

Thoughts on Original Sin

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Introduction

The traditional view of "original sin" includes two related ideas:

First, "original sin" has traditionally included the idea that all people inherit from Adam a corrupted nature that is bent toward (or "predisposed" to) sin. Just as a potted plant placed near a window inevitably bends toward the light of the window, so inside each of our hearts is something that draws us to rebel against the authority of God. This tendency may be masked to some extent if one receives proper training and discipline as a child, just as the owner of the potted plant may rotate the pot a little each day to offset the pull of the light. However, the inner predisposition remains beneath the surface (as potted plant owners learn after returning from a week's vacation and finding the once straight-stalked plant arched precariously toward the window). This inherited predisposition leads all individuals to commit sin.

Second, "original sin" has traditionally included the teaching that all people not only commit personal acts of sin due to the inherited predisposition described above, but they also *share in the guilt of Adam's initial sin* of eating the forbidden fruit. This guilt that the descendants share with Adam is considered to stand logically prior to the descendants' own personal acts of sin, and in itself is considered sufficient grounds to place all of Adam's descendants under God's condemnation. The concept of sharing in Adam's guilt is commonly understood in terms parallel to Christ's relationship to believers: Just as justification has traditionally been held to involve the crediting of Christ's own record of righteousness to believers, so original sin has been held to involve the crediting of Adam's sin to all of his descendants.

The traditional view of original sin, then, involves two distinct cause/effect chains, which can be diagrammed as follows:

Traditional Interpretation (two chains):

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| Chain | Adam sinned |
| #1: | |
| | > Descendants inherit predisposition to sin |
| | > Descendants sin |
| | > Descendants guilty/subject to death for their own sins |
| Chain #2: | Adam sinned |
| | |
| | > Descendants guilty/subject to death for Adam's sin |

There is an alternative interpretation, however, which accepts chain #1 above but denies the existence of chain #2. According to this alternative view, each individual is born with a predisposition to sin, but incurs guilt before God only for his *own* personal sins, as he acts on his innate predisposition and breaks God's Law (which all people do; Mk. 10:18; Rom. 3:9, 19, 23; 11:32; Gal. 3:22).

Alternative Interpretation (one chain only):

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| Chain #1: | Adam sinned |
| | |
| | > Descendants inherit predisposition to sin |
| | > Descendants sin |
| | > Descendants guilty/subject to death for their own sins |

In Part One of this essay I will argue for this alternative view, paying special attention to the key passage regarding this issue, Rom. 5:12-21. In Part Two I will look more closely at the question *when* in a person's individual history does that person becomes guilty before God.

Part One: Of Whose Sin Are We Guilty?

The most important passage widely held to support the traditional view of original sin is Rom. 5:12-21.

12Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned-- 13 for until the Law sin was in the world; but sin is not imputed when there is no law. 14 Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned

in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. 15 But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many. 16 And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification. 17 For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. 18 So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. 19 For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous. 20 And the Law came in that the transgression might increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, 21 that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The key phrases in this passage to which supporters of the traditional view point are:

"by the transgression of the one [i.e., Adam] the many died" (vs 15)

"the judgment arose from one transgression [i.e., Adam's sin] resulting in condemnation" (v 16)

"by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one" (vs 17)

"through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men" (vs 18)

"through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners" (vs 19)

(Note: all translations used here are taken from the New American Standard Bible)

Clearly there is in all of these phrases a cause-effect relationship between Adam's sin (i.e., the cause) and the resulting condemnation/guilt and death of all men (the effect). This much no one questions. What is in question is *to which of the two proposed cause/effect chains* (i.e., the chains #1 or #2 mentioned earlier) *does Rom. 5:12-21 refer?* Supporters of the traditional view of original sin claim that Rom. 5:12-21 refers to what I have called chain #2, that is, the idea that Adam's sin leads *directly* to his descendants' guilt in one immediate step, prior to any consideration of the descendants' own personal acts of sin. In this view, each person is guilty not merely of his own sins, but is guilty first and foremost of the original sin act committed by Adam. The alternative view for which I will argue below says that Rom. 5:12-21 refers instead to chain #1 (and that there is no chain #2). That is, Adam's sin leads to a *chain of secondary causes and effects culminating in the final effect* of his descendants' guilt. In this view, the above cause-effect statements from Romans 5 describe the head and tail (i.e., the beginning and ending points) of a chain of causes and effects: Adam's sin (the head of the chain) caused the descendants to inherit a predisposition to sin, which in turn leads each descendant to commit personal acts of sin, for which God then holds the descendants guilty and subject to death (the tail of the chain).

