

# Herald

ANTIPAS

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No 4

## ORIGINAL SIN

*The key to understanding the gospel*

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### THE FACT AND ORIGIN OF SIN

❑ Sin is a universal fact. It is the daily experience of every person who has ever lived, anywhere on earth. There is no exception. This is taught by the Bible and confirmed by our own experience and observation. And because this is true, all people die, "for the wages of sin is death ..." (Rom 6:23). ['Death' in the Bible, of course means more than just physical death.]

❑ How then are we to understand this? What is the origin of sin? The key to these questions is to be found in the Biblical doctrine of *Original Sin*.

*Original Sin is the effect of Adam's sin on each of his descendants (therefore all people), independent of and prior to any action or failure on their part. It includes both **guilt** and the **corruption**.*

❑ The Bible clearly teaches this doctrine: Rom 3:9-20 and 5:12-19 are perhaps the clearest, but see also Gen 6:5-6, 11; 8:21; 1 Kings 8:46; Ps 14; 51:7; 53; 143:2; Eccl 7:20; Jer 17:9; Mark 7:21; 1Cor 15:21-22; Gal 3:22; Eph 2:1-3; 1John 5:19.

### GUILT

❑ Here we are concerned with the

*guilt* of man before God - with his liability to punishment. One way of explaining the connection between Adam's sin and that of his descendants, is to think in terms of mankind as being in his loins, as it were, when he sinned. This is called the natural or realistic theory. A better way of explaining the connection is probably the federal or representative theory. According to this view Adam acted as the covenant head of mankind, representing each and every person before God.

All Adam's descendants are therefore 'co-responsible' for the Fall. They are equally guilty in God's sight, and equally punishable.

❑ We know many similar situations in life. Hitler's actions in the thirties and forties, for instance, plunged the entire German people into chaos. Parents with an immoral lifestyle may be the cause of their children being born HIV-positive. It is a simple fact of life that babies are often born into miserable situations caused by others.

❑ In the same way every person is born into a terrible condition - as a member of mankind under the wrath of God (Eph 2:3). Nobody likes the thought. Many have tried to deny it, ignore it or explain it away, but that is what the Bible teaches - unashamedly!

Adam's *guilt* is *imputed* ('debited') to all people. This is a *forensic* or legal problem.

❑ Anybody offended by the foregoing should be careful, for God's entire plan of salvation rests on the principle of imputation: *Adam's sin is imputed to me; my sin is imputed to Christ; His righteousness is in turn imputed to me.*

### NATURAL CORRUPTION

❑ This has to do with man's inherent depravity, his moral pollution. Every descendant of Adam is born with a morally distorted nature. He therefore has an inborn inclination to go against the Law and the will of God. This makes him a *rebel* before his Creator. Moreover, he is incapable of complying with God's will and standards. This makes him a *failure* before the Lord.

❑ Here we have an irrefutable fact of life. It is true universally, and through all ages. Even in babies it is unmistakable: 'Mine!' 'No!' 'Give!' 'I Won't!' (Ps 58:3).

It is like a negative characteristic genetically passed on from one generation to the next. Everybody is born with it. Nobody can escape it.

The *corruption* due to Adam's sin is therefore *imparted* to his descendants.

This is a *moral* problem.

### ACTUAL SIN

❑ This term denotes those sins which proceed from original sin and which the individual actually and personally performs. This means that personal guilt is continually added to imputed guilt.

Actual sin manifest over the whole spectrum of personality and life: outwardly and inwardly; in thought, speech and deed; in emotions, motives and attitudes; in commission and omission.

### TOTAL DEPRAVITY

Man is therefore *totally depraved*. This does not mean that he is as depraved as he can be, but rather that *no part of his being, personality or life is free from the effects of the fall*. The image of God has not been totally erased (Gen 9:6), but is terribly cracked and distorted.

Even worse, man is spiritually deaf and blind. Ever since the fall he no longer hears and sees the things of God (1Cor 2:14; 2Cor 4:3-4). He has no desire for them, but rather loathes them. Without the grace of the Holy Spirit, he has no true sense of sin (Joh 16:8-11) and he will never come to true faith in Christ (Acts 16:14). He is spiritually dead (Eph 2:1).

❑ Is Rom 3:9-20 (especially the

recurrent expressions 'no one' and 'all') not too merciless in its condemnation of man?

