

MEA CULPA: AN APOLOGY FOR ORIGINAL GUILT¹

by Hans Madueme

Christianity is most thoroughly a *practical* system in the highest and most intimate sense . . . everything in it relates to the great contrast between sin and redemption . . . it is impossible to understand the doctrine of redemption, which is its very essence, until we have a thorough knowledge of sin. Christian theology here, if anywhere, *wages war, pro aris et focis*.

— Julius Müller²

Original guilt is like a pelican playing chess. Something so strange seems beyond the realm of possibility. In the 21st century, one rarely finds renowned theologians defending the idea that every person shares culpability for Adam’s first sin and that we are individually *guilty* for that ill-fated transgression.³ It is inconceivable to many people that God would judge the human race responsible for an infraction that happened millennia before any of us existed. The God of Isaiah 6:3 would never stoop to such injustice. The French thinker Gabriel Jean Edmond Séailles once remarked,

Mystery and absurdity no longer appear to us as reasons for belief; without further examination, the immorality of it seems to us sufficient reason to refuse belief. Without being astounded that our fathers should have made God to their own image and measure, we refuse to attribute to God what would henceforth be unworthy of an enlightened man. . . . [T]his naïve theory, which

1. This essay revises and significantly expands my argument in Hans Madueme, “The Drama of (Imputation) Doctrine: Original Guilt as Biblical and Systematic Theology,” in *Hearing and Doing the Word: The Drama of Evangelical Hermeneutics*, ed. Daniel J. Treier and Douglas A. Sweeney (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2021), 253–69, with kind permission of the publisher.

2. Julius Müller, *The Christian Doctrine of Sin*, trans. William Pulsford, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1852), 1:xix.

3. For recent exceptions, see Andrew Leslie, “Retrieving a Mature Reformed Doctrine of Original Sin: A Conversation with Some Recent Proposals,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 22.3 (2020): 336–60; and John V. Fesko, *Death in Adam, Life in Christ: The Doctrine of Imputation* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2016).

had some meaning when the earth was enthroned at the centre of the universe where everything was referred to man, has no place in a universe of countless worlds. And what is more serious, by what kind of justice does a perfect God condemn all men in their first father? It is a bad logician who confuses the species with the individual; it is a still worse judge who strikes at random the guilty and the innocent.⁴

The scorn is predictable, given that Gabriel Séailles was a secular philosopher. However, Roman Catholic theologians have questioned inherited guilt, despite it being official church dogma. Ratzinger, for example, reinterprets original guilt as damaged relationships—“when the network of human relationships is damaged from the very beginning, then every human being enters into a world that is marked by relational damage.”⁵ This distaste for the hard edges of the Augustinian doctrine reflects much recent Catholic scholarship on original sin.⁶

Original guilt has also fallen out of favor among Protestant theologians. Here the complaints pile on from every direction. According to Wolfhart Pannenberg, “It is impossible for me to be held jointly responsible, as though I were a joint cause, for an act that another did many generations ago and in a situation radically different from mine.”⁷ Oliver Crisp pulls no punches: “It is immoral because it is necessarily morally wrong to punish the innocent, and I am innocent of Adam’s sin (I did not commit his sin or condone it). It is also immoral because the guilt of one person’s sin does not transfer to another (I am not guilty of committing Adam’s sin).”⁸ Original guilt is “a significant obstacle” to restating the doctrine of original sin.⁹ James Dunn thinks that

4. Gabriel Séailles, *Les Affirmations de la Conscience Moderne* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1903), 70–71, cited in Henri Rondet, *Original Sin: The Patristic and Theological Background*, trans. Cajetan Finegan (New York: Alba House, 1972), 185–86.

5. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “‘In the Beginning’: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall,” trans. Boniface Ramsey (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 73. Ratzinger became Pope Benedict XVI.

6. E.g., see Tatha Wiley, *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meanings* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2002), esp. 243n9. Much recent Catholic scholarship on original sin is an extended dialogue with the natural sciences (especially evolutionary biology), where the theorizing is even more distant from the conceptual world of original guilt; however, the science-theology discussion is not my focus in this essay.

7. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. Matthew O’Connell (New York: T&T Clark, 1985), 124.

8. Oliver Crisp, “On Original Sin,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17.3 (2015): 257. See also Richard Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 144–45, who argues that “no one can be guilty in a literal sense for the sins of another, unless he had some obligation to deter that person and did not do so. Since none of us today could have had the obligation to deter the first sinner from sinning, we cannot be guilty for his sins.” Cf. Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 207: “Unlike a sinful act I perform, original sin need not be thought of as something for which I am culpable (original sin is not necessarily original guilt); insofar as I am born in this predicament, my being in it is not within my control and not up to me.”

9. Crisp, “On Original Sin,” 258. In a footnote, he writes: “My own views on this topic have changed in the last decade. It now seems to me that the biblical warrant for original guilt is thin.

Paul teaches original sin without guilt, “since individuals are only held responsible for deliberate acts of defiance against God and his law.”¹⁰ Most recent exegetes of Romans 5 agree with Dunn. After reviewing the exegetical warrant for the doctrine, Henri Blocher reaches a similar verdict:

I have been led to question the doctrine of alien guilt transferred—that is, the doctrine of the imputation to all of Adam’s own trespass, his act of transgression. If Scripture definitely taught such a doctrine, however offensive to modern taste, I should readily bow to its authority. But where does Scripture require it? My investigation did not find it in the only passage from which it is drawn, Romans 5. Could it be, then, a case of laying a heavy burden upon people’s shoulders, beyond the express demands of God?¹¹

This chorus of grievances has a long history, yet in recent decades the scholarly voices against original guilt keep mounting across the theological spectrum.

As I define it, original guilt means that descendants of Adam and Eve are guilty and justly condemned for Adam’s first sin.¹² This essay argues that imputed guilt, a particular understanding of original guilt, is an essential whole-Bible doctrine that resists longstanding criticisms. First, in dialogue with recent scholarship, I present the immediate imputation of Adam’s sin as the best reading of Romans 5:12–21. Second, I further argue that immediate imputation is a whole-Bible doctrine by developing a wider canonical and doctrinal basis for imputed guilt in light of infant baptism and infant death. Third, I conclude that the immediate imputation of Adam’s guilt lies near the heart of the gospel.

1. The Imputation of Adam’s Sin

Augustine believed original guilt was the divine teaching of Romans 5:12. “Through the bad will of that one man all sinned in him,” the African bishop argued, “when all were that one man, and on that account each individual contracted from him original

The oft-touted Adam Christology of Rom. 5:12–19 does not yield anything like a clear and unambiguous doctrine of original guilt” (258n12).

10. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 291.

11. Henri Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 128.

12. We are liable to punishment *because* we are culpable for Adam’s sin. For the relevance of the medieval concepts of *reatus poenae* and *reatus culpa*, see John Murray, *The Imputation of Adam’s Sin* (Nutley: P&R, 1977), 71–95. Cf. Richard Muller, “Reatus,” in *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 306–307.

sin.”¹³ Condemnation, he wrote elsewhere, “pervades the whole mass of humanity.”¹⁴ Death is universal by dint of Adam’s sin; all of humanity sinned collectively *in Adam* and shares in his guilt. According to this Augustinian realism, the human race was seminally present in Adam, like Levi in the body of Abraham (Heb. 7:9–10). Adam’s sin was ours, too. As the penalty for their role in Adam’s first sin, his descendants inherit an innate, moral corruption.¹⁵

1.1. Romans 5:12–21 Without Original Guilt

Augustine, as is widely known, misread the final clause of Romans 5:12. His exegesis may have relied on Ambrosiaster who, in turn, used Jerome’s Vulgate’s mistranslation (ἐφ’ ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον rendered “in whom” all sinned).¹⁶ Augustine’s mistake does not invalidate his realist understanding of original sin, for he could still counter that, even if not taught explicitly, “all sinned *in Adam*” is implied in the broader context of Romans 5:12–21. However, other difficulties with Augustine’s position are harder to dismiss.¹⁷ For example, his claim that we participated directly in Adam’s sin deemphasizes and thus misjudges the parallelism between Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12–21. In addition, the Augustinian position that we all sinned in Adam contradicts Romans 5:14, where Paul states explicitly that not everyone sinned by breaking a command like Adam. Finally, it is hard to imagine how all people co-existed and sinned *en masse* in Adam millennia before their existence. Why should

13. Augustine, *Marriage and Desire* II.5.15 (*The Works of Saint Augustine: Answer to the Pelagians*, vol. 2, ed. John Rotelle, trans. Roland J. Teske [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1998], 61).

14. Augustine, *Nature and Grace* 8.9 (*The Works of Saint Augustine: Answer to the Pelagians*, vol. 1, ed. John Rotelle, trans. Roland J. Teske [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997], 229).

15. For much of his theological career, Augustine vacillated between creationism and traducianism as the mode of sin’s transmission. See Jesse Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin, Cured by Christ: Agency, Necessity, and Culpability in Augustinian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 42–45.

16. Augustine claimed to inherit his doctrine of original sin from church fathers before him, among them: “Irenaeus, Cyprian, Reticius, Olympius, Hilary, Gregory, Basil, Ambrose, John, Innocent, Jerome, and other companions and colleagues of theirs, as well as the whole Church of Christ.” Augustine, *Answer to Julian* II.10.37 (*The Works of Saint Augustine: Answer to the Pelagians*, vol. 2, ed. John Rotelle, trans. Roland J. Teske [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1998], 335). According to Bernard Leeming, “Augustine insisted that his doctrine on original sin was held by all Christians, handed down as part of the faith, so that not even heretics and schismatics held anything else. If he spoke the truth, and who can doubt it?—then we have an explanation of the origin of his opinions; and a possible explanation likewise of the same doctrine appearing in Ambrosiaster some fifty or sixty years earlier. He in turn derived it from the common teaching. Herein also lies the explanation of certain similarities between Augustine and Ambrosiaster.” Bernard Leeming, “Augustine, Ambrosiaster and the Massa Perditionis,” *Gregorianum* 11.1 (1930): 74.