How can we decide between these two interpretations? Let's begin by considering the following question that is immediately raised by the traditional interpretation (though supporters of the traditional interpretation have an answer for this objection--see below): *Why* would God hold all people guilty for a sin which was committed by someone else years (in most cases, millennia) before they were even born? Though it is true that Scripture speaks of the sins of the fathers being visited on subsequent generations (Ex. 20:5; Jer. 32:18), this is generally held to refer only to functional effects of sin (e.g., the damage to relationships that can result from harmful interpersonal habits handed down through the generations). Setting aside such functional consequences of sin, the Bible is clear that God does not hold the descendants *legally guilty* for their ancestors' sins. See, for example, Ezek. 18:4, 20 and Jer. 31:30 (which expand upon Deut. 24:16), where God unambiguously reveals that it is "the soul who sins [who] will die" (Ezek. 18:4). And yet, in the case of Adam's original sin, the traditional view is precisely that all of Adam's descendants are held legally guilty for the one sin act in Eden.

This apparent contradiction to the "soul-who-sins-will-die" principle is commonly avoided by proposing that each person in some sense actually *participated along with Adam* in Adam's sin, so that Adam's act of sin was in effect the act of us all. Consequently, the guilt from this one sin act can be rightly distributed to both Adam and his descendants, all of whom are said to have participated in the act. Various theories have been proposed as to how this joint participation with Adam should best be formulated, but the important point here is that in the traditional view Adam's sin is in one sense or another considered our sin as well, and we equally share in the guilt for this act.

At this point we need to be careful, however. Given that the idea of joint-participation in Adam's sin is on the face of it a rather unusual concept, we would want to have clear and compelling biblical evidence in favor of the idea before we accept it. Not that the notion is entirely without precedent, for admittedly it resembles in some ways the doctrine of substitutionary sacrifice employed to explain how Christ can function as our sin-bearer. Yet in the case of the imputation of our sins to Christ on the cross, there is an overwhelming weight of biblical evidence to support that teaching. The question at hand is whether there is sufficient biblical evidence to support the traditional doctrine of joint-participation in Adam's sin.

Proponents of this doctrine claim so. Evidence for joint-participation and resulting shared-guilt from Adam's sin is drawn not merely from the string of cause-effect phrases in Romans 5 listed above (though as I have noted above, these cause-effect phrases do not in themselves clearly favor the traditional interpretation over the alternative interpretation for which I am arguing). Support for the traditional view is also drawn from the fact that in this passage Adam is called a "type" of Christ (5:14), and the relationship between Adam and his descendants is paralleled to the relationship between Christ and Christians. The Bible teaches that Christians are in a spiritual union with Christ (e.g.,

John 15; Gal. 2:20; Col. 2:6-7; 1 Jn. 5:20), and this union has traditionally been taught to include that Christ's life of perfect righteousness is credited to each believer (a sort of joint-participation in Christ's righteousness), just as each believer's record of sin is credited to Christ. Because of the parallel between Adam and Christ in Romans 5, interpreters have traditionally interpreted Paul as implying that Adam's relationship to his descendants also involves a joint-participation principle. That is, Adam's descendants are credited with the guilt of Adam's sin in Eden, much as Christians are credited with Christ's perfect record of a righteous life.

Again caution is in order, however. Although there is without question a parallel drawn in Romans 5 between Adam and his descendants, on the one hand, and Christ and his followers, on the other, the existence of this parallel is not in itself enough to prove the traditional interpretation. The question is not simply whether a parallel is drawn in this passage, but *what is the specific content of this parallel*. There are various senses in which Adam might be argued to stand in a type relationship to Christ. The traditional interpretation of original sin is supported only if it can be shown that one aspect of this type relationship that Paul had in mind in Rom. 5:12-21 is the crediting of Christ's personal record of righteousness to His followers.

