

“Basic Truth” series, #5

Understanding the Fall of Man¹

By Daryl Wingerd

Adam and Eve were the only two human beings (apart from Christ) to enter into life with a will that was truly free. Unlike every one of their descendants, they alone began life with the *ability* to reflect God’s holiness—the *ability* to remain sinless. But things soon changed for the worse.

The Fall of Man

God granted Adam and Eve free access to a rich variety of fruit with only one restriction. They were not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God assured Adam that if he ate the fruit of that one tree, he would die (Genesis 2:17). As we all know, the serpent deceived Eve by tempting her to doubt God’s character and His word (Genesis 3:1). Then, he called God a liar (Genesis 3:4-5). Trusting Satan’s word over God’s, Eve ate the forbidden fruit.

At what point did Eve sin? During a discussion of the Fall of Man, a perceptive young girl asked her pastor if it were sinful to doubt God’s goodness and truthfulness. The pastor assured her that such doubt is indeed sinful, because it calls God’s perfect character and infallible Word into question, even if only in the mind. It is a form of private, mental blasphemy, the pastor said. The girl responded by saying that it seemed to her that Eve sinned *before* she ate the forbidden fruit, because in order to do so, she first had to distrust God. The pastor had to agree. The eating of the fruit was the *overt* action most commonly thought of as the Fall of Man. But the Fall really began *covertly*, in a place much deeper than Eve’s eyes or taste buds. It began in her heart.

Adam as Our Representative—the Doctrine of Original Sin

The theological term “original sin” may be somewhat misleading in that it does not refer to the first *act* of sin. It refers rather to the *results* of that act. Though Eve sinned first, God designated Adam as the representative for mankind. By his sin, Adam brought death into the world (cf. Romans 5:12; 1 Corinthians 15:22). Because of this, the mortality rate among humans stands at a consistent 100%. We all die.

Having sinned against God, Adam also became unholy, guilty, and unavoidably prone to sin. The formerly clear image of God in him was suddenly and terribly marred. Since then it is as if Adam’s spiritual DNA passes from one generation to the next, causing all people to bear this sad resemblance to their first father. We can see this through the Bible’s

consistent descriptions of every one of Adam’s descendants (cf. Genesis 6:5; Romans 3:10-12, 23).

People do not *become* sinners when they sin; they sin because they are sinners “by nature” (Romans 5:19; Ephesians 2:1-3). Just as a newborn baby rattlesnake possesses lethal poison and instinctively knows how to coil and strike, human beings naturally behave according to the sinful nature they inherited from Adam (cf. Psalm 51:5; 58:3).

Our sinful nature is not all we inherited from Adam. We also inherited his guilt. In Romans 5:12-19, Paul teaches Christians about Christ’s representative act on their behalf and the imputation of His righteousness. He also describes Adam’s representative act of sin as an inverse but parallel truth. “Therefore, as through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men resulting in justification of life” (v. 18).

Paul clearly says that it was the *one* man’s offense that resulted in *all* men being made sinners and condemned. In verse 16, Paul writes, “the judgment that came from one offense resulted in condemnation.” *One single sin* resulted in the condemnation of the entire human race. And since only guilty people can be condemned by a just God, it becomes clear that *one single sin* resulted in the *guilt* of the entire human race. Just as Christ’s perfect obedience results in wonderful consequences for all who are *in Him*—that is, all believers, Adam’s sinful disobedience resulted in shameful consequences for all who were *in him*—that is, all of humanity.

The verse that explains this most clearly is Romans 5:12—“Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, *because all sinned* . . .” (emphasis added). Paul did not write, “because all *sin*,” (indicating a present and ongoing reality). He did not write, “because all *will sin*” (indicating something in the future). He wrote, “because all *sinned*,” referring to something that occurred in the past. We were all, in a sense, *in Adam* when he sinned, and therefore *we all actually sinned*.

If Paul were saying that our condemnation is based solely on *our own sins*—those we commit during our lives—then his parallel between Adam and Christ makes no sense unless our justification is based solely on *our own* righteousness. If God cannot justly condemn based on the imputed guilt of our sinful representative, Adam, neither can He justly reward based on the imputed righteousness of our perfect Representative, Christ. If we are willing to accept the reward of Christ’s imputed righteousness, we must also accept the pain and shame of Adam’s imputed guilt and condemnation.

¹ This material adapted from the commentary section of the catechism for Christ Fellowship of Kansas City entitled, *Questions and Answers for Learning and Living the Christian Faith*, Copyright © 2004, Christ Fellowship of Kansas City.