17. For similar analysis, see S. Lewis Johnson Jr., “Romans 5:12—An Exercise in Exegesis and Theology,” in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 309–310.

we share the blame when none of us were alive at the time? Augustine's concept of original guilt seems to undercut moral responsibility as we know it in human experience and throughout Holy Scripture.¹⁸

Pelagius, of course, disputed Augustine's realism, arguing instead that Romans 5:12 denies both original guilt and inherited corruption. In the Pelagian scheme, sin is not an innate depravity antecedent to our actions; people are independent of Adam, yet they imitate him and sin in their own persons. The early church rightly rejected this view, siding with Paul, who insists, repeatedly, that Adam's sin brought condemnation and death to all (Rom. 5:15–19; 1 Cor. 15:21–22). Although later medieval theologians modified Augustine's realism, they typically accepted original guilt as the true sense of Romans 5:12.¹⁹

Recent Bible scholars and theologians have jettisoned any concept of an alien guilt in Paul. Representing this new consensus, Joseph Fitzmyer argues that ἡμαρτον in verse 12 “should not be understood as ‘have sinned collectively’ or as ‘have sinned in Adam,’ because they would be additions to Paul’s text.”²⁰ All sinned in their own persons, *not* in Adam, consistent with Paul’s use of ἡμαρτον elsewhere (e.g., Rom. 2:12; 3:23; 5:14, 16, etc.).²¹ Fitzmyer operates with an overly restrictive exegetical principle that forbids readers from theologically interpreting a word in terms not explicit in its narrow linguistic meaning.

Nonetheless, if we deny that all sinned *in Adam*, then whence the universality of sin? Why does *everyone* sin? Charles Cranfield offers an elegant solution: all men sin “in their own persons . . . as a result of the corrupt nature inherited from Adam.”²² Sin is not a mere external imitation of Adam, as Pelagius held; Adam’s sin had an internal effect, “the fruit of the desperate moral debility and corruption which resulted from man’s primal transgression and which all succeeding generations of mankind have inherited.”²³ Cranfield’s interpretation adds an extra step to Paul’s argument in Romans 5:12–21; after all, Paul repeatedly draws a *direct* connection between Adam’s

18. Modern defenses of Augustinian realism by theologians like William G. T. Shedd and Augustus Strong posit that Adam possessed all of human nature in his person, which serves as the basis for our original guilt and corruption. See Oliver Crisp, *An American Augustinian: Sin and Salvation in the Dogmatic Theology of William G. T. Shedd* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2007), 37–55, and Michael Rea, “The Metaphysics of Original Sin,” in *Persons: Human and Divine* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007), 328–32.

19. Wiley, *Original Sin*, 76–88.

20. Joseph Fitzmyer, *Romans* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 417.

21. Fitzmyer also argued from Rom 5:12 that all men sin *because* all died—see Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 416, and “The Consecutive Meaning of ΕΦ’Ω in Romans 5.12,” *New Testament Studies* 39 (1993): 321–39. On why his reading is implausible, see Thomas Schreiner, “Original Sin and Original Death: Romans 5:12–19,” in *Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin: Theological, Biblical, and Scientific Perspectives*, ed. Hans Madueme and Michael Reeves (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 273–74.

22. C. E. B. Cranfield, “On Some Problems in the Interpretation of Romans 5.12,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 22 (1969): 331. He appeals to Cyril of Alexandria for patristic support (Cranfield, “On Some Problems,” 337).

23. Cranfield, “On Some Problems,” 337. Similarly, see Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 590.

sin and death (vv. 15, 16, 17, 18)—and yet, as Douglas Moo notes, Cranfield insinuates a middle term: “one man’s trespass *resulted in the corruption of human nature, which caused all people to sin, and so* brought condemnation to all men.”²⁴ Although there is little reason to think that Paul (or the divine author) is making this inference, recent theologians have cashed in on the “corruption-only” position.

Oliver Crisp is a case in point. In dialogue with Zwingli, Crisp argues that everyone inherits a defective moral condition from Adam but without guilt. I am not culpable for inheriting this moral disease, “though it will lead to my death without the interposition of divine grace, just as some inherited conditions lead to death without medical intervention.”²⁵ On this view, fallen human beings *will* inevitably sin.²⁶ Suffering from original corruption “yields condemnation irrespective of actual sin.” As Crisp explains, “possession of original sin will lead to death and exclusion from the presence of God without the application of the relevant treatment: in this case, salvation through Christ.”²⁷ Tom McCall similarly endorses this corruption-only argument.²⁸ He writes that corruption-only proponents favor the position because “there is ample evidence for corruption—a corruption of the human nature that is deep and vast beyond telling. But on the other hand, they typically do not find such evidence for original guilt.”²⁹

All the same, the corruption-only account falters under scrutiny.³⁰ Crisp thinks that Adam’s fall saddles humanity with a morally corrupt condition, a condition for

24. Douglas Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 353.

25. Oliver Crisp, “Sin,” in *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott Swain (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 213.

26. Crisp puts it more precisely in order to account for premature infant death or mentally impaired persons: “the moral corruption of original sin makes it inevitable that all fallen human beings will actually sin on at least one occasion, if they live long enough and are appropriate subjects for the ascription of moral responsibility and culpability” (“On Original Sin,” 261–62; original italics removed).

27. Crisp, “On Original Sin,” 262.

28. In addition to Zwingli, McCall discerns a precedent in Arminius. Cf. Keith Stanglin and Thomas McCall, *Jacob Arminius: Theologian of Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 149–150. However, Arminius is often quite Augustinian, as when he describes original corruption as the result of incurred guilt, “by the intervention of the judgment and sentence of God, imputing the guilt of the first sin to all the posterity of Adam, not less than to Adam himself and to Eve, because they also sinned in Adam” (“Discussion with F. Junius,” Proposition 24, in William Bagnall, *The Works of James Arminius* [Auburn: Derby, and Muller, 1853], 3:249).

29. Thomas McCall, *Against God and Nature: The Doctrine of Sin* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 160–61.

30. My thinking has been shaped by Julius Müller, *The Christian Doctrine of Sin*, trans. William Urwick, 5th ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1868), 2:307–57. Parenthetically, Crisp often claims that his corruption-only hamartiology is a valid Reformed position; he justifies this claim based on Zwingli’s writings and several confessional statements. This contention deserves comment, although of course a claim can be dead right even if it is not “Reformed”! Zwingli’s conception of original corruption was an anomaly among Lutheran and Reformed theologians. While we should not ignore the diversity within the “Calvinist” tradition, Zwingli’s account is marginal to the classical Reformation doctrine of original sin. Crisp argues that Zwingli’s

which we are not culpable even though that condition is what causes us inevitably to sin (“sin” for which we *are* culpable). This position is incoherent. By its own logic, if the fall caused original corruption, for which we bear no guilt, then we should bear no guilt for any actual sins, which, as the theory goes, necessarily arise from that corruption. Suppose I am not personally guilty for my corrupt state. In that case, it is unjust for the Lord to judge me guilty for actual sins I commit since—according to corruption-only accounts—they arise necessarily from that state (in fact, naming them “sins” is a mistake).³¹ Someone might try to neutralize this inference by arguing

account shares key features with the doctrine of original sin in the Anglican *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* (1563) and the *Belgic Confession* (1561)—“Retrieving Zwingli’s Doctrine of Original Sin,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 10 (2016): 357–60. In fact, Crisp has misread both confessions, neither of which support his claim. See Hans Madueme, “An Augustinian-Reformed Response,” in *Original Sin and the Fall: Five Views*, ed. J. B. Stump and Chad Meister (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2020), 136. Original sin as corruption-only has more affinities with a Roman Catholic than Reformed theology of sin. While Luther and most of the other Reformers, following Augustine, decreed concupiscence as culpable sin, medieval theologians saw concupiscence as the “tinder of sin” (*fomes peccati*), the punishment for original sin but not sin itself (so, too, the Council of Trent). For background, see Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 120–45. According to the Westminster Assembly, and reflected in its Westminster Standards, original corruption entails guilt—see Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009), 205. The seventeenth-century Remonstrants agreed that original corruption was a punishment for Adam’s sin but insisted that his descendants incurred no guilt. The Apology for the Remonstrants explains that “it is contrary to justice and equity, that any one should be charged as guilty, for a sin that is not his own, or that he should be judged to be really guilty who in respect to his own individual voluntariness is innocent, or, rather, not guilty.” Simon Episcopius, *Apologia pro Confessione sive Declaratione Sententiae eorum, Qui in Foederato Belgio vocantur Remonstrantes, super praecipuis Articulis Religionis Christianae: Contra Censuram Quatuor Professorum Leidensium* (N.p., 1629), 84–85. The translation is from William G. T. Shedd, *A History of Christian Doctrine*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner, 1863), 2:184. Episcopius was the chief author of the Arminian Confession, first published in 1621 (in Dutch) and translated into English fifty-five years later: *The Confession or Declaration of the Ministers or Pastors Which in the United Provinces Are Called Remonstrants, Concerning the Chief Points of Christian Religion* (London: Francis Smith, 1676). Interestingly, the Dutch Remonstrant Church (aka the Remonstrant Brotherhood)—founded in 1619 and finally granted religious toleration in 1795—is an official member of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Huldrych Zwingli notwithstanding, the theological pedigree of Crisp’s thesis lies primarily in the medieval Catholic and Arminian traditions. For a similar judgment, see Leslie, “Original Sin,” 346–47; and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *Zwingli and Bullinger* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 328n12—in his footnote, Bromiley is reacting to this line in Zwingli’s analysis of Romans 7:7, “for by the word sin Paul here means the weakness which gives rise to sin” (“Of the Clarity and Certainty of the Word of God,” in Bromiley, *Zwingli and Bullinger*, 66, my emphasis).