With this in mind, it is important to understand that *nowhere* in Rom. 5:12-21 is the traditional notion of believers' joint-participation in Christ's righteousness explicitly mentioned, nor is it even implicit in the passage. I have argued this point in detail (among other points) in the separate essay "[Thoughts on Imputed Righteousness](#)." The important aspects of my argument there in regard to Rom. 5:12-21 can be summarized as follows in terms of two observations.

First, the wording in vs. 18 is not what we would expect if the joint-participation principle were in view. Notice the reference to Christ's "one act of righteousness":

18 So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. 19 For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.

One of the key claims made by those who see the joint-participation principle in this passage is that the phrase "one act of righteousness" refers to Christ's lifelong record of obedience to the Law, which according to the traditional view is imputed to believers, thus resulting in "justification of life" to them. However, if Paul were indeed saying that Christ's personal record of righteousness is credited to all believers (and thus, that Adam's sin is credited to all people in the same way), we might expect vs. 18 to have instead stated that "through many acts of righteousness [i.e., the whole record of Jesus' righteous life] there resulted justification of life to all men." This would be so, because the parallel assumed in the traditional interpretation of Rom. 5:12-21 is between Adam's sin and Christ's righteousness, both of which are said to be credited to the respective populations in accordance with the joint-participation principle. However, in actuality the righteousness of Christ does not comprise only a single act, but rather the entire record of Christ's perfect fulfillment of the Law of God.

Paul does not say what we would expect him to say according to the traditional interpretation of this passage, because Paul is not basing his parallel between Adam and Christ on our joint-participation in Christ's righteous life at all. Rather, Paul is focusing on the "one act of righteousness" that he has just mentioned in 5:6-10, namely, Christ's decision to submit to die as our substitutionary sacrifice on the cross (notice in particular vs. 9, in which Paul states that our justification is "by [Christ's] blood"). This one act of righteousness, Christ's death, provided the basis for our justification, hence for eternal life to all who believe. Given the strong parallel between vss. 18 and 19, "the obedience of the One" in vs. 19 must likewise refer not to Christ's full record of righteousness credited to us but instead to Christ's particular act of obedience/righteousness in submitting to die on the cross (cf. Philp. 2:8).

Second, Paul's wording in vs. 16 is for similar reasons unexpected if we assume the traditional interpretation:

16 And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification.

If Paul had in mind the believer's joint participation in Christ's righteousness, we might expect him to have instead said that "the free gift arose from many acts of righteousness" (i.e., the many acts making up Christ's lifelong record of perfect righteousness). It was not, however, this joint-participation principle that Paul had in mind, but instead the "many transgressions" of humanity that made Christ's substitutionary death necessary (cf. 4:25). Again, then, we see in this passage that Paul bases our justification not on Christ's perfect life but on His substitutionary death.

From these two observations I conclude that Paul's references to Christ's "one act of righteousness" and His "obedience" in Rom. 5:18-19 refer to Christ's willingness to submit to a substitutionary death; they do not refer to Christ's lifelong record of obedience to the Law. Consequently, when Paul wrote this passage he did not appear to have in mind the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers (i.e., the principle of joint-participation in Christ's righteousness). Indeed, this doctrine does not surface anywhere at all in Romans. (In "[Thoughts on Imputed Righteousness](#)" I develop this further and argue that the principle of joint-participation in Christ's righteousness fails to find any support at all in Scripture, but I need not press that broader point for my purposes here.) Though the principles of justification and righteousness are dealt with throughout Romans, and issues related to the believer's union with Christ surface in chapters 6-8, in none of these cases does Paul discuss the idea of Christ's personal record of righteousness being credited to believers.

Romans 8:4 might appear to be the exception, if the "fulfillment" of the "requirements of the Law . . . in us" is taken to mean that Christ's perfect fulfillment of the Law is credited to us. However, a closer look reveals that this interpretation is not supported by the context.

