



George L. Murphy

## Article

# The Twofold Character of Original Sin in the Real World

George L. Murphy

*The topic of original sin in the context of theology-science discussions has, quite naturally, tended to focus on how this condition might have originated in view of scientific knowledge about early humanity. But that is only one aspect of the doctrine. What is really important for most people is the question of what original sin means today. Here that aspect of the doctrine is considered from a pastoral perspective first. Then I review and clarify what I have suggested in earlier publications about the origins of original sin.*

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### The Two Aspects of "Original Sin"

Here I consider two aspects of the western church's traditional doctrine of original sin.<sup>1</sup> The first is the sinful condition in which each human life begins, *peccatum originale originatum*, "original sin as originated." The second is the origin of that condition at the beginning of the human race, *peccatum originale originans*, "original sin as originating."<sup>2</sup>

In the fifth century, disputes about those matters arose as a result of the teachings of the British monk Pelagius. He held that, in theory, a person could live in accord with God's will by his or her own effort, without the saving grace made available through the death and resurrection of Christ. Augustine, the bishop of Carthage, disagreed, saying that we can be put in a right relationship with God only by that saving grace, not by our own effort. The need for that grace, he said, was due to a sinful condition we were in apart from any actual sins we had

committed, a sin in which our lives originate. That is "original sin originated."

But why do people sin? Pelagius and Augustine went back to Adam, whom they both saw as a historical figure. For Pelagius, Adam set a bad example for us, but we do not have to follow it.<sup>3</sup> For Augustine, Adam's sin brought about a changed human condition, "original sin originating." It was an abrupt "fall" which changed not only the human condition but also the whole terrestrial creation. Whether or not that idea of a radical change brought about when humanity consisted of only a single primordial couple can be reconciled with modern evolutionary understandings of human origins, has been the subject of a great deal of debate.

The first aspect of original sin, however, is what matters for people's lives today and for proper proclamation of the gospel. Our tendency to think that we are pretty decent people and can lead God-pleasing lives if we really try, inclines many to a Pelagian or semi-Pelagian position. In contrast, Augustine's insistence that we are completely dependent upon God for our salvation can seem unattractive.

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There is obvious discord between Augustine's picture of an abrupt "fall" of an initially perfect human couple and the understanding of the condition of early humans that evolution gives us. Those who dislike Augustine's teaching, that our lives today begin in a sinful condition, can focus on that discord to the advantage of Pelagius (who also did not know about evolution). I have referred to that tactic in the past under the heading, "Darwin as a stalking horse for Pelagius?"<sup>4</sup> It is a fallacy because belief that Augustine was right about the present condition of humanity does not mean that we must accept his idea about how that condition got started.

### Original Sin as Originated

The articles concerning original sin in the historic confessions of the churches in which I have served refer to the sin of Adam, but their emphases are on the beginning of each human life in a sinful condition.<sup>5</sup> The eighteenth-century Reformed theologian Jonathan Edwards held an Augustinian view of original sin. Nevertheless, the first chapter of his defense of the doctrine is titled, "The Evidence of Original Sin from What Appears in Fact of the Sinfulness of Mankind."<sup>6</sup>

As a parish pastor, I usually have not given the formal doctrine of original sin a great deal of emphasis. A doctrinal statement does need to be presented in educational settings, and the concept is relevant at some points in worship. In the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, the order for baptism begins by acknowledging that "we are born children of a fallen humanity," and in the opening order for confession and forgiveness, "we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves."<sup>7</sup> In preaching, I don't emphasize the doctrine of original sin for its own sake but address the reality and seriousness of sin in people's lives and in the world. That can be done without any need to talk about something that happened at the dawn of humanity. The law's demand and its condemnation of sin precede the promise of the gospel. In preaching on the story of Eve and Adam's sin in Genesis 3, I make the point that such disobedience to God is and always has been typical human behavior. It is not just a story of the first humans, but the story of all of us, centuries ago and today.

Sin is pictured as a universal human problem in the New Testament. "There is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:22b-23). And though Christ has reconciled us to God and we are justified by faith in him, though we are to consider ourselves "dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:11), Christians still must struggle with sin, as Paul describes in Romans 7:15-25.