31. Responding to a similar objection, Crisp claims elsewhere that “moral approbation or blame attaches to *actions* an agent performs, not (or not necessarily) to the moral nature with which a person is created” (“A Moderate Reformed Response,” in *Original Sin and the Fall: Five Views*, ed. J. B. Stump and Chad Meister [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2020], 142).

against Crisp that actual sins do not inevitably arise from original corruption. Perhaps an individual's free will can resist the power of internal corruption. Alas, that move traps you on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, the universality of sin exposes human "free will" as a paper tiger that is consistently and mysteriously *powerless* to block the expression of internal corruption. On the other hand, if the claim is that human beings have genuine incompatibilist freedom, then human sinlessness is a real possibility; otherwise, the universality of sin is again inexplicable.³²

Henri Blocher carves out a delicate, mediating position between Augustine and Pelagius. Based on Romans 5:13–14, he thinks God cannot judge sin without established law. "Sin cannot be imputed" unless an explicit divine command is broken. As isolated individuals, Blocher explains, we humans "have no standing with God, no relationship to his judgment"—entire generations between Adam and Moses who, unlike Adam, never violated a divine command would be (as it were) "floating in a vacuum."³³ And yet, "death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses" (Rom. 5:14).³⁴ Since death is the result of sin (Rom. 5:12), how then were the sins of those pre-Mosaic generations imputed *as transgression* when no law had yet been given? According to Blocher, Adam is the missing link, the legal head who makes possible "*the imputation, the judicial treatment, of human sins*. His role thus brings about the condemnation of all, and its sequel, death."³⁵ Blocher continues: "Before the law of Moses was promulgated, sin was imputed and therefore death reigned owing to the relationship of all humans to Adam, the natural and legal head or mediator."³⁶ In virtue of Adam's natural headship, every descendant is born with a will that opposes God and is thus guilty. "Being born sinners is not a penalty, or strictly the result of

As the present essay argues, however, Scripture offers a wide range of reasons to doubt Crisp's conclusions or the way he frames the problem.

32. I have posed this dilemma for the corruption-only position: if we are not blameworthy for our innate corruption, doesn't that mean we are not blameworthy for sins that inevitably arise from them? Keith Wyma offers a possible solution to this dilemma: "I think not, based on an important distinction between the inevitability of *sinning* and the inevitability of *committing a particular sin*. I believe a correct view of original sin includes the former but not the latter. The disordered faculties of post-Fall humanity make sinning unavoidable, but that doesn't mean they necessitate committing any particular sin. Because of the inescapability of sinning, it may not make sense to hold us accountable for entering the general state of being sinners. Yet we may still bear responsibility for specific sins we commit" (Keith Wyma, "Innocent Sinfulness, Guilty Sin: Original Sin and Divine Justice," in *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil*, ed. Peter van Inwagen [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004], 272, emphasis original). However, Wyma's solution fails. He may be right that I'm responsible for choosing this sin instead of that sin, for stealing instead of lying. Nevertheless, it is directly because of my moral corruption that I sinned *either way*. If I am innocent of the moral corruption, then I am still innocent of any actual sin, even if on a formal level I am "responsible" for consenting to this particular sin over that one.

33. Blocher, *Original Sin*, 77.

34. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™

35. Blocher, *Original Sin*, 77.

36. Blocher, *Original Sin*, 77.

transference, but simply an existential, spiritual, *fact* for human beings since Adam.”³⁷ Alien guilt is irrelevant, for everyone sins in his or her own person.³⁸

Against Blocher’s thesis, Romans 2:14–15 denies Adam as the basis for imputing pre-Mosaic sins. Paul writes that those who lived before Moses “are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts.” Blocher anticipates this objection:

[I]f this provides a way other than that of Adamic dependence, leading to the same end (imputation of human sins), then my proposal must be withdrawn. But I venture to suggest that it is not “another” way; rather, it is the same way described from another angle. Being related to God through Adam, the covenant head, is equivalent to having the law written on one’s heart; they are two sides of the same coin.³⁹

Blocher’s argument is formidable and has similarities with both Pelagian and Augustinian approaches. Each person sins in his or her own self (no one sins in Adam nor is Adam’s guilt imputed), and each person sins in his or her own self *ab initio* and is thus guilty from birth. In response, I cannot accept his exegesis of Romans 5:13–14 (see more below). Furthermore, he seems to underestimate Paul’s insistence that Adam’s sin—not merely his headship—causes our condemnation and death (Paul emphasizes the point five times in Rom. 5:15–19).⁴⁰ The causal link between Adam’s sin and our own sin damages Blocher’s thesis.

Blocher appeals to Adam’s headship to explain why everyone is born in a state of guilt and willful enmity toward God. Once Adam fell, we were all born sinners due to “the organic solidarity of the race”⁴¹ (this is a hair’s breadth from original guilt!). Ironically, Blocher does not escape the alleged problems with alien guilt. His proposal still leaves us sinning from the beginning—and *that sin is guilt-bearing*. Even without the *peccatum alienum*, his proposal retains the thing that has rankled critics since Pelagius. Hence Blocher’s defensive remark: “An inborn state, or *habitus*, of guilt without any prior deliberation at a ‘neutral’ stage will be denounced by some as intolerably unjust. The root of this reaction, however, is clearly the absolutization of individual freedom.”⁴² Indeed! Yet is the pot calling the kettle black? His denial of original guilt is odd, given his own position. At any rate, the *peccatum alienum* has far more biblical support than Blocher recognizes—as I shall now argue.

37. Blocher, *Original Sin*, 129.

38. Adam’s headship permits God to judge human iniquity *as transgression* of his commandments; however, Adam’s primal sin plays no causal role in human sinning—as Blocher concludes, “I see no necessity for the idea that alien guilt was transferred (that is, that Adam’s particular act was reckoned to the account of all)” (*Original Sin*, 130).

39. Blocher, *Original Sin*, 80.

40. Cf. Schreiner, “Original Sin and Original Death,” 176.

41. Blocher, *Original Sin*, 129.

42. Blocher, *Original Sin*, 131.

1.2. Once More on Imputed Guilt

The exegetical and theological objections to original guilt are hard to square with Paul's reasoning in Romans 5:12–21 and 1 Corinthians 15:21–22.⁴³ Adam's fall brought sin into the human experience as well as physical and spiritual death.⁴⁴ In the wake of Adam's sin, all people die because we all sinned individually (ἐφ' ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον). The inspired apostle elaborates further on our solidarity with Adam in Romans 5:15–19. The one man's trespass leads not only to death (vv. 15, 17) but also to judgment and condemnation (vv. 16, 18). More pointedly: "through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners" (v. 19). As Douglas Moo sums up, "all sinned" must be given some kind of corporate meaning: sinning not as voluntary acts of sin in one's own person, but sinning in and with Adam."⁴⁵ In short, Adam's sin and human sinning are part of a deeper reality.

2. Defending Immediate Imputation

Augustine saw this deeper reality: Adam's posterity is guilty and justly condemned for his first sin. Instead of Augustinian realism, I root original guilt in Adam's role as a federal head. Adam and Christ as representatives of humanity loom large in the parallelism of Romans 5:15–21. Just as Adam's trespass brought the reign of death, so, too, the obedience of Christ unlocks God's grace (v. 15). The one sin ends in judgment and condemnation, but the gift of Christ enables justification (v. 16). One man brought death, whereas grace and righteousness abounded through one man (v. 17). Paul keeps piling on the contrast: Adam's disobedience brings our sin, condemnation, and death, whereas Christ's righteousness brings our justification, righteousness, and eternal life (vv. 18–19). Adam's sin affects our condemnation, just as Christ's righteousness affects our justification. Jesus is a federal head like Adam, a pattern or type of Christ (v. 14). God appointed both men to act for and in place of those whom they represented. Let us call this *imputation*.⁴⁶

43. For a helpful survey of the main exegetical issues, see McCall, *Against God and Nature*, 176–84.

44. Moo, *Romans*, 348: "We are not forced to make a choice between [spiritual and physical death]. Paul frequently uses 'death' and related words to designate a 'physico-spiritual entity,' —'total death,' the penalty incurred for sin."

45. Moo, *Romans*, 354.

46. An 18th-century critic of imputation expresses the logic of federalism: "For, according to the very same principles, upon which an imputation of the sin of Adam is deduced from Rom. v., the imputation of Christ's righteousness is also based thereon; and according to the same reasons of law, upon which an alien guilt is imputed to us, an alien righteousness is to be ascribed to us also." Gotthilf Samuel Steinbert, *System der reinen Philosophie; oder, Glückseligkeitslehre des Christenthums*, 3rd ed. (Züllichau, 1786), 125, cited in Robert S. Franks, *A History of the Doctrine of the Work of Christ in its Ecclesiastical Development* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1918), 2:19.

Federalism holds that we all became sinners when Adam sinned. Adam's sin was imputed to us. Adam's sin and guilt are *our* sin and guilt.⁴⁷ However, Blocher takes issue with Federalism's exegesis of Romans 5:13–14: “there remains a slight tension,” he writes, “between Paul's wording, ‘they did not sin after the likeness of Adam's transgression,’ and the Reformed emphasis that they sinned in Adam.”⁴⁸ In addition, Paul's emphasis on the period between Adam and Moses sits awkwardly with federal theology's precept that *all* people sinned in Adam.⁴⁹

Blocher is right to fault the older federalists.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Federalism pledges no fealty to what seems to be a misreading of Romans 5:13–14. Adam died because he disobeyed God's direct command (v. 12). Everyone before Moses died, too, even though God had not yet handed down any law. If Paul says that the absence of law implies the absence of any formal sin, why did they all die? Recall that Paul has already said in v. 13 that sin was in the world before Moses (see also Rom. 2:12); thus, he cannot mean that their sins were not reckoned as sin *in any sense*. Those pre-Mosaic generations all died, and death results from *sin*. “Paul's point,” Tom Schreiner explains, “is that their sins, though still punishable by death, were not technically counted against them in the same way as sin was counted against Adam.”⁵¹ They died because they sinned against God. Although people disobeyed God's direct commands after Moses instituted the law, the post-Mosaic scene differs from Adam pre-fall. Since God's covenant with Israel was with a sinful people, Adam's sin had already corrupted the human race. Far from jeopardizing Federalism, the fact that the generation before Moses did not transgress “as did Adam” actually *supports* it. They did not sin, as did Adam, because Adam's sin was the fountainhead. He was *sui generis*, the head of the

47. Charles Hodge famously argued that imputing the guilt of sin meant “the judicial obligation to satisfy justice” (*Systematic Theology* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898], 2:194). He was wrong (even the great ones stumble!). The imputation of Adam's sin includes both penalty *and* guilt (cf. Rom. 5:19, “the many were made *sinners*”). See Murray, *Imputation*, 72–86.

