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Original Sin and the Unborn

Albert L. Garcia

The current phenomenon of rampant abortion has raised with new urgency an important question related to the doctrine of original sin. The question meant is this: What are the implications of the doctrine of original sin for unborn children in general and those who die before birth in particular — and, specifically, children who are aborted. First we need to consider the doctrine of original sin itself.

I. The Biblical Doctrine

In considering the doctrine of original sin one thing must remain clear at all times. All children from the time of their conception are sinful human beings. This is the teaching of Scripture.

Psalm 51 is a well-structured psalm in which the teaching of original sin is quite evident. David, the repentant sinner, speaks to the fact of his inherited corruption. Not only at birth did David show the imprint of corruption; but already at the very moment that David was conceived through the sexual act of his parents, David as a human being bore the imprint of sin. That the sin is traced back to conception specifies the time of its transmission but does not put the blame of sin on the sexual act itself. To be sure, some commentators understand the psalm in this way. But such an understanding is essentially a form of Gnosticism. The fact is that we are sinful from the time of our conception. The New Testament is also very clear on this point. Thus Jesus tells Nicodemus that “that which is born of flesh (*sarkos*) is flesh (*sarx*) and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6). The fact that we came forth from sinful parents means that we bear the imprint of sin. Paul is also very clear in Ephesians when he speaks of us being “by nature (*phusei*) children of wrath” (2:3). Here the word “flesh” could be substituted for “nature,” and the very word *phusis* implies that our *physical* natures bear the imprint of sin. Thus original sin is clearly taught in Scripture. It relates to something inherent in us as a result of Adam’s and Eve’s sin.

Martin Luther in his explanation of Psalm 51 deals quite clearly with these points. Luther regards the baby in his or her mother’s womb as a responsible human being before God because of inherited sin. He vividly explains verse 5 of this penitential psalm as follows:

This verse of the psalm teaches us about the cause of sin, why

we are sinners. The prophet confesses publicly that he was wicked by his own fault, not only by that of his parents, while he was growing and being formed as an embryo in the womb. Thus before she gave him birth, his mother was nourishing a sinner with her blood in the womb. We should hold the same thing about everyone who is born, ever was born, or ever will be born into this world, except Christ. The fact that John the Baptist and others were sanctified in the womb (Luke 1:15) does not abolish the fact that they were conceived in sin, just as the flesh still remains wicked in adults who have been sanctified by the Spirit and faith.¹

On this point John Calvin in his interpretation of Psalm 51 is in agreement with Luther. The word “conceived” (*yechemathni*, derived from *yacham* or *chamam*, which mean “to warm”) is interpreted by him literally as “hath warmed herself of me,” here with reference to procreation.² Calvin continues:

The passage affords a striking testimony in proof of original sin entailed by Adam upon the whole of humanity. It not only teaches the doctrine, but may assist us in forming a correct idea of it . . . the Bible, both in this and other places, clearly attests that we are born in sin, and that it exists within us as a disease fixed in our nature. David does not charge it upon his parents, nor trace his crime to them, but sits himself before the Divine tribunal, confesses that he was formed in sin, and that he was a transgressor ere he saw the light of this world.³

On the basis of Scripture, then, we need to stress that the baby from the time of conception is a sinful human being and thus is born with sin. We need to stress, in the teaching of this doctrine, sin from the time of conception and not only from the time of birth. Sometimes we tend to be unclear on this matter. Two cases in point are the Latin text of the Augsburg Confession and the English translation of Franz Pieper’s *Christian Dogmatics* with respect to the doctrine of original sin.

Article II of the Augsburg Confession states in the Latin text that “all those propagated according to nature are born in sin.”⁴ The German text stresses that “all men who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin.”⁵ The existence of sin from the time of conception is clearly expressed in the German, while the Latin text stresses the existence of sin at the time of birth. It is true, of course, that sin exists at birth, but nowadays we need to stress specifically its presence from the time of conception. The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord

is quite clear on this point when it stresses that “original sin is transmitted through our carnal conception and birth out of sinful seed from our father and mother.”⁶

In the English translation of Franz Pieper’s explanation of original sin, one reads that this is transmitted “by natural birth.” The original German text actually states that it is transmitted through “natural descent” (“durch die natuerliche Abstammung”).⁷ The German points quite clearly to the beginning of each individual’s sin in his conception. The German usage of *geboren* is such that sometimes it is to be rendered as “conceived” and sometimes as “born.” In some cases, however, when the theological context dictates the translation “conceived,” it is nevertheless translated “born” in the English version of Pieper. It is correct to say that since Adam’s Fall we are born in hereditary corruption, but it is important to stress that we are, indeed, conceived in sin. This emphasis is lacking in many cases in the English translation of Pieper’s *Christian Dogmatics*.⁸

II. Issues concerning the Stillborn

During Luther’s day many babies were stillborn. We thank God that today science has progressed to the point that this occurrence is less frequent. Nevertheless, still today some children, in spite of our scientific technology, are born dead — sometimes to Christian parents. In referring to such cases should we moderate the Biblical teaching of original sin? This we cannot do. We saw how emphatically Luther stressed this point in his explanation of Psalm 51. But he also stressed the possibility of a child (in the manner of John the Baptist) being filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his or her mother’s womb. How then, shall we counsel the parents of a stillborn?