3 For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, 4 in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.

Notice that the statement of the Law being "fulfilled in us" in vs. 4 must be understood in terms of the "weakness" of the Law mentioned in vs. 3; namely, the inability of the Law itself to foster experiential righteousness in one's life, as Paul so vividly described in the preceding chapter (7:14-25). Paul's point in 8:4, then, is that Christ's death achieved what the Law could not: it provides the basis for the Spirit's work in our lives (8:2, 13), by which we may experience victory over the flesh and fulfill the Law as we "walk according to the Spirit" (i.e., grow in Spirit-enabled, experiential righteousness). The primary focus here is on our experiential walk with Christ, not our objective legal standing before God. Therefore, the reference in 8:4 to the fulfillment of the Law's requirements in us refers not to our being objectively credited with Christ's righteousness (i.e., joint-participation in Christ's righteousness), but rather to the Spirit's enabling us to *experientially* keep the requirements of the Law, which are distilled in the law of love (Rom. 13:8-10).

So we see that the principle of the believer's joint-participation in Christ's righteousness, traditionally assumed by interpreters to form the basis of Paul's parallel between Adam and Christ in Rom. 5:12-21, does not surface in the book of Romans. This observation casts serious doubt on the traditional interpretation of 5:12-21, in that we would like to see some concrete evidence that Paul had this principle in mind before we conclude that he intended the relationship between Adam and his descendants to be interpreted from the same perspective of joint-participation.

What *is* explicitly stated in Romans 5 (building on Paul's arguments in the earlier chapters of Romans) is that our justification is by faith (not works), and that this justification leads to reconciliation (peace) with God. Immediately prior to 5:12-21 Paul has made the point that our future salvation from the wrath of God is guaranteed by the love of God (5:8-10), for if He loved us enough to provide for our justification through Christ's death while we were His enemies, surely He will continue loving us enough to honor Christ's continuing intercession on our behalf (this is the gist of "we shall be saved by His life" in 5:10, as a comparison with Heb 7:25 makes clear).

Moving on to the critical passage Rom. 5:12-21, Paul continues his discussion of the enduring, victorious love of God toward us, though now he highlights the scope of God's gracious gift of love to us through Christ by contrasting it to the "gift" bestowed on us through Adam. His main point in this passage is that whereas Adam's one act of sin led to disastrous consequences for the world (viz., condemnation and death), Jesus Christ's submission to suffer death on the cross leads to overwhelmingly greater benefits of grace for those who believe in Him (viz., righteousness and life). As noted above, though this passage clearly teaches that there is a type relationship between Adam and Christ, the passage does not indicate that the content of this type relationship is meant to include a parallel between the Christ's personal record of righteousness being credited to the believer, on the one hand, and the guilt of Adam's sin being credited to Adam's descendants, on the other. Consequently, Paul's use of phrases such as the one in vs. 18 "through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men" need not entail a simple, one-step relationship from cause to effect, but can instead refer to the head and tail of a chain of multiple causes and effects, as was discussed earlier (i.e., where the inheritance of a predisposition to sin and each individual's choice to act on that predisposition are the middle links in the chain).

There is, in fact, strong evidence within this passage itself to indicate that Paul did not intend to teach that Adam's descendants are held guilty of Adam's sin. Consider carefully the wording used in vs. 12:

"Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned--"

If the traditional interpretation were correct, we would expect the final phrase of this verse to be worded differently, perhaps along the following lines:

"and so death spread to all men, because Adam sinned,"

or perhaps

"and so death spread to all men, because all sinned in Adam."