48. Blocher, *Original Sin*, 75.

49. Federal theologians have often interpreted Romans 5:14—i.e., “those who did not sin by breaking a command”—as referring to infants or the mentally impaired. E.g., see Murray, *Romans*, 190–91; and Johnson, “Romans 5:12,” 310. Cf. John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 95–96: “I am still inclined to think, against the most common scholarly opinion, that the group of people begging for an explanation, and providing the most relevant illustration for Paul's point, is infants.” Distinguished pedigree notwithstanding, this reading is mistaken (see Thomas Schreiner, *Romans*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018], 281–83; Moo, *Romans*, 358).

50. With most contemporary exegetes, I disagree with the traditional Augustinian and federal grammatical reading of ἥμαρτον in v. 12, i.e., that we all sinned *in Adam*—defending the latter, see John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 178–87. Cf. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrove Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), 1:617–618—however, in the broader context of vv. 13–21, sinning in and with Adam is the right *theological* interpretation.

51. Schreiner, *Romans*, 284.

human race. Typologically, he was the chosen representative, anticipating the one to come, Jesus Christ, his righteous counterpoint.

Early Reformed theologians understood the transmission of sin as natural propagation from Adam to his descendants. The realistic union had priority, and guilt followed the corruption inherited from Adam (i.e., mediate imputation). John Calvin, for example, commenting on Romans 5:17, remarks that “by Adam’s sin we are not condemned through imputation alone, as though we were punished only for the sin of another; but we suffer his punishment, because we also ourselves are guilty; *for as our nature is vitiated in him, it is regarded by God as having committed sin.*”⁵² Peter Martyr Vermigli described Adam “as a certaine common lumpe or masse, wherein was contained all mankind: which lumpe being corrupted, we cannot be brought forth into the world, but corrupted and defiled.”⁵³ As Robert Letham demonstrates, hereditary depravity and our realist connection to Adam were emphasized by other 16th to early 17th century Reformers, among them Martin Bucer, Heinrich Bullinger, Wolfgang Musculus, William Perkins, Robert Pollock, Johannes Piscator, and Amandus Polanus (and reflected, too, in the Irish Articles of Religion, the Canons of Dort, and the Leiden Synopsis).⁵⁴

The later shift from mediate to immediate imputation was part of the Reformed development of doctrine at the turn of the 17th century. As the covenant of works rose to prominence, Reformed divines increasingly emphasized Adam’s role as the federal head of humanity. Francis Turretin, the apogee of these shifts in Reformed orthodoxy, wrote:

For the bond between Adam and his posterity is twofold: (1) natural, as he is the father, and we are his children; (2) political and forensic, as he was the prince and representative head of the whole human race. Therefore the foundation of imputation is not only the natural connection which exists between us and Adam . . . but mainly the moral and federal (in virtue of which God entered into covenant with him as our head). Hence Adam stood in that sin not as a private person, but as a public and representative person—representing all his posterity in that action and whose demerit equally pertains to all.⁵⁵

Although mediate imputation is a species of original guilt, it suffers from the same liability as the corruption-only position. If corruption is a consequence of divine punishment—and what else could it be?—then guilt must precede or co-exist with it.

52. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, ed. and trans. John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), 210, my emphasis.

53. Peter Martyr Vermigli, *The Common Places of the Most Famous and Renowned Doctor Peter Martyr*, trans. Anthonie Marten (London: Henrie Denham, Thomas Chard, William Broome, and Andrew Maunsell, 1583), 242, cited in Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 211.

54. For historical documentation, see Letham, *Westminster Assembly*, 198–223.

55. Turretin, *Elencic Theology*, 1:616.

Otherwise, through no fault of their own, all human beings are born condemned with concupiscence, and thus the worry of divine injustice presses in.

Building on the truths of mediate imputation, Federalism, as I defend it, fully accepts the seminal union that we have with Adam. The first man is the federal representative of all humans, namely, his genealogical descendants—genealogical descent from Adam is the *necessary* ground for covenantal representation.⁵⁶ As John Murray noted, “On the representative construction natural headship and representative headship are correlative, and each aspect has its own proper and specific function.”⁵⁷ Herman Bavinck was equally federalist and Augustinian: “Federalism certainly does not rule out the truth contained in realism; on the contrary, it fully accepts it. It proceeds from it but does not confine itself to it.”⁵⁸ Although the imputation of Adam’s sin presupposes physical descent from Adam, its justification lies in a more profound moral unity with Adam as federal head.

3. Three Perennial Objections

Federalism is not beyond reproach. Three recurring objections deserve particular scrutiny at this point. The first applies to Augustus Hopkins Strong, a prominent nineteenth-century Baptist theologian, who worried that the federal theory of imputation was built entirely on *legal fiction*. God judges everyone guilty of a sin that only Adam personally committed—a sin worthy of eternal damnation. Strong disputes that arrangement, for “[God] can regard as responsible for Adam’s transgression only those who *in some real sense* have been concerned, and have had part, in that transgression.”⁵⁹ The imputation of Adam’s sin, so the charge goes, is arbitrary and wholly disconnected from divine justice.

In reply, this objection poses the most serious challenge for my position. I agree that the imputation of Adam’s sin cannot be an arbitrary decree disconnected from the facts of the case. Such a miscarriage of justice would be a mockery of God’s righteousness. I take Adam’s federal role as hamartologically basic; no other principle can explain it. God is just in imputing Adam’s sin, but we cannot finally explain *why* God is just. As Bavinck clarifies:

[Adam and Christ] have the human race not behind them but before them; they do not spring from it but give rise to it; they are not sustained by it but themselves sustain it; they are not the product of humankind, but are, each in his own way, the beginning and root of it, the heads of all humanity. They are

56. Jesus Christ is the only exception: Conceived without a biological father by the power of the Holy Spirit, he was not a son of Adam by ordinary (or natural) generation—yet he was fully human (Matt. 1:18–25; Luke 1:26–38; cf. WCF 8.2). He therefore had no innate moral corruption or imputed guilt.

57. Murray, *Imputation*, 37–38.

58. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:104.

59. Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907), 615, my emphasis. Cf. McCall, *Against God and Nature*, 168, 199–200.

not explained by the law of solidarity but explain this law by their own existence. They do not presuppose but constitute the organism of humanity.⁶⁰

No other datum of human experience can explain the imputation of Adam's sin. The federal headship of Adam and Christ explains the principle of moral solidarity (e.g., Matt. 23:35; Num. 16:32; Josh. 7:24–25)—but we cannot explain how federal headship itself is consistent with divine justice.⁶¹ The imputation of Adam's sin is an incomprehensible mystery, but we are incomprehensible to ourselves without it.⁶² Here we must bow before the limits of human reason.⁶³

Furthermore, we should note that Adam and his posterity are not atomistic, detached persons who are strangers to each other. The human race has a natural, seminal union with Adam, which—as Letham notes—“must be the basis both for the covenant relationship established by God and for the imputation of his sin and guilt.”⁶⁴ More precisely, realistic union with Adam is the *ontological* basis of his covenant relationship with the human race. Conversely, God's just ordination of Adam to be our federal head is the *legal* basis for the imputation of his first sin.

The doctrine of the image of God is also relevant here.⁶⁵ Since God the Trinity is a unity-in-diversity, his image-bearers necessarily reflect that triune shape. The divine image is not merely a loose collection of individuals but an organic unity of *every* man and woman. Bavinck's description soars:

Not the man alone, nor the man and woman together, but only the whole of humanity is the fully developed image of God, his children, his offspring. The image of God is much too rich for it to be fully realized in a single human being, however richly gifted that human being may be. It can only be somewhat unfolded in its depth and riches in a humanity counting billions of

60. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:106.

61. For several examples of the moral solidarity principle in Scripture, see Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:104–106.

62. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. W. F. Trotter (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 121–22.

63. Stephen Williams suggests that God's condemnation of humanity for Adam's transgression is *just* if “we all would have done what Adam did”—sin was inevitable for humanity because “contingently, any one of us would have done the same” (“Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin: A Review Essay,” *Themelios* 40.2 [2015]: 25In23). For a similar argument, see Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928), 303–4. Since pre-fallen humanity is sinless—*posse non peccare*—had we been in Adam's place, it is not clear why none of us would have avoided sinning; the God-given capacity to avoid sin was real, not imaginary. Williams's tentative proposal appears to be reading our postlapsarian condition (*non posse non peccare*) back into the prelapsarian state.

64. Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 396.