Paul's statement that "all have sinned" is not limited to those who have reached a certain "age of accountability." Nor is there any explicit statement in scripture that infants are in a sinful condition. To say of them, as the Augsburg Confession does, that "from birth they are full of evil lust and inclination" is excessive. The continuation of that sentence, that they "cannot by nature possess true fear of God and true faith in God" is more to the point.<sup>8</sup> If a newborn infant can be said to have a god at all, it is the child's mother or father or whoever the primary caregiver is, not the One who got Israel out of Egypt, hung on the cross, and raised Jesus from the dead. The statement from some atheist that I saw years ago, "100% of all babies are born atheists" is not a telling criticism of Christianity, but a reaffirmation of the doctrine of original sin.

Preaching of God's law and its condemnation of sin precedes proclamation of what God has done to deal with sin through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Insistence that we are justified by faith alone means that we cannot put ourselves in a right relationship with God by our own effort or contribute "our share" to the work of Christ. Even being brought to faith is the work of the Holy Spirit, not something we achieve by ourselves. The fact that we are saved entirely by what God does, indicates that unaided humans are in a condition that makes them unable "to fear, love, and trust God above all things," as Luther stated the meaning of the First Commandment in the Small Catechism.<sup>9</sup>

That name of that state is "sin," which includes both our sin of origin and whatever specific sins we commit. "Before sin is an act," Paul Tillich wrote, "it is a state."<sup>10</sup> The problem is more fundamental than the fact that we think and do individual bad things. The

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apostle Paul calls this state that of “the ungodly” in Romans 4:5 and 5:6, designating it as a condition of separation from God.

People sometimes object to this, saying, “I believe that people are basically good.” But this doctrine does not deny that. As sinners, we are still God’s creations and thus fundamentally good. (Augustine said that even the devil was created wholly good by God.<sup>11</sup>) While the Pelagian denial of original sin is a heresy, its diametric opposite, the idea that unsaved sinners are basically evil, is also a heresy, one akin to Manichaeism.<sup>12</sup>

Original sin is a necessary part of a systematic theology, but its practical significance for preaching and pastoral care is not great. The fundamental law-gospel message is, “You are a sinner and Christ is your savior.” Tracing a person’s sinful condition to the beginning of her or his life, let alone to the sin of some remote ancestor, is not likely to play a significant role in that person’s conversion or to provide any help to a person struggling with particular temptations.

### Original Sin as Originating

Given that our lives begin in a sinful state, it is natural to ask how that condition arose. If humans are part of that creation that God saw as “very good” in the beginning, how did we come to be in an “ungodly” state? How did we “go bad”?

The answer that Paul gives in Romans 5:12–24 is “Adam.” The story of the first man, which Paul, of course, knew from the Hebrew scriptures, tells how sin came into the world. We ought to note though that Paul’s attention on this passage is not focused primarily on Adam but on Christ. Karl Barth pointed to that fact when he titled his little book on Romans 5 not *Adam and Christ* but *Christ and Adam*.<sup>13</sup> It is Christ who shows us what genuine humanity is to be.

It is with questions about the origin of human sinfulness, of course, that our topic has become a significant part of science-theology discussions. The development of critical approaches to the study of scripture raised questions about the historical character of early Genesis, and then biological evolution

challenged the pictures of early humanity that we find in Genesis. The real issue that is being debated in this connection, however, is often not original sin but whether or not there was a “historical Adam.”

The traditional picture of human origins in western Christianity is incompatible with what we know about the evolution of humanity.<sup>14</sup> We owe that picture largely to Augustine. In “The City of God,” he poses the question, whether our “first parents ... before they sinned, experienced in their animal body such emotions as we shall not experience in the spiritual body when sin has been purged and finally abolished?” His answer is resoundingly negative.