However, this is not the case. Instead, the verse indicates that the direct cause for the universal scope of death is the *universal scope of sin*. All people die because *all people sin*; that is, each person acts on the predisposition to sin that he has inherited from Adam. This cause-effect phrase in vs. 12, "death spread to all men, because all sinned," is different then from all of the other cause-effect phrases quoted earlier from 5:15-19, in that only vs. 12 names the *immediate* cause for universal death, namely, universal sin. Whereas universal guilt/death is the *ultimate* effect, then, within the larger cause-effect chain characterized in 5:12-21, universal sin (committed by each individual acting on his predispositions) is the *penultimate* link in this chain. It is significant that Paul makes this understanding clear in vs. 12 (i.e., the opening verse of the thought-structure in 5:12-21), where it is in a position to guide our interpretation of Paul's other cause-effect statements in vss. 15-19. In view of vs. 12, it becomes clear that Adam's sin mentioned in vss. 15-19 cannot be the *immediate* cause of universal guilt (the ultimate effect) in these verses, for the immediate cause has already been identified in vs. 12 as being *universal sin* (i.e., not Adam's sin, but instead each individual's sin). Adam's sin lies farther up the chain of cause/effects at the very head of the chain, for Adam's sin marked only the "entrance" of sin into the world (see vs. 12) and the initial corruption of human nature toward a predisposition to sin, a predisposition which was passed down to all the descendants.

To summarize so far, a close examination of Rom. 5:12-21 and the broader context suggests that when Paul drew a parallel between Adam and Christ in this passage, he did not intend to teach that Adam's sin in Eden is credited to Adam's descendants in the same way that Christ's perfect record of righteousness is traditionally said to be credited to

all believers in Christ (what I have here called the joint-participation principle). The joint-participation principle between Christ and his followers is neither explicit nor implicit in Rom. 5:12-21 or anywhere else in the epistle to the Romans. In 5:16 and 5:18 in particular, Adam's sin is paralleled not to Christ's perfect record of righteousness (as assumed in the traditional interpretation of this passage) but rather to Christ's decision to submit to a substitutionary death (His "one act of righteousness"). Moreover, the opening verse (5:12) of the critical passage in question indicates that the direct, immediate cause of the universal scope of death is the universal scope of sin (i.e., not Adam's particular sin).

These observations cast serious doubt on the traditional formulation of original sin (i.e., that Adam's descendants are counted guilty for Adam's sin in Eden) and provide support for the alternative interpretation outlined earlier, namely, that Adam's sin was the initial cause in a chain of causes and effects, in which all of Adam's descendants inherit a predisposition to sin upon which each descendant personally acts, this personal sin in turn leading to each individual's condemnation before God.

Part Two: When Do We Become Guilty?

There is still one common objection to the alternative view of original sin espoused here that I have not yet addressed. Dealing with this objection will require us to shift our focus slightly and look in more detail at the question of *when* a person becomes guilty of sin. The objection is this: If the alternative formulation of original sin argued for above is correct, then how do we explain those passages of Scripture which seem to indicate that humans are born in a sinful state, prior to any personal experience of sin? Consider, for example, the most common verse mentioned in this regard, Ps. 51:5.

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me. (cf. also Ps. 58:3)

If we assume that this is not simply a hyperbole, or poetic exaggeration, and if David (and presumably the rest of us as well) was conceived "in sin," this verse indicates that David was in some sense considered sinful even before he was born, prior to any personal decision on his part one way or the other. This might appear to conflict with the position that I have argued for above, namely, that we are not held guilty before God until we have personally acted on our inherited predisposition to sin.

There are two possible interpretations of Ps. 51:5, however, that are compatible with the view of original sin that I have argued for above. First, it may be that merely having a predisposition to sin, even apart from consciously acting on that predisposition, is itself grounds for guilt before God. That is, because we inherit (presumably from the time of conception) a corrupt nature that is bent toward sin, we are by nature less than what God intends for humanity to be. This would be true even if one were never to have the opportunity to act on that nature (which, e.g., would arguably be so in the case of an unborn child that dies in the womb). From this perspective, then, David might rightly say that he bore the guilt of "iniquity" and "sin" even from conception. Note that this is very different from saying that when David was conceived he bore the guilt for *Adam's* sin. Instead, we are considering here the possibility that from the time of conception David bore his *own* guilt due to being *in a state predisposed to* commit sin.