65. In what follows, I am indebted to Nathaniel Sutanto, “Herman Bavinck on the Image of God and Original Sin,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18.2 (2016): 174–90. Sutanto's insights build on James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012).

members. Just as the traces of God . . . are spread over many, many works, in both space and time, so also the image of God can only be displayed in all its dimensions and characteristic features in a humanity whose members exist both successively one after the other and contemporaneously side by side. . . . Not as a heap of souls on a tract of land, not as a loose aggregate of individuals, but as having been created out of one blood; as one household and one family, humanity is the image and likeness of God.⁶⁶

Far from being a legal fiction, Adam's federal headship has its source in "an utterly special ordinance of God,"⁶⁷ one that is wise, just, and holy, and indeed one that corresponds to the very ontology of the human race as the creaturely mirror of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The second objection challenges the very idea of imputing sins from one person to another. As McCall states, "a prima facie case can be made from Scripture that the guilt of one person is not transferred to another (Deut. 24:16; Jer. 31:29–30; Ezek. 18:20)."⁶⁸ The citation from Deuteronomy is unequivocal: "Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin" (ESV). Guilt is not the kind of thing that transfers from Tom to Dick to Harry. Does Federalism have a response?

In the first place, the common refrain that imputation of guilt has no analogies in the human experience is demonstrably false. One need look no further than the Old Testament sacrificial system for an embarrassment of riches: the imputation of guilt from the sinner to the animal lay at the heart of the Israelite understanding of atonement.⁶⁹ In the Passover sacrifice, for instance, God commanded each Hebrew family to kill a year-old, innocent lamb and apply some of its blood to the doorframes of their houses (Ex. 12:1–30). The Lord struck down the firstborn men and animals of the Egyptian families whose sins were not covered by the blood. The Passover ritual

66. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:577. Cf. Brian Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny: Eschatology and the Image of God in Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 145–48.

67. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:105.

68. McCall, *Against God and Nature*, 165. For discussion of the difficulties facing the *peccatum alienum* concept, see G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 424–65.

69. Recent cultural trends in the West bristle against the canonical witness to substitutionary atonement. Henri Blocher's remarks, though dated, still repay careful reading: "The Sacrifice of Jesus Christ: The Current Theological Situation," *European Journal of Theology* 8.1 (1999): 23–36. Tom McCall rejects this interpretation of the OT sacrificial system, citing Hebrews 10:4, "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (he raised this objection in Nov. 16, 2020, at the annual ETS conference, during a symposium on his book *Against God and Nature: The Doctrine of Sin*). McCall is correct that the blood of bulls and goats could never serve as the ultimate ground of atonement (including guilt transfer); it was only ever the proximate ground during the OT administration, pointing forward to Christ's atonement as the ultimate ground. However, this observation merely highlights their limited efficacy—their transitory and provisional nature—without in any way challenging the underlying reality of imputation itself.

averted divine judgment by transferring the guilt of the Israelites to the sacrificial lamb. The same atonement theology is reflected in the Levitical sacrifices, including the burnt offerings (Lev. 1:3–17), fellowship offerings (Lev. 3:1–17), sin offerings (Lev. 4:1–35), and guilt offerings (Lev. 5:14–6:7). The individual’s sin and guilt were transferred to the slain animal; its sprinkled blood was a token of the victim’s life (see Lev. 17:11).⁷⁰ In addition to slaughtering unblemished animals for the sake of sinners, on the annual Day of Atonement, the high priest would lay hands on the head of a live goat while confessing the sins of the Israelite community—“a ritual that denotes transfer of defilement and guilt from the person to the animal.”⁷¹ These sacrificial rituals reach their denouement in the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 52:13–53:12, who was mistreated, pierced, and crushed *for the sins of others*. Although the Servant’s experience seems extremely unjust, “it was part of God’s unbelievable plan to transfer the guilt of many to this innocent Servant. He functioned as a substitute who took the penalty for others, and through this act he justified many (53:11).”⁷² In short, the biblical witness to Israel’s encounter with Yahweh brushes aside the objection that guilt transfer is foreign to human experience.⁷³

In the second place, the canon of Scripture has a deep unity that reflects its single divine author. Since God does not—because he can not—contradict himself, passages like Jeremiah 31:29–30 and Ezekiel 18:20 that emphasize individual responsibility cannot contradict other biblical texts that teach the imputation of guilt. According to one plausible suggestion, “Jeremiah and Ezekiel wrote to people in exile who were suffering for the sins of an earlier generation. In this context, the prophets’ assurances that the solidarity that bound the present generation to their forefathers’ guilt could be broken functioned as an encouragement to repentance (see especially Ezek. 18:30–32).”⁷⁴ The “individualism” in Jeremiah and Ezekiel is addressing the immediate context of their hearers and was never intended as a far-reaching, universal declaration.⁷⁵

In the third place, if personal guilt cannot transfer to another, then each of us must bear his own sin. At the final judgment, Christ will judge the world with justice (Acts 17:31); everyone will be judged by what he has done (2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 20:13). If my

70. Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997), 169; Jay Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement: The Priestly Conceptions* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 2005), 168–73.

71. Mark Boda, *A Severe Mercy: Sin and its Remedy in the Old Testament* (Winona Lake, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 59–60. Cf. Gordon Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 62; and Emile Nicole, “Atonement in the Pentateuch: ‘It is the Blood That Makes Atonement for One’s Life,’” in *The Glory of the Atonement*, ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 44.

72. Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66* (Nashville: B&H, 2009), 465.

73. Interestingly, William Lane Craig has argued that the imputation of guilt has *direct* analogies in the Anglo-American justice system: “Is Penal Substitution Unsatisfactory?” *Philosophia Christi* 21.1 (2019): 153–66.

74. See Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 247.

75. I suspect that Deuteronomy 24:16 reflects a similar dynamic.

sin remains mine forever, then salvation is impossible.⁷⁶ I will be condemned. In his commentary on Galatians 3:13, Martin Luther observed that “Whatever sins I, you, and all of us have committed, or may commit in the future, they are as much Christ’s own as if He Himself had committed them. In short, our sins must be Christ’s own sin, or we shall perish eternally.”⁷⁷ Luther continued: “If the sins of the entire world are on that one man, Jesus Christ, then they are not on the world. But if they are not on Him, then they are still on the world . . . [I]f He is innocent and does not carry our sins, then we carry them and shall die and be damned in them.”⁷⁸ *The imputation of sin is the basis of salvation.*

The final objection concerns early church tradition. Extant writings suggest that few pre-Augustinian Fathers endorsed original guilt. Guilt, they believed, is attached to actual sins and not to human nature; culpability lies in the abuse of free will. Therefore, the Fathers rejected any notion that newborn babies were guilty of inherited sin.⁷⁹ They defended inherited mortality and corruption—not original guilt—themes that were later taken up by the Eastern Orthodox tradition.⁸⁰ Is original guilt, then, a distortion of an earlier, purer tradition? I don’t think so.⁸¹

Given the cultural prevalence of Gnostic determinism in their day, the church fathers understandably emphasized free will and self-determination. The deeper questions that Augustine’s doctrine of original sin was trying to answer were there below the surface. Still, no heresy had confronted the church to clarify the inner logic of sin—until Pelagianism. Church history often reveals this dynamic of heresy prompting doctrinal clarification. So it was with Christ’s divinity, as Gerald Bray notes: “Before Arius challenged the church, there were many people who thought of the Son as somehow inferior to the Father. But when Arius drew the logical (and erroneous) conclusions from what had previously been left undecided, the church had to react and condemn him. So also with Pelagius. The question of the depth of human

76. Donald Macleod, *Christ Crucified: Understanding the Atonement* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 90.

77. *Luther’s Works* 26: 278, cited in Macleod, *Christ Crucified*, 90–91.

78. *Luther’s Works* 26: 280, cited in Macleod, *Christ Crucified*, 91.

79. Gerald Bray, “Original Sin in Patristic Thought,” *Churchman* 108 (1994): 43. See also N. P. Williams, *The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin* (London: Longman, Green & Co., 1929), 246–47; and John Toews, *The Story of Original Sin* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), 48–61.

80. E.g., see John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, rev. ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1983), 143–46; and Constantine Tsirpanlis, *Introduction to Eastern Patristic Thought and Orthodox Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 49–53.

81. In my view, we should not overstate the novelty of Augustine’s doctrine of original guilt. As Augustine attested repeatedly, the Greek Fathers sometimes assumed—if not explicitly argued—original guilt. Irenaeus’s conception of original sin, Williams remarks, “clearly contains the potentiality of a theory of ‘Original Guilt,’ though this is not explicitly developed” (*The Ideas of the Fall*, 196). For an argument that Irenaeus likewise endorsed inherited guilt, see Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 218. Cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.18.7, 3.23.2, 5.17.1, 5.21.1, etc. See also Marta Przyszychowska, *We Were All in Adam: The Unity of Mankind in Adam in the Teaching of the Church Fathers*, trans. Elżbieta Puławska (Warsaw: De Gruyter, 2018).

sinfulness had never before been raised, and Augustine had to answer it.”⁸² And answer it, he did.

3.1. Original Guilt as a Whole-Bible Doctrine

One might think that original guilt is derived solely from Romans 5:12–21 and 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, but exegesis of a handful of texts only takes us so far.⁸³ Already in Augustine, we see that original guilt has much broader theological warrants than Romans 5:12.⁸⁴ Infant baptism was pivotal to his argument for original sin—“does not the truth proclaim without any ambiguity,” he asks rhetorically, “that unbaptized little ones not only cannot enter the kingdom of God, but cannot possess eternal life apart from the body of Christ and that, in order to be incorporated in this body, they are given the sacrament of baptism?”⁸⁵ The widespread practice of infant baptism proves original guilt; why else baptize infants? Augustine beat this drum relentlessly. His logic reveals that original guilt is not merely an exegetical claim—it is a *whole-Bible* doctrine, a doctrinal synthesis of a wide swath of biblical teaching on the human condition.⁸⁶

82. Gerald Bray, review of John Toews, *The Story of Original Sin*, *Evangelical Quarterly* 85.4 (2013): 363. Similarly, as David Wright observes, “Early Christian writers commonly ascribe to infants innocence or sinlessness, attributes which should be read not so much as denying original sin as reflecting a stage prior to its conscious articulation as a teaching of the church.” *Infant Baptism in Historical Perspective: Collected Studies* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 28–29.

