clear that a "man's heart is evil from "*Youth*," at a time when the individual is able to make a moral decision. This implies that a "man's heart is evil from youth", but before this he is innocent. This is in accord with what we have stated throughout this study.

There is one other passage we ought to consider before making our final statement. This is found in Psalm 58:3. If we are to follow the rules of exegesis, we must interpret a doubtful passage in the light of all other relevant passages. If this is so then we can say David was speaking of certain people who had a bias for sin from the beginning, and, at the time of moral perception and understanding, this bias for sin moved them to live a life of falsehood. They were not false, until they decided to be false.

Whatever interpretation we place on this passage and others like it, we must now understand them in the light of the pronouncement of the great prophets--Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Their statements make it clear that, whatever others have said in past days they must now be understood in the light of the higher and clearer revelation now

given. Just as the Old Testament teachings must be understood in the light of the New Testament truths, so the late and more mature teaching of the prophets must be taken as the fuller instruction that God is giving to men.

Prophets Point to the Error in Teaching that a Child is Born a Sinner.

The prophet Ezekiel deals with the question and makes it very clear in Chapter 18 of his book, that "the man who has sinned is the one who must die, a son is not to suffer for the sins of the father, nor the father for the sin of his son." Each man is held responsible for his own sin. If men repent of the sins they have committed even the sins which he has knowingly done, then the Lord will forgive him. This forgiveness is made possible by the death of Christ who has died for the sin of the world. The Lord does not desire that anyone perish. All may repent and all may be saved. "Repent, and live," said Ezekiel. The note in the Jerusalem Bible on this passage is: "Not only is a man not burdened with the guilt of his forefathers, but he can escape the burden of his own sin. Here the idea of individual, and not *collective*, obedience is clearly stated. It is a man's present dispositions, and these only that determine the judgment of God."

There was a saying used by the people of the day which the prophets now consider false; "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." Both Jeremiah (Chap. 31:29) and now Ezekiel (Chap. 18) declare this to be false. Both have come down clearly on the side of truth: "The man who has sinned, he is the one who shall die." Jeremiah makes the same truth clear. "Each is to die for his own sin. Every man who eats unripe grapes is to have his own teeth set on edge." An innocent child is not to be held guilty for the acts of the fathers. The child, when old, will be held responsible for his own sins.

Conclusion.

Why let the false doctrines of some early church teachers determine the Biblical and Christian view of baptism? Why not accept the New Testament teaching that a man who sins must be born again? Before we enter the church we must be converted; that is, born of the Spirit of God. Only when we see the foundation of the church as being centered in Christ and those who are born into the life of Christ members of the church, then only' can we expect the church to serve a's the Lord requires. Entry into the church ought to be for each member an experience that may be *remembered*, and entry into Christ ought to-be a spiritual experience of great significance.

1. The prophets of the Old Testament have come down on the side of the truth that each person is responsible for his own sin. A man is not condemned because of the sin of his father. The old saying that the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge is now no longer true. Each is to die for his own sin. Every man who eats unripe grapes is to have his own teeth set on edge and the children will not suffer for the father's action. The children are not to be considered sinners because their fathers were sinners.

2. Paul has pointed out that he was once in a state when he was not under the law. But when he became aware of the law, then he sinned. Each person, when he comes to the time of moral understanding sins so that all men become sinners at that time.

3. Jesus has said: "Suffer the little children to come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of God."

We must not confuse original sin with say, original guilt. While all suffer as a result of the consequences of Adam's sin, *none inherits the original guilt of Adam*. A child may suffer the consequence of a Father's foolishness of a Father's sin but the child cannot be held guilty of that Father's sin.

A father carries the burden while the child may suffer from the consequences of his sin. The child although suffering the physical disability does not carry the guilt of the Father. He may blame the father for his sin but be free from any sense of guilt as far as the father's sin is concerned.

In Romans 5:12-18 Paul tells us that by the deed of one, sin came into the world and by that act death passed on to all Adam's children. But the free gift of grace was also brought into the world by ONE and by that ONE all shall be made righteous. However, it is clear that such righteousness does not pass on of itself *but* only if a person is accepted before God by faith and by direct and personal participation in Christ. We may argue that to gain grace because of Christ's act we must have faith; then to suffer from the pangs of guilt we must sin as Adam sinned and participate in sin. If we share in sin and guilt we must participate in a personal act in order to gain the free gift of grace.

The sin of the first Adam did not pass on of itself any more than salvation passes on of itself from the second Adam.

4. This makes it clear that sin is not inherited from the fathers. Each must be held responsible for his own sin only. Children are not born sinners but may have a bias to sin. They are not sinners until they sin. Until they sin, they are not in need of forgiveness nor of baptism.

¹ *Romans 2:14,15*

² *Romans 5:13*

³ *Romans 7:9*

⁴ *Romans 7:9 (See Jerusalem Bible Translation)*

⁵ *Romans 5:12, "for this reason that everyone has sinned" J. B.*

⁶ *Acts 2:38*