The second possible interpretation of Ps. 51:5 assumes that no guilt accrues from merely having a predisposition toward sin; guilt is incurred only when a morally awakened individual acts on that predisposition (see below for discussion of what it means to be "morally awakened"). According to this interpretation, the phrases "in iniquity" and "in sin" in Ps. 51:5 do not refer to any guilt arising from David's inherent predisposition to sin; instead, these phrases are simply David's way of referring to the innate predisposition itself. In this view, then, Ps. 51:5 is not saying that David actually bore guilt from the time of his conception, but rather that he had always been in a state predisposed toward sin.

While not ruling out the first of the above interpretations of Ps 51:5, I lean toward the second for several reasons:

1. When Paul in Romans chapters 1 and 2 argues his case for why all human beings, even if they do not have access to the explicit Law of God, are "without excuse" (1:20), he consistently refers to intentional acts occurring in one's personal experience, not to a state prior to experience. Thus, for example, Paul argues that all people "suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (1:18), that "even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened" (1:21), and that "they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (1:25). The list of sins in 1:26-32 are likewise all intentional acts resulting from a "depraved mind" (1:28). Significantly, Paul caps this discussion of humanity's culpability by appealing to the role of the conscience in bearing witness against each person (2:15). Given that the activity of the conscience presupposes personal moral experience, this again supports the view that guilt accrues only from acting on one's predisposition to sin in the context of a morally awakened conscience, and not from simply having the predisposition itself.

2. In Rom. 7:8 Paul teaches that "apart from the Law, sin is dead." Paul seems here to be teaching that sin is in some sense not fully realized in an individual's personal history until it is activated by an awareness of the moral Law (either through exposure to the Torah, as in the typical case of Mosaic Jews, or through a developing awareness of the inner moral Law which is "written in the hearts" even of Gentiles (Rom. 2:12-16)). The context suggests that Paul has in mind the development of an awareness of the moral demands of Law in each individual's personal history, presumably at some point in childhood for individuals of normal mental development. [Footnote] Crucial for my present point, Paul indicates in 7:9 that a person does not spiritually "die" until this personal awareness of the Law comes about, at which point sin becomes "alive" for him:

9 And I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died;
10 and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me; 11 for sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me.

Given that one's spiritual "death" in this passage co-occurs with the point at which sin becomes "alive," the most natural interpretation is to take the phrase "sin became alive" as referring to the time at which God begins to hold the individual guilty for his sins. This interpretation argues against viewing an innate predisposition to sin as itself being sufficient to make a person guilty before God. Instead, it appears that though the inherited predisposition to sin is present in each individual from conception and actively promotes "sinful" acts even in the young child, this does not in itself accrue guilt to the child. Guilt and the resulting death of the spirit occurs only when the child's conscience has awakened to the moral Law and begins to "alternately accuse or else defend" him (Rom. 2:15). Sin then becomes "alive" as the child continues to act on his innate predisposition to sin and becomes morally guilty before God. (This conclusion requires a clarification of my earlier characterization of original sin, where I argued that death follows as soon as we act on our innate predisposition to sin. More accurately, children may act on this predisposition even before the conscience is awakened to the Law and sin "becomes alive," but it is only after the point of moral awakening that guilt and spiritual death are incurred by the child.)

A related verse which requires some comment is Eph. 2:3.

Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

I do not take the phrase "by nature children of wrath" here to mean that each individual is an object of God's wrath from the moment of conception. Instead, in line with Rom. 7:9 and the reasoning above, the fact that we are "by nature children of wrath" indicates that because of the predisposition to sin inherited from Adam, it is our nature to produce that which provokes God's wrath, though God's wrath is incurred for such acts only once the individual has an awakened moral conscience.

Summary

To summarize, in Part One of this essay I argued that Adam's descendants all inherit a predisposition to sin from Adam and yet are held guilty only for their own personal sins, not for Adam's sin in Eden. I sought to demonstrate that the primary passage purportedly supporting the traditional view of our joint-participation in Adam's sin, Rom. 5:12-21, in actuality makes no such reference, either explicit or implicit, to a joint-participation principle. I argued, moreover, that the opening verse of this passage, 5:12, reveals the direct cause of universal guilt and death to be the universal scope of sin (not Adam's sin). In Part Two of this essay I argued that guilt is incurred at that point in an individual's personal history when he first sins after his conscience has been awakened to the moral Law of God. Before the awakening of the conscience, each person acts on his innate predisposition to sin inherited from Adam, and yet is not held accountable for these acts. After this awakening of the conscience, each person stands condemned before God for his transgressions of God's Law.