83. As we have seen, not only are the exegetical grounds for imputed guilt in Romans 5:12–21 and 1 Corinthians 15:21–22 contested, but the imputation of Christ’s righteousness—which I have taken for granted—has also been criticized exegetically. That literature is vast beyond measure, but see the debate between Robert Gundry and D. A. Carson in *Justification: What’s at Stake in the Current Debates*, ed. Mark Husbands and Daniel Treier (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 17–78. It is unrealistic to expect an exegetical silver bullet, because, as Ben Dunson avers, imputation is primarily a *doctrinal* rather than exegetical claim. See his “Do Bible Words Have Bible Meaning? Distinguishing Between Imputation as Word and Doctrine,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 75 (2013): 239–60.

84. However, one should not downplay the significance of Rom 5:12 in Augustine’s thinking. As Gerald Bonner notes, “It is clear . . . from the very magnitude of the list of recorded citations, that Augustine regarded Romans 5,12 as being of palmary significance in his theology” (“Augustine on Romans 5,12,” in *Studia Evangelica*, vol. IV: Papers Presented to the Third International Congress on New Testament Studies Held at Christ Church, Oxford, 1965, ed. Frank L. Cross [Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1968], 246). So, too, S. Lewis Johnson: “Augustine cites the text over 150 times” (“Romans 5:12,” 313n103).

85. Augustine, *The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins and the Baptism of Little Ones* III.4.8 (*The Works of Saint Augustine: Answer to the Pelagians*, vol. 1, ed. John Rotelle, trans. Roland J. Teske [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997], 125).

86. On the exegesis vs. doctrine distinction, see Dunson, “Do Bible Words.” Cf. David S. Yeago, “The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis,” *Pro Ecclesia* 3.2 (1994): 152–64.

3.1.1. Infant Baptism and Original Guilt

Infants need baptism to remove their original guilt since they cannot commit any personal sins of their own. Augustine prosecutes his case with copious citations from all corners of the Bible. Christ died for the ungodly (Rom. 5:6) and was a physician for the sick, not the healthy (Luke 5:31–32).⁸⁷ If Jesus came to save his people from their sins, infants are among those beneficiaries (Matt. 1:21).⁸⁸ They, too, descend from Eve who was deceived (Gen. 3:1–6), and they, too, are cursed with a body of death (Rom. 7:24). The only antidote is the forgiveness of sins (Titus 2:11).⁸⁹ Since babies need their sins forgiven (Matt. 26:28), they share that original guilt.⁹⁰ The grace of Christ in baptism delivers infants from the devil (Col. 1:13).⁹¹ These citations are a drop in the sea of biblical warrants throughout Augustine’s corpus. Scripture’s logic was irresistible: the possibility of redemption extends to the human race, including infants. They must need baptism, Augustine concluded, to nullify the guilt of Adam’s sin.

Augustine believed that unbaptized infants are condemned to hell in its mildest form.⁹² The western tradition accepted this creed until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, at which point medieval theologians softened the edges of Augustine’s teaching. Peter Abelard, for example, argued that unbaptized infants lose the beatific vision when they die but suffer no further torment. (Many would follow his judgment, including Thomas Aquinas.) In standard medieval doctrine, the penalty for original sin was privation of the beatific vision—mortal sins were punished with eternal damnation. According to the doctrine of limbo, infants who die without baptism are consigned to an intermediate state between heaven and hell. The Council of Trent

87. Augustine, *The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins* I.19.24 (*The Works of Saint Augustine: Answer to the Pelagians*, vol. 1, ed. John Rotelle, trans. Roland J. Teske [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997], 46–47).

88. Augustine, *Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian* V.29 (*The Works of Saint Augustine: Answer to the Pelagians*, vol. 3, ed. John Rotelle, trans. Roland J. Teske [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1999], 554).

89. Augustine, *The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins* I.28.56 (*The Works of Saint Augustine: Answer to the Pelagians*, vol. 1, ed. John Rotelle, trans. Roland J. Teske [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997], 66).

90. Augustine, *Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian* V.9 (*The Works of Saint Augustine: Answer to the Pelagians*, vol. 3, ed. John Rotelle, trans. Roland J. Teske [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1999], 521–22).

91. Augustine, *Marriage and Desire* I.20.22 (*The Works of Saint Augustine: Answer to the Pelagians*, vol. 2, ed. John Rotelle, trans. Roland J. Teske [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1998], 42–43).

92. E.g., see Augustine, *The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins* I.16.21 (*The Works of Saint Augustine: Answer to the Pelagians*, vol. 1, ed. John Rotelle, trans. Roland J. Teske [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997], 45). For this paragraph, I am relying on the report by the Roman Catholic Church’s International Theological Commission, “The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptised” (2007). Available online: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070419_un-baptised-infants_en.html (accessed May 28, 2020).

would give its stamp of approval to Augustine's baptismal regeneration: "If any one denies, that, by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is conferred in baptism, the guilt of original sin is remitted; or even asserts that the whole of that which has the true and proper nature of sin is not taken away . . . let him be anathema."⁹³ Baptismal regeneration remains official Catholic dogma, but Catholic theologians today reject the theory of limbo and hold out hope for the salvation of all infants who die.⁹⁴

Christians, however, should reject baptismal regeneration.⁹⁵ Baptism cannot erase sin, nor can it secure union with Christ and eternal life. Abraham was counted righteous when he believed the Lord (Gen. 15:6). Salvation comes by grace through faith in Christ (e.g., John 3:14–16; Gal. 3:9; 1 John 5:1). Baptismal regeneration is antithetical to justification by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8–9), having the form of godliness but denying its power. As the Westminster divines put it, "The justification of believers under the old testament was, in all these respects, one and the same with the justification of believers under the new testament."⁹⁶ The countless baptized infants who grow up without any evidence of true faith testify against baptismal regeneration. As Charles Hodge wrote:

Regeneration is no slight matter. It is a new birth; a new creation; a resurrection from spiritual death to spiritual life. It is a change, wrought by the exceeding greatness of God's power, analogous to that which was wrought in Christ, when He was raised from the dead, and exalted to the right hand of the majesty on high. It cannot therefore remain without visible effect. It controls the whole inward and outward life of its subject, so that he becomes a new man in Christ Jesus. The mass of those baptized, however, exhibit no evidence of any such change.⁹⁷

Augustine was wrong about baptismal regeneration, yet he was right about original guilt. Strictly speaking, no infant is innocent; all infants are guilty in the courtroom of heaven, which is why Christ's atonement is glad tidings, indeed.

Many credobaptist theologians contest this notion of original guilt. David Smith insists that inherited guilt is nowhere in Scripture—"the Bible teaches that the father's sin will not be charged against his children; we may conclude, then, that God does not impute the sin of Adam against his posterity."⁹⁸ Everyone is condemned for personal,

93. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), 2:87.

94. See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), §§977–978.

95. Cf. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, and Co., 1873), 3:590–604.

96. WCF 11.6, in *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as Adopted by the Presbyterian Church in America with Proof Texts* (Lawrenceville: Christian Education & Publications Committee of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2007), 55–56.

97. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:603.

98. David Smith, *With Willful Intent: A Theology of Sin* (Wheaton, IL: Bridgepoint, 1994), 368.

not hereditary, sin. Infants are innocent until they reach an age of accountability, the idea that persons are not morally responsible until they reach a certain age (e.g., twelve or thirteen years old).⁹⁹ Adam's sin, Smith argues, pollutes all human beings with innate "tendencies that later lead to actual transgression."¹⁰⁰ Millard Erickson draws on the same age of accountability concept and concludes that infants who die are not under condemnation (citing Deut. 1:39; Isa. 7:15–16; Jonah 4:11). The parallelism between Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12–21, he thinks, implies that Adam's guilt is only imputed once we consciously sin—just as Christ's righteousness is only imputed once we have faith. If a child dies before personally sinning, Adam's sin is not imputed, and God forgives them based on Christ's atonement.¹⁰¹ Adam Harwood, who also rejects inherited guilt, argues "that people receive from Adam a sinful nature but later become guilty due to their own sinful thoughts, attitudes, and actions."¹⁰² Most Baptists in North America—except for Particular or Reformed Baptists—hold to a corruption-only position that relies on the concept of an age of accountability.¹⁰³

99. Smith, *Willful Intent*, 371: "those who do not reach a point of awareness and accountability are in a state of imputed innocence in which their sins are covered by the finished work of Christ on Calvary." For an attempt to justify this concept of accountability, see Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 581.

100. Smith, *Willful Intent*, 368. Smith is citing Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth: A Summary of Christian Doctrine Based on Biblical Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 290. The Baptist theologian E. Y. Mullins is another forerunner to Smith's position.

101. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 582. For a defense of the age of accountability as central to the Southern Baptist Convention, see Steve Lemke, "What is a Baptist? Nine Marks that Separate Baptists from Presbyterians," *Journal for Baptist Theology & Mission* 5.2 (2008): 27. But see Kenneth Gore, "A Response to Steve W. Lemke's 'What is A Baptist?: Nine Marks that Separate Baptists from Presbyterians,'" *Journal for Baptist Theology & Mission* 5.2 (2008): 60: "while I follow the basic idea of the 'age of accountability,' it is very difficult to find suitable biblical citations regarding this tenet. . . . While Baptists cannot find scriptural support for pedobaptism, the same could be said of the 'age of accountability.'"

102. Adam Harwood, *The Spiritual Condition of Infants: A Biblical-Historical Survey and Systematic Proposal* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 40. Cf. Adam Harwood, *Born Guilty? A Southern Baptist View of Original Sin* (Carrollton, TX: Free Church Press, 2013). For Reformed/Particular Baptists who accept infant guilt, see Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 2:660–64; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 499–501; Toby Jennings, *Precious Enemy: A Biblical Portrait of Death* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 161–93; Schreiner, "Original Sin and Original Death," 276, 286–87; and R. Albert Mohler and Daniel Akin, "The Salvation of the 'Little Ones': Do Infants who Die Go to Heaven?" (July 16, 2009). Available online: <https://albertmohler.com/2009/07/16/the-salvation-of-the-little-ones-do-infants-who-die-go-to-heaven> (accessed May 28, 2020). Drawing specifically on the Second London Baptist Confession (1689), see Obbie Todd, "Infant Election," *Founders Journal* 109 (Summer 2017): 28–38.