A typical reaction to this would be, "There are so many wonderful people! Of course nobody is perfect, but there is some good, even in the worst of men!"

To man it is quite repulsive that the Bible holds him in such low esteem. That is why Luther says of him: "*His ultimate sin is his unwillingness to admit that he is a sinner.*" Yet it is necessary to understand just why Scripture is so categorical in its judgment of man.

\* What is the greatest sin? Robbery, murder, adultery, blasphemy, unbelief? Well, which is the greatest commandment? The summary of the Ten Commandments states quite clearly: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength". Furthermore: "Love your neighbour as yourself." (Deut 6:4-5; Mark 12:28-31). It is therefore logical that the transgression of the most important commandment must also rank as the greatest sin.

What then, is the greatest sin? It is *failing to love God with your total being and your neighbour as yourself*. And in this nobody ever succeeds! Never!

Or, to take a more positive approach, in order for a good work to

meet God's standards, it has to proceed from a heart filled with perfect love for God and neighbour (1Cor 13:1-3). This is why the Bible emphasises the importance of the heart's attitude so strongly. This is exactly what the Sermon on the Mount wants to bring home (Matt 5-7). But who can claim this to be true of himself?

Since nobody has a perfect heart, nobody can perform a perfect deed.

\* This does not mean that we cannot please God. The Heidelberg Catechism is profoundly Scriptural: *Good works are those done from true faith, according to the law of God, and to His glory.*

However, to please God is one thing (and from the above it is clear that only a true Christian can do that); but to be *perfect* is something totally different.

God's 'pass mark' for perfection is always one hundred percent - and not to attain this mark, is to fail! Always remember: God is perfect, and so are His standards.

### SOME IMPLICATIONS

❑ J.I. Packer is correct when he says: "*The subject of sin is vital knowledge. To say that our first need in life is to learn about sin may sound strange, but in the sense intended it is profoundly true. If you have not*

*learned about sin, you cannot understand yourself, or your fellow-men, or the world you live in, or the Christian faith. And you will not be able to make head or tail of the Bible. For the Bible is an exposition of God's answer to the problem of human sin ..."* (God's Words, p. 71).

□ The only answer to this inescapable and fatal misery of man is indeed the redemptive work of Christ alone. Exactly this is what makes the gospel the best news on earth.

He who does not understand the doctrine of original sin, can therefore not have a proper understanding of the gospel. The heart of him who never recognises and fights the stranglehold of this universal moral cancer, can never glow and overflow with gratitude for God's love. A proper appreciation of God's sovereign grace for sinners is only possible against the dark backdrop of natural man's total depravity and complete moral helplessness.

Without a doubt inadequate understanding and conviction of sin is at the root of the lukewarm apathy so prevalent in the contemporary church. After all, "... he who has been forgiven little loves little." (Luk 7:47).

One of the most precious words in Scripture is the short little word '*but*'. In a sense one can say that it is

the hinge of salvation! Several times the Apostle Paul uses it to express the contrast between the hopeless depravity of natural man, and the glorious grace of God in the lives of regenerated men and women in Christ.

\* Rom 3:9-20: Natural man is in a hopeless situation. *But*: Rom 3:21-31!

\* Eph 2:1-3: Natural man is spiritually *dead* (1); he is a *slave* to the world, the devil and the flesh (2-3a); he is under the *wrath* of God (3b). *But*: Eph 2:4-10!

\* Col 1:21: Natural man is an enemy of God. *But*: Col 1:22!

\* Tit 3:3: Natural man is helplessly trapped in a swamp of sin. *But*: Tit 3:4-7!

□ Few things underline Biblical inspiration and authority more clearly than the universal reality of sin. Where else can a satisfactory explanation be found for this tragic fact of life?

Yet the doctrine of original sin and the total depravity of natural man causes embarrassment, even offence in many Christian circles. It is unfortunately a human tendency to pretend God to be less than He is, and to over-inflate the stature of man.

Fact is, however, that disregard

or neglect of this doctrine, lies at the root of a thousand deceptions and heresies.

\* One of the most alarming, even fatal practices arising from the disregard of total depravity, is the superficial approach to evangelism adopted by many contemporary Christians. Because they accept that fallen man has the natural ability to choose for or against Christ, they use every conceivable technique - just to get people to accept a 'hat in hand Christ' into their lives. Like unscrupulous salesmen, they emphasise only the positive aspects of the gospel, and keep quiet about anything which might not be acceptable to their listeners. The result is that in the process they 'abolish the offence of the cross' (Gal. 5:11). In this way a cheap gospel is strung together, filling the church with unconverted people who thrive on a diet of 'gospel showbiz'.