For who that is affected by fear or grief can be called absolutely blessed? And what could those persons fear or suffer in such affluence of blessings, where neither death nor ill health was to be feared, and where nothing was wanting which a good will could desire, and nothing present which could interrupt man’s mental or bodily enjoyment? [They were, Augustine says,] agitated by no mental perturbations, and annoyed by no bodily discomforts.<sup>15</sup>

Besides being at variance with the picture of early humans that evolution gives, the Bible just does not tell us those things. Even less is there any basis for later speculations like Luther’s about the sharpness of Adam’s eyesight and his tremendous strength, or claims like that of the seventeenth-century English clergyman Robert South that “an Aristotle was but the rubbish of an Adam.”<sup>16</sup>

In the following discussion, we will be concerned with our earliest ancestors to whom God had conveyed some awareness of the divine nature and will, the first humans in a theological sense.<sup>17</sup> We can call them “religiously modern humans,” in analogy with the term “anatomically modern humans” that is commonly used. We need not assume, however, that “religiously modern human” equates to “anatomically modern human.” For the theological model of human development which I have suggested previously and will sketch here, we do not have to specify when they came into being, or how many individuals or groups of such individuals there may have been.<sup>18</sup> But while we may not be able to rule out completely the possibility that all present-day humans

have descended from a single male-female couple, population genetics now seems to make that highly unlikely.<sup>19</sup> There is little to be gained by continuing to insist on a “historical Adam.”

It is important to emphasize that the first religiously modern humans were, along with their primate relatives, products of evolution. Certainly God was acting through the evolutionary process, as God cooperates with created things in all that happens in the world.<sup>20</sup> We need not debate here whether or not God provided some special guidance, perhaps at the quantum level, so that intelligent creatures would have come about. But we do need to resist the suggestion that is sometimes made, that God intervened to, in effect, “clean up” a chosen male-female couple to become Adam and Eve. Such cleansing would simply get rid of what it would mean for these creatures to have come into being through the evolutionary process, something that we will consider later.

I begin with the picture of the first humans sketched by some of the Greek church fathers, a picture significantly different from the corresponding figures of Augustinian theology. Theophilus of Antioch thought that eating from the tree of knowledge had been forbidden because “Adam, being yet an infant in age, was on this account yet unable to receive knowledge worthily.”<sup>21</sup> In a similar vein, Irenaeus wrote, “The man was a young child, not yet having a perfect deliberation” and “It was necessary for him to reach full development by growing in this way.”<sup>22</sup> The Orthodox tradition has generally followed that line of thought, seeing the first humans as immature. As one modern Orthodox theologian puts it,

Orthodoxy, holding as it does a less exalted idea of man’s state before he fell, is also less severe than the West in its view of the consequences of the fall. Adam fell, not from a great height of knowledge and perfection, but from a state of undeveloped simplicity; hence he is not to be judged too harshly for his error.<sup>23</sup>

This picture of the first humans as immature is certainly better than the picture that the western tradition has often drawn. But scientific evidence strongly suggests that those first religiously modern humans were not simply two individuals who had to grow to maturity, but members of a species with

an evolutionary history. (Theophilus with “Adam” and Irenaeus with “the man” clearly had a single individual in mind.) Another of the Greek Fathers, Gregory of Nyssa, did develop what can be called an evolutionary picture of human development, but it is quite different from the modern picture of biological evolution.<sup>24</sup>

We can learn something about the behavior of our prehuman ancestors by studying our closest surviving primate relatives. While cooperation among members of a species is observed, there is also competition, as evolution via natural selection would lead us to expect. Studies of our primate relatives show us that deceit is sometimes practiced among them, sexual promiscuity is not uncommon, and violence, sometimes lethal, is observed.<sup>25</sup> There is no reason to think that the condition of our ancestors’ prehuman ancestors would not have been similar. Of course this raises questions about traditional ideas of what their “original righteousness” was.

Before being given any kind of awareness of God or any hint of the divine will for them, those early humans would not have been sinful, for “sin is not reckoned when there is no law” (Rom. 5:13). But things would be different when they had some knowledge, however dim, of the way God wanted them to live. They were not hardwired for sin, but having the genes of ancestors who through many generations had survived numerous threats from members of their own and other species, and who had succeeded in leaving offspring, would have left them with strong tendencies for some selfish behaviors.