1. We need to deal with the phenomenon of death. Death comes to this world because of our sin. The creation itself was made subject to futility because of Adam’s and Eve’s sin (Rom. 3:23; 5:12; 8:20). But how can this fact begin to comfort some faithful parents who have lost their little one? The fact that the baby died does not mean that God has rendered a judgment against them; it is part of the judgment which rests upon the whole of creation. In essence, the death points not to a specific judgment of God, not to a specific sin, but to the whole human condition. Quenstedt in a very practical way connects the reality of death with the sin in us. If we were not sinners, we would not die. If babies were not sinners, they would not die. Quenstedt writes:

But infants and those not yet born, die either on account of

some fault (*delictum*) of their own or of an actual transgression; therefore, on account of the actual transgression of another, *scil.*, of Adam, who tainted them with his own stain.⁹

2. We need to deal with the phenomenon of promise, the way in which Jesus deals with believers. Baptism is a proclamation of promise. In it God leads us from death to life (Rom.6). It is the means that the Lord has provided for us under normal circumstances to deal with the phenomenon of sin. Yet we need to be reminded that baptism did not exist in the Old Testament. God dealt with His people on the basis of the promise of the Messiah. The point which is clear from the New Testament is that the Lord condemns those who hinder little ones from coming to faith and to the knowledge of truth. The corresponding imperative is clearly seen in Mark 10:14: "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." We need to keep this point in mind in dealing with parents who are grieving for the death of a baby. Parents who partake of the means of grace are parents living in accord with the imperative of the Lord. Thus we tell them that the Lord is pleased with them. But what about their stillborn child? In the same way that the Lord filled John the Baptist through the preaching of the Word with the Holy Ghost, God could have worked through His Word the act of faith in the baby. Parents who have been living within the context of the means of grace have, like the Old Testament faithful, lived a life of faith conditioned by the promised of God. Parents should not speculate but be glad that they have lived a life in the light of God's Word. God does not expect any more or any less from us. But what about the parents of the child that was aborted willfully?

III. The Responsibility of the Abortionist

Throughout this study we have seen how original sin is present in the child at conception. We cannot escape this fact. We cannot, like the Roman Catholics, speak of a "limbo state" to which unbaptized dead babies go. We would thereby accept a Roman watered-down understanding of original sin. For original sin is really sin and not merely an inclination to sin. Individuals who are considering the killing of their babies should be aware of the biblical teaching concerning original sin. If they abort their child, not only are they responsible for its physical death, but they also prevent its baptism. In essence they are depriving their little one of the gift of God's kingdom.

Unfortunately, more than likely guilt feelings concerning

abortion will result *post factum*. How should we counsel those who come to us laden with the guilt of such a grievous crime? I find that we need to deal with all the issues. Since we are dealing with grievous sin, we need to cover all the bases in order to lead someone to repentance and to peace. We must discuss the fact, not only that the person committed a murder, but also that he rejected the Gospel of salvation for his child. For to discuss only one side of the coin and not the other may, in effect, leave the person still burdened. Then, as a positive step, we must point not only to forgiveness in Christ for the murder but also to the means of grace which the sinner needs so much.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (55 vol., St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-), 12, p. 350.
2. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, translated by James Anderson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), II, p. 290.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 290-291. Here Calvin proceeds to refute the error of Pelagius, who denied original sin as hereditary. He also refutes the Roman Catholic position: "The Papists grant that the nature of man has become depraved, but they extenuate original sin as much as possible and represent it as consisting merely in an inclination to that which is evil." Thus Calvin on this point agrees with the Lutheran Confessional position (cf. Apology II).
4. English quotes are taken from *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959). Latin and German quotes come from the *Concordia Triglotta*, ed. F. Bente (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921). Tappert, p. 29; "quod post lapsum Adae omnes homines, secundum naturam propagati, nascantur cum peccato" (*Triglotta*, p. 42).
5. Tappert, p. 29. Note that while the German rendering stresses that "all men are full of evil lust and inclinations from their mother's wombs," the Latin just mentions "born in sin." The actual German text reads, "Das nach Adams Fall alle Menschen so naturalich geboren werden, in Sunden empfangen und geboren werden" (p. 49). The *Triglotta* emphasizes in italics "*empfangen und geboren.*"
6. SD I; Tappert, p. 510.
7. Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), I, pp. 538-543. The German treatment can be found in *Christliche Dogmatik* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1924), I, pp. 646-652. The quotations come from the English text, p. 538, and the German text, p. 646. This same mistake of rendering "die natuerliche Abstammung" as "natural birth" rather than "heredity" is made fairly consistently. Cf., e.g., German text, p. 649, and the English rendering, p. 541.
8. We have only "are born" rather than "conceived" in the rendering on page 539. Here the English translation reads "that all men since Adam's fall are born with hereditary corruption." The German text expresses it as follows: "nach Adams Fall alle Menchen in dem Erbserderben (*corruptio hereditoria*) geboren werden laesst." Since the stress is on "nach Adams Fall," and the context is the *corruptio hereditoria*, I would choose to render

geboren as “begotten” or “conceived.” It would make clearer the point of origin for the individual of original sin.

9. Quoted from Heinrich Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1875), p. 241.