The solution for this personal dilemma that we all face is outlined by Paul at various points in his epistle to the Romans. In Rom. 3:22, Paul reveals that the "righteousness of God" can be obtained "through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe." Because our sins were punished in the death of Jesus Christ as our substitute sin-bearer, there is now a basis on which God can forgive our sins without compromising the holy demands of His own character that every sin be punished with death. Christ's death, then, allows God to "be just [because every sin is punished in Christ] and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26). Moreover, those who have this loyal faith in Christ receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, who can enable us to fulfill the requirements of the law of love, as Christ lives out His own life through us in the world (Rom. 8:1-11; Gal. 2:20). In this way God has provided a marvelous solution to humanity's dilemma of sin, to which we may respond with the apostle Paul in Rom. 7:25, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

Footnote:

Paul's discussion of his awakening to the Law in his personal moral history in Rom. 7:7-13 stands in contrast to his reference to the appearance of the Mosaic Law in the stream of human history in Rom. 5:13-14. Notice that the context for Paul's remarks in 5:13-14 is the spread of sin through history from Adam to his descendants, whereas Paul's remarks in 7:7-13 are instead all set in the first person ("I would not have come to know sin . . ." "I was once alive apart from the Law . . ."). Not all interpreters agree that Rom. 7:7-13 refers to Paul's personal developmental history. Walt Russell, for example, in what is overall an exegetically sound and convincing article on Paul's use of the term "flesh" ("The Apostle Paul's View of the 'Sin Nature'/'New Nature' Struggle," in Moreland and Cioocchi, eds., *Christian Perspectives On Being Human: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Integration*, Baker Books, 1993), argues that the focus of Paul's argument in Rom. 7-8 is that the "redemptive-historical era of law/flesh has been superseded by the redemptive-historical era of Christ/Spirit" (p. 220). In this context, Russell argues that 7:7-13 is "Paul's [rhetorical] first person narrative of the coming of the law to Israel at Mount Sinai," whereas 7:14-25 is his "first person narrative of the convicting and condemning function of the law through Israel's post-Sinai history" (p. 220). While I agree with Russell's overall perspective, it seems to me that none of the significant insights of his analysis are lost if we view 7:7-13 along with 7:14-25 as Paul's account of the impact that the Torah had on his personal moral development as a child in a family of Mosaic Jews. Whereas 7:7-13 focuses on the initial impact the Law had on Paul's conscience and on his standing before God, 7:14-25 focuses on the continuing impact of the Law in Paul's pre-Christian experience as he struggled to keep the demands of the Law without the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. Two observations in particular convince me that Paul had his personal history in mind in Rom. 7:7-13, in contrast to the stream of human history in Rom. 5:13-14:

(1) As noted above, Paul use of first-person pronouns in 7:7-13 indicates that the intended context is his individual personal history, in contrast to the pre-Mosaic historical context established for 5:13-14 by the references to Adam and Moses in 5:12 and 5:14 ("from Adam until Moses").

(2) In Rom. 7:9, Paul says that he was "once alive apart from the Law," and that death occurred only *after* the Law came. In contrast, in 5:14 Paul says that "death reigned from Adam until Moses" *before* the Law came. This apparent contradiction is resolved immediately if we assume that 7:7-13, unlike 5:13-14, refers to the arrival of the Law in a child's (in this case, Paul's own) personal moral history. In each individual's personal history, there is a point in time when the conscience awakens and spiritual death occurs as the child with full moral awareness chooses to continue acting in accordance with his innate predisposition to sin. In contrast, 5:14 is not concerned with the timing of the Law's influence at the individual level, but rather the Law's place in the whole of redemptive history. Even before the Mosaic Law made God's righteous demands explicit, all of Adam's descendants old enough to have consciences awakened by the inner Law "written on the heart" (Rom. 2:15) were nonetheless under the reign of death.