Athanasius, another eastern theologian, did not picture the first humans as children. But neither did he speculate about their properties or abilities. He thought that they would have been subject to natural death, though not corruption. Having been made in God’s image and given a law and residence in God’s own garden, “if they kept the grace and remained good, they might still keep the life in paradise without sorrow or pain or care, besides having the promise of incorruption in heaven.”<sup>26</sup> They were, in a sense, at the beginning of a journey and could follow one of two ways—faithfulness and obedience, or not.

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I have elaborated that idea in a model of human sin and divine salvation.<sup>27</sup>

Given their evolutionary history, Jesus's words about the narrow way that leads to life and the easy one that leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13) are appropriate here. It is not surprising that the earliest religiously modern humans took the easy way. In the words of Reinhold Niebuhr, sin would not have been "necessary," but "inevitable."<sup>28</sup> The "first sin" need not have been anything obviously earthshaking—Athanasius seems to have in view a gradual departure from blessedness rather than an abrupt fall. That is the way the story is told in the early chapters of Genesis—Eve and Adam's disobedience followed by Cain's murder of Abel, Lamech gloating about unlimited vengeance, and the general corruption that leads to the flood. Even after that, God reflects that "the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth" (Gen. 8:21).

There is no "gene for sin." However, those first humans had genomes formed by millennia of evolution which favored abilities and behaviors that were favorable for survival in what was sometimes a brutal environment. They were not abilities and behaviors that were intrinsically sinful, but they could be used in sinful ways. A drive to survive and pass on one's genes can easily get in the way of trusting in God above anything else.

So, in this model, humans wandered away from God and soon became lost. In human societies, there would also have been sinful influences from social environments. We know today how those who are born and grow up in a society with strong racial prejudices can absorb those prejudices. This is not just a matter of a child being affected by one or another "bad influence," but of absorbing sinful attitudes almost with the air that is breathed. The sinful state of humanity is a matter of both nature and nurture.

God, of course, does not give up on his creation. In the biblical story, God begins to bring humanity back into communion with the call of Abram in Genesis 12, and continues that call and formation of a faithful community with Moses and the prophets of Israel. Humanity has wandered away from God and

the people of Israel are often tempted to as well, but God persists. It is significant that the usual Hebrew word for "repent" is *shubh*, "return." "Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart. ... Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Joel 2:12–13).

And finally, God comes in person, not only to issue a definitive call for repentance but to "draw all people to myself" (John 12:32) with the power of his cross and resurrection. Detailed discussion of atonement and salvation are topics for another time. I have treated them in some of the works listed in note 1.<sup>29</sup>

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>For more detailed treatment of what follows, I refer here to previous writings of mine. George L. Murphy, *The Trademark of God: A Christian Course in Creation, Evolution, and Salvation* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1985), chap. 8; \_\_\_\_, "Christology, Evolution, and the Cross," in *Perspectives on an Evolving Creation*, ed. Keith B. Miller (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 370–89; \_\_\_\_, "Roads to Paradise and Perdition: Christ, Evolution, and Original Sin," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 58, no. 2 (2006): 109; \_\_\_\_, "Chiasmic Cosmology and Atonement," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 60, no. 4 (2008): 214; \_\_\_\_, "Human Evolution in Theological Context," *The BioLogos Foundation*, 2010, [https://www.fliedner.es/media/modules/editor/cienciayfe/docs/biologos/murphy\\_scholarly\\_essay.pdf](https://www.fliedner.es/media/modules/editor/cienciayfe/docs/biologos/murphy_scholarly_essay.pdf); \_\_\_\_, *Models of Atonement: Speaking about Salvation in a Scientific World* (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran University Press, 2013); and \_\_\_\_, "Evolution and the 'Original Sins,'" July 6, 2015, <https://biologos.org/series/atonement-and-evolution-a-biologos-conversation/articles/evolution-and-the-original-sins>.

<sup>2</sup>Tatha Wiley, *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meanings* (New York: Paulist, 2002), 5.

<sup>3</sup>Though this cannot be our primary concern now, it would be helpful to devote some discussion to the inevitable distortion that has been produced by the common practice of focusing entirely on "Adam" in connection with original sin, with Eve being brought in to get the blame for the whole mess only after the theological work has been done.