Certainly we must urge sinners to repent and accept Christ, and certainly the personal responsibility of man and the importance of his will in the process, must never be overlooked; but we must always remember that the Holy Spirit alone can bring a sinner to repentance. And He does so through the true gospel.

Only by firmly holding to these truths can the pitfalls of a 'syrupy gospel' be avoided. In fact, because the evangelist knows that 'all who are

appointed for eternal life will believe' (Acts 13:48), he can confidently preach an undiluted and radical gospel.

\* Another disquieting tendency which has gained a worldwide foothold over the past few decades, is to replace the Biblical gospel with some form of 'christianised' psychology. It traces, in a simplistic way, virtually all personality and behavioural problems back to traumatic experiences, often in a person's youth. The outcome is that the sinner is often not told to repent, but that he is a victim of circumstances - very often injustices and ill-treatment by other people. This misplaced sympathy suggests that his behaviour is not only in order, but inevitable. In stead of the Biblical emphasis on sin, the focus now is on wounds. The villain becomes the victim. And a fatal result follows: no sense of sin, no repentance, no gratitude, no loving obedience - no salvation!

□ Because of the reality of sin in their lives, most people are concerned to find a remedy for it. And this search lies at the root of the universal phenomena of human morality and religion.

Typically man-made religion comes to expression in human endeavour to transcend moral corruption through religious or cultic

do's and don'ts. In the process man hopes to pacify and please his creator, and ultimately to inherit life after death. This has resulted through the ages in the terrible bondage of billions - causing deluded men and women to spend a lifetime in slavery on the futile treadmill of personal spiritual merit.

But fallen man simply cannot free himself from the bondage of sin. He does not have the ability to pull himself up by his own shoestrings.

Only the Christian gospel carries the true message of deliverance: *The answer to man's terrible dilemma is not to be found in his climbing up to God. Religion is a ladder leading nowhere. No, there is but one hope - that God would bend down to man. And this is exactly what He did - in Christ Jesus, His own Son!*

The distinction between man-made religion (and this includes 'churchianity') and the Christian faith is simple, but vital: *human merit versus divine grace*. And this makes all the difference in the world - and in heaven!

❑ The doctrine of original sin makes it clear: there is no ultimate hope in peace negotiations, democracy, economic reform, education or research. While these things may be good and necessary, they will never bring about the Utopia for which man has been searching since the Fall.

❑ Without the Bible, God's particular revelation, we shall never recognize sin for what it really is. *Sin is defined by the Creator, not by the creature.*

\* Sin is *status* and *nature* before it is act or omission. It goes much deeper, therefore, than the problems, the mere symptoms, of 'violence', or 'crime', or 'drug abuse', or whatever.

Sin is, first of all, a *status* before our Creator. Man, no I personally, was guilty before a holy God even before I took my first breath. Sin is also a *nature* - a natural inclination, an inborn disability. It is, as it were, a 'genetic heart ailment', transmitted from one generation to the next.

Only thereafter does sin become either an act or an omission.

We sin because we are sinners - we are not sinners because we sin.

❑ Sin cannot be in structures without first being in *people*. What this means is that I myself am a more serious problem in this world than any social disease or economic policy or political system. Social structures, after all, are made up of people - and their nature is determined by those people. Therefore, if men and women do not change, any change in the structure can be little more than cosmetic. And people? How do they change? There is only one way: *their*

*hearts must be changed.*

This is why it is so tragic that large portions of the church have forsaken its most glorious calling, that of preaching Christ as the only Mediator between the holy God and fallen man (1Tim 2:5). Only the gospel can bring about true change in a sinner - making him part, no longer of the problem, but of the solution (Rom 1:16-17; 1Cor 1:21; 2Thess 2:14; James 1:18; 1Pet 1:23). But changing structures, per se, does not address the real problem - the depraved heart of natural man. Apart from the preaching of the gospel, an obsession with social structures is but the moving of chairs on Titanic decks.

Because the apostles understood this, they could hardly find time for that which is good - they were too busy giving their all for that which is supreme. Read the New Testament: they had one passion - to preach the gospel. And they had one message: Jesus Christ, and Him crucified! (1Cor 1:23;2:2).



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