103. For more examples of Baptist theologians who deny original guilt and infant baptism, see J. Mark Beach, "Original Sin, Infant Salvation, and the Baptism of Infants: A Critique of Some Contemporary Baptist Authors," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 12 (2011): 47–79. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Particular Baptists who were committed to the Second London Baptist Confession (1689) endorsed infant guilt and thus rejected the concept of an age of accountability, e.g., John Gill, *Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity; or, A System of Practical Truths* (London: Button and Son, and Whittingham and Arliss, 1815), 231–35. On the

Aside from our earlier criticism of corruption-only accounts, we must register further misgivings with the Baptist hamartiology presented here. This approach leaves infants with an ambiguous soteriological status.¹⁰⁴ On this view, infants inherit a corrupt nature from Adam, incur no guilt, and are under no penalty of eternal damnation. Christ's propitiatory (and expiatory) atonement is unnecessary for them since—by definition—they are guilty of nothing. Instead of Christ's atonement, they need the Spirit's regenerative power to erase indwelling corruption. In effect, this position leaves us with two kinds of sinners and two kinds of salvation.¹⁰⁵ Adults are guilty and need atonement for the forgiveness of sins, whereas infants need regeneration without atonement. The age of accountability doctrine also implies that severely mentally disabled individuals are not capable of sin and thus need no savior. Indeed, according to this theory, countless people will end up in the new earth because they never needed a savior (for they were never sinners).¹⁰⁶ This scenario is antithetical to the biblical witness that *all* the redeemed are those who have been justified by God's grace (e.g., Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:21–22; 1 John 2:2).¹⁰⁷

In Reformed Federalism, by contrast, infants are sinful from conception (Ps. 51:5) and incur original guilt from God's imputation of Adam's sin to each of his descendants. All infants face eternal damnation unless they are born again unless Christ atones for their sins and justifies them by grace through faith. In the Roman Catholic tradition, following Augustine, baptism communicates the grace of regeneration *ex opere operato*, thereby objectively purifying the stain of original guilt. Anti-sacramental traditions hold a symbolic view of baptism that has no bearing on original guilt's presence (or absence). Instead of either of these options, I hold a Reformed account of baptism as a sign and seal of the covenant of grace. In the Old Testament, circumcision was given to male infants as the sign of the Abrahamic covenant—"This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep" (Gen. 17:10). After this promise was fulfilled in Acts 2:39 ("The promise is for you *and your children*"), circumcision as the covenant sign was replaced with baptism of male *and female* infants, reflecting the richer, wider, deeper blessings of the new covenant (Col. 2:11–12).

Baptism signifies a trove of covenant blessings, including union with Christ in his death and resurrection. As Paul says, "we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body" (1 Cor. 12:13, cf. Rom. 6:3–6; Gal. 3:27–28). Baptism also stands in for

Particular Baptist tradition, see James Renihan, *Edification and Beauty: The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists, 1675–1705* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008); and Samuel Renihan, *From Shadow to Substance: The Federal Theology of the English Particular Baptists (1642–1704)* (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2018).

104. I am drawing on Beach, "Original Sin."

105. Beach, "Original Sin," 78.

106. Terrance Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?: Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 78; *contra* Paul Copan, "Original Sin and Christian Philosophy," *Philosophia Christi* 5.2 (2003): 529–30.

107. As a Reformed Baptist who accepts infant guilt, Tiessen speculates that elect infants are somehow enabled by God to put their faith in Christ: "Whether that revelational confrontation takes place at some point in the prenatal life of the infant or at the moment of death when the infant meets Christ, we do not know" (*Who Can Be Saved*, 215).

the remission of sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Pet. 3:21) and the cleansing of our moral corruption by the Spirit (e.g., John 3:5; 1 Cor. 6:11; Titus 3:5).¹⁰⁸ “In the New Testament,” Anthony Lane points out, “salvation, union with Christ, forgiveness, washing, regeneration and receiving the Holy Spirit are all attributed to baptism.”¹⁰⁹ Baptism itself, however, is a sign and seal pointing visibly to the grace of God received by faith.¹¹⁰ Regeneration can occur at baptism, or even earlier, perhaps in the womb (Luke 1:41), or it can happen years afterward—only God knows at what point he regenerates a person by his Word and Spirit.¹¹¹

Original guilt reminds us that children are sinners like everyone else (even if they have committed no actual sins). The children of believers are included in the covenant of grace. They need Christ’s substitutionary atonement for their guilt before God. As J. Mark Beach declares, “those who are united with Christ, according to divine promise, are the objects of God’s saving mercy and so likewise the proper subjects of baptism—believers and their children.”¹¹² In the waters of baptism, God extends to infant sinners the promise (the sign!) of salvation, regeneration, union with Christ, and the forgiveness of sins.¹¹³

3.1.2. Sin, Death, and Original Guilt

Original guilt is relevant to the human experience of death. Infants die because they are already sinners. Augustine thought so: “[W]hy do little ones also die if they are not subject to the sin of that first human being? Are the little ones, then, rescued from the kingdom of death in any other way than by him in whom all will be brought to life?”¹¹⁴ His rhetorical questions presuppose death as the consequence of sin. In what

108. The cited passages depict regeneration as washing with water; it is reasonable to think that baptism signifies the same reality. On the remission of sins, John Murray remarks that baptism represents “purification from the guilt of sin by the sprinkling of the blood of Christ.” *Christian Baptism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 5.

109. Anthony Lane, *Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue: An Evangelical Assessment* (New York: T&T Clark, 2002), 187, cited in Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 713.

110. For discussion, see Murray, *Christian Baptism*; Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 705–23; and Bavink, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:521–39.

111. Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 715. The relationship between infant baptism, election, and regeneration is a well-worn intra-Reformed debate (see, for example, the controversy over Abraham Kuypers’s defense of “presumptive regeneration”). See Richard Mouw, “Baptism and the Salvific Status of Children: An Examination of Some Intra-Reformed Debates,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 41 (2006): 238–54; and Erik A. de Boer, “O, Ye Women, Think of Thy Innocent Children, When They Die Young!’ The Canons of Dordt (First Head, Article Seventeen) between Polemic and Pastoral Theology,” in *Revisiting the Synod of Dordt (1618–1619)*, ed. Aza Goudriaan and Fred van Lieburg (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 262–90.

112. Beach, “Original Sin,” 79.

113. Reformed Baptists who affirm original guilt will disagree with my analysis of infant baptism. For example, see Jeffrey D. Johnson, *The Fatal Flaw of the Theology Behind Infant Baptism* (Conway, AR: Free Grace Press, 2017).

114. Augustine, *Answer to Julian* 1.6.24 (*The Works of Saint Augustine: Answers to the Pelagians*, vol. 2, ed. John Rotelle, trans. Roland J. Teske [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1998], 284).

follows, I will argue that the tragedy of infant death is a compelling argument for the imputation of Adam's guilt.

Modern theologians are not so sure. According to David Fergusson, for example, Scripture rejects the idea that physical death is a punishment for sin: "Indeed," he says, "the prevailing view seems to be that death as a return to the dust is the natural lot of human beings who organically came from the dust."¹¹⁵ J. Richard Middleton argues that death in Genesis 2 and 3 is "the antithesis of flourishing," *not* "the contrast between mere existence and the extinction of existence; nor does it refer to immortality versus mortality."¹¹⁶ Similarly, John Zizioulas recoils at the idea that death is God's punishment for Adam's sin, for then "God himself introduced this horrible evil which he then tried through his Son to remove." Zizioulas contends that creation was "from the beginning in a state of mortality—owing to its having had a beginning—and awaiting the arrival of man in order to overcome this predicament."¹¹⁷ These witnesses reflect the opinion of many that Adam's sin did not bring about physical death.

Scripture opposes this way of reasoning. At the outset of the canonical narrative, after Adam's fall, God metes out death as part of a judicial *curse* (Gen. 3:17–19)—"for dust you are and to dust you will return." Rendering death natural to God's creation strips the curse of all meaning. Some have suggested that the curse is *premature* death (not death *per se*). But that move will not work because verses 17–18 imply a long life of toilsome labor culminating in death.¹¹⁸ As John Stott writes, "The Bible everywhere views human death not as a *natural* but as a *penal* event. It is an alien intrusion into God's good world, and not part of his original intention for humankind."¹¹⁹ Human life is from God's Spirit (Gen. 2:7). Death is antithetical to creation; it is the absence of life, separation from God. Breaking the law is punishable by death—"Anyone who strikes a person with a fatal blow is to be put to death" (Ex. 21:12; see also Lev. 20:2, 9–13, 15–16, 27; Deut. 22:21, 24; and *passim*). God himself inflicts the death of the wicked, as he did at Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18–19) and among the Canaanites (Num. 21:2–3; Josh. 6:17, 21), the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:1–9), the Hittites, the Hivites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, and so on (e.g., Deut. 20:16–18). Death as a *natural* function of creaturely being clashes with

115. David Fergusson, *Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 38. Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 2:267: "From the 18th century onward . . . the opinion gained ground in Protestant theology that for us, as for other forms of life, death is part of the finitude of our nature. . . . Not the objective fact of death but our subjective experience of it is understood as the consequence of sin."

116. J. Richard Middleton, "Reading Genesis 3 Attentive to Human Evolution: Beyond Concordism and Non-Overlapping Magisteria," in *Evolution and the Fall*, ed. William Cavanaugh and James K. A. Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 79.

117. John D. Zizioulas, *The Eucharistic Communion and the World*, ed. Luke Ben Tallon (New York: Continuum, 2011), 173.

118. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948), 48.