<sup>4</sup>George L. Murphy, "Darwin as a Stalking Horse for Pelagius?," *Lutheran Alliance for Faith, Science and Technology*, March 26, 2012, <https://luthscitech.org/darwin-as-a-stalking-horse-for-pelagius/>.

<sup>5</sup>Article 2 of the Augsburg Confession in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000), 36–38; and Article IX of "Articles of Religion" in *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing, 1986), 869.39.

<sup>6</sup>Jonathan Edwards, "The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 3, ed. Clyde A. Holbrook (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970).

<sup>7</sup>Lutheran Book of Worship (Minneapolis, MN; Augsburg, 1979), 121 and 56.

<sup>8</sup>Kolb and Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord*, 36–38.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 351.

<sup>10</sup>Paul Tillich, “You Are Accepted,” in *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948), 155.

<sup>11</sup>Phillip Cary, “Augustine on Evil,” <https://templeton.eastern.edu/sites/default/files/inline-files/Augustine-on-Evil-by-Dr-Phil-Cary-Dialogue.pdf>, 3–4.

<sup>12</sup>See, e.g., Article 1 of the Formula of Concord’s Solid Declaration, “Concerning Original Sin,” in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Kolb and Wengert, 531–42.

<sup>13</sup>Karl Barth, *Christ and Adam: Man and Humanity in Romans 5* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956).

<sup>14</sup>Murphy, “Roads to Paradise and Perdition;” and \_\_\_\_, *Models of Atonement*; and other references in Miller, *Perspectives on an Evolving Creation*.

<sup>15</sup>Augustine, “The City of God,” Book XIV, chapter 10, 271.

<sup>16</sup>Martin Luther, “Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1–5,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 1 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1958), 62; and A. S. Peake, *Christianity: Its Nature and Its Truth* (London, UK: Duckworth & Co., 1908), 116.

<sup>17</sup>Romans 1:19–20 is relevant here, though we shouldn’t think of those early humans as having a full understanding of God’s power and nature.

<sup>18</sup>See Murphy, “Roads to Paradise and Perdition;” \_\_\_\_, “Human Evolution in Theological Context;” and \_\_\_\_, *Models of Atonement*, chaps. III and IV.

<sup>19</sup>BioLogos Editorial Team, “Adam, Eve, and Human Population Genetics,” BioLogos.org, November 12, 2014, <https://biologos.org/articles/series/genetics-and-the-historical-adam-responses-to-popular-arguments/adam-eve-and-human-population-genetics>.

<sup>20</sup>George L. Murphy, “The Nuts and Bolts of Creation,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 76, no. 1 (2018): 48.

<sup>21</sup>Theophilus of Antioch, “Theophilus to Autolyclus,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers II* (reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 47.

<sup>22</sup>St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *On the Apostolic Preaching* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 1997), 47.

<sup>23</sup>Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1963), 228.

<sup>24</sup>Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Making of Man” in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, vol. 5 (reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 387–427; and George L. Murphy, *The Cosmos in the Light of the Cross* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 114–16.

<sup>25</sup>For example, Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin, *Origins Reconsidered* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), chap. 16; Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan, *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (New York: Random House, 1992), chaps. 14 and 15; and Daryl P. Domning, “A New Interpretation of Original Sin,” in Dr. Daryl P. Domning and Dr. Joseph F. Wimmer, *Evolution and Original Sin: Accounting for Evil in the World*, <https://wasitheocon.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/EvolutionOriginalSin1-corrected.pdf>, 55–72.

<sup>26</sup>Athanasius, “On the Incarnation of the Word,” in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd series, vol. 4 (reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978), 37–39. See also p. lxxi of the *Prolegomena* by Archibald Robertson.

<sup>27</sup>Murphy, “Roads to Paradise and Perdition.”

<sup>28</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1964), 242–43.

<sup>29</sup>See, in particular, Murphy, “Chiasmic Cosmology and Atonement;” \_\_\_\_, *Models of Atonement*; and \_\_\_\_, “Evolution and the ‘Original Sins.’”

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