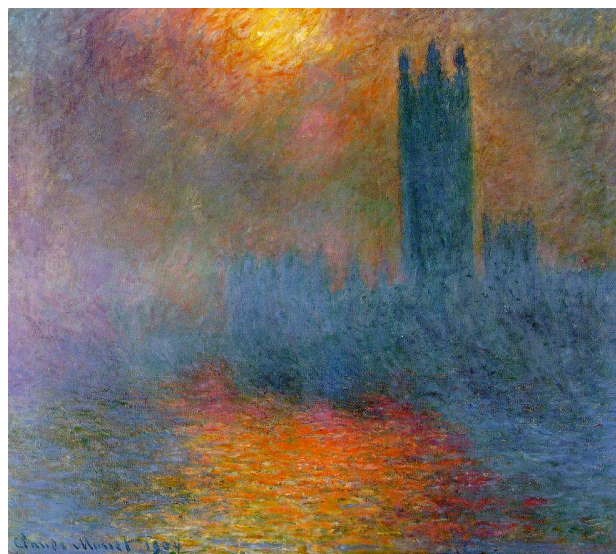


Evolution and the Fall: Clarifying the Issues, Imagining the Possibilities

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Introduction: Foggy Clarity

My goals for this essay are fairly modest. From a “meta” or macro-level, I hope to articulate some issues that arise at the intersection of evolutionary science and Reformed orthodoxy concerning the Fall and original sin. By claiming to “clarify the issues,” I don’t mean to claim some sort of definitive statement of the issues; instead, I only want to suggest that, in some ways, I don’t think we’ve adequately named what’s at stake in the current conversation. Or, to put it otherwise, I worry that some have too quickly decided, quite confidently, that they know exactly what the issues are, and have with equal speed already decided what our conclusions ought to be (or ought *not* to be).



I’d like to complicate that supposed clarity and confidence just