119. John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester: IVP, 1986), 65. Pannenberg concedes that "sin in particular must have death for its natural consequence, inasmuch as the opposition to God contained in sin reaches its logical term in a complete separation from God that is sealed by death." Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, 40.

such biblical narratives in their portrayal of death as divine *punishment*. The wages of sin, Scripture says, is death (Rom. 6:23). Death is the last enemy (1 Cor. 15:26). Isaiah prophesies a day when death will be no more (Isa. 25:8). One day our tears will be wiped away forever (Rev. 21:4). The logic of salvation falls to pieces if mortality is native to God's original creation.¹²⁰

This sin-death nexus emerges in the work of Christ.¹²¹ Christ's physical death is central to the atonement. He died for our sins according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:3); we were reconciled by his physical body through death (Col. 1:22). As the apostle says, Jesus bore our sins on his body on the tree "so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; 'by his wounds you have been healed'" (1 Pet. 2:24). Death entered the world through the first Adam (Rom. 5:12). Still, it was in dying—being obedient to death on a cross (Phil. 2:8)—that the last Adam secured our justification, sanctification, and glorification. Sin also lies behind the suffering and decay that herald death. The healing miracles of Jesus ostensibly reversed the effects of sin on human lives. The death of Christ, Isaiah says, atoned for human suffering and disease (Isa. 53:4; Matt. 8:17). To be sure, reimagining death as intrinsic to the world *as created* resonates with scientific sensibilities, but its revisionism pays a steep price, driving a wedge between Christ as creator and Christ as redeemer. Are we to believe that death was part of the Son's original creation, only for him then to defeat it at the cross (1 Cor. 15:55), that disease and death are natural processes, even though Jesus miraculously healed the sick and raised the dead throughout his earthly ministry? This convoluted logic pits creation and redemption against each other.

If sin causes suffering and death—as I have argued—then that raises a dilemma. Even though infants are not guilty of any personal sins, many have suffered and died throughout history. If they are sinless, why do they experience death? I suggest that they have an original guilt imputed from Adam. Difficult pastoral questions immediately press in, and here I speak with halting lips. Scripture gives us grounds to be confident that covenant children are elect; the apostle Peter reiterates that the promise is to believing parents *and their children* (Acts 2:39). In premature death, the child's imputed guilt is forgiven based on Christ's atonement. I am agnostic, however, on the fate of uncovenanted children who die in infancy—I trust them to the Lord's righteous judgment.¹²²

120. Scripture at times does speak about death in neutral or even "positive" ways (e.g., Gen. 25:8; Phil. 1:21–23). As Stephen Lloyd remarks, however, "these are examples of those who have hope even in the face of death because its 'sting' has been removed (1 Cor. 15:56). Physical death itself is the inevitable end to a process that is not viewed so positively: the body is 'wasting away' (2 Cor. 4:16). The fact that death can be a source of rejoicing for a believer does not make it something good, any more than rejoicing in suffering makes suffering good." Stephen Lloyd, "Christian Theology and Neo-Darwinism are Incompatible: An Argument from the Resurrection," in Graeme Finlay, Stephen Lloyd, Stephen Pattemore, and David Swift, *Debating Darwin: Two Debates: Is Darwinism True and Does It Matter* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), 17.

121. In this paragraph, I am drawing on Stephen Lloyd, "Chronological Creationism," *Foundations* 72 (May 2017): 76–99.

122. For a typology of various Reformed approaches to infant death, see B. B. Warfield, *The Development of the Doctrine of Infant Salvation* (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1891),

However, my claim that infant death implies original guilt is controversial. Other explanations are available to account for infant death. Adam Harwood, for instance, draws on Genesis 6:5–6 and 2 Samuel 12:23 to deny that original guilt causes infant death. Instead, he says, “infants are sometimes subject to the sweeping consequences of God’s judgment against the sinful behavior of their parents.”¹²³ Jesse Couenhoven argues likewise that infant death is the collateral damage of sin being in the world—“many parts of the creation suffer and die without sin.”¹²⁴ Infant death is a symptom of living in a fallen world. I can accept such accounts as *partial* explanations, but they fail as *ultimate* explanations in the face of the Old Testament sacrifices and Christ’s atonement.

The sacrificial system allowed God to dwell among sinful people—despite the consuming fire of his holiness (Deut. 4:24). Without atoning sacrifice, God was liable to destroy sinners (Ex. 33:3). This sacrificial ritual, like other rituals of the time, assumes the principle of a covenant household. Anyone included in the patriarchal household was covered. Much like the circumcision of the patriarch covered the females in the family, the sacrifices of the adults covered the children (e.g., in Lev. 10:14, children were included in the fellowship offerings). In his discussion of various OT sacrifices, Gordon Wenham confirms that individuals sacrificed for themselves and their families, including infants.¹²⁵ These sacrifices anticipated the spotless sacrifice of Christ and his atonement for our sins (Heb. 10:1–4). My argument, in a nutshell, is this: Atonement, by definition, entails the guilt of the recipient. Since the sacrifices in the Old Testament were offered for all, including babies, and since Christ’s atonement in the New Testament covers infant sinners, it follows that infants have Adam’s imputed guilt.

35–50. Interestingly, Warfield concluded that *all* infants—covenanted *and* uncovenanted—who die are elect (as did Charles Hodge, *inter alia*, who claimed the backing of the Westminster Standards). While well intentioned, I doubt that this position is sustainable. See the convincing critique in David Clark, “Warfield, Infant Salvation, and the Logic of Calvinism,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27.4 (1984): 459–464. Although Philip Schaff was writing from an anti-Calvinistic stance, I agree with his critique of Hodge: “For the term ‘*elect* infants,’ in ch. X., 3, plainly implies, in the Calvinistic system, ‘non-elect’ or ‘reprobate infants.’ If the Confession meant to teach the salvation of *all* infants dying in infancy, as held by Dr. Hodge and nearly all the Presbyterian divines in America, it would have either said ‘*all* infants,’ or simply ‘infants.’ To explain ‘*elect*’ to mean ‘*all*,’ is not only ungrammatical and illogical, but fatal to the whole system of limited election, and would make it universal. If *elect infants* is equivalent to *all infants*, then *elect adults* would be equivalent to *all adults*.” *Creed Revision and the Westminster Standards* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1890), 17.

123. Harwood, *Spiritual Condition*, 55.

124. Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin*, 212n39. Paul Copan appeals to original corruption to explain infant death and the need for atonement. My earlier critique of the corruption-only position applies here. Cf. Copan, “Original Sin,” 529–31, 539.

125. Gordon Wenham, “The Theology of Old Testament Sacrifice,” in *Sacrifice in the Bible*, ed. Roger Beckwith and Martin Selman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), 85.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, let me circle back to an earlier point in my argument—original guilt preserves divine justice.¹²⁶ Sin entered the world through Adam (Rom. 5:12). God was just to punish him for the transgression since he disobeyed a direct command. Adam brought on himself the irreversible corruption of human nature and lost fellowship with God. As a result, *all* Adam’s descendants are subsequently born into the same condition as fallen Adam—morally corrupt, destitute of any righteousness, condemned to suffering and death. While it is true that we have corporate solidarity with Adam and thus suffer from the consequences of his sin, God himself condemned all humanity for that first transgression in Eden—“through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners” (Rom. 5:19). At this point, Blocher rightly asks: “Can we see how it is *right*, under the righteous God’s sovereign rule, that Adam’s descendants find themselves deprived of the gift of divine fellowship, and therefore enmeshed in a destructive disorder at all levels of their nature, which affects heredity; and that they find themselves the slaves of their own pride, greed, lies and fears, under the tyranny of the Evil One?”¹²⁷ God cannot punish us without just cause—“Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen. 18:25). As Andrew Leslie notes, “the universal imposition of punishment needs a legal foundation in some real sin, otherwise it is profoundly unjust.”¹²⁸ Adam’s federal headship *is* that legal foundation, the imputation of his sin its juridical consequence. God is just to condemn the entire human race because he counted us as guilty of Adam’s sin.

Original guilt permeates the biblical story. Scripture is the story of God redeeming man. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Our sins are individually forgiven (Ps. 32:1–2). All of humanity stands guilty before God; Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin (Rom. 3:9); all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). Redemption implies guilt. No one is innocent. Adults and infants need redemption. In Christ’s propitiatory sacrifice, God imputes our guilt to him on the cross and his righteousness to us (2 Cor. 5:21). Original guilt is a function of fallen human existence and the postulate of atonement and the forgiveness of sins.

The question looms nonetheless. Does this doctrine have a future in a post-Christian, scientifically enlightened milieu? My wager is a full-throated *Yes*.¹²⁹ After all, that strange pelican was the medieval symbol of Christ’s atonement.¹³⁰ The doctrine of original guilt will prevail whatever the countervailing winds, for nothing

126. My remarks in this paragraph are indebted to Leslie, “Original Sin,” 351–53.

127. Blocher, *Original Sin*, 129.

128. Leslie, “Original Sin,” 352.

129. Granted, the doctrine of original guilt faces a range of difficult scientific challenges. However, as I explained at the outset of this essay, I have chosen to set aside those questions in order to focus narrowly on dogmatic objections. I address the former set of concerns in *The Evolution of Sin? Sin, Theistic Evolution, and the Biological Question—A Theological Account* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, forthcoming).

130. Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 24–25.

can quash the glory of the atonement. The logic of redemption is unshakable. Oh, eternity! Blessed eternity! Wonder of wonders! Unspeakably glorious, a day without end filled with psalms of thanksgiving to the Holy One of Israel for his tender mercies toward sinners like us.¹³¹

131. Thanks to Robert Erle Barham, J. Mark Beach, Cam Clausing, Bill Davis, Travis Hutchinson, Chandler Kelley, Andrew Leslie, Flavien Pardigon, Michael Radmacher, and Stephen Williams for their comments on an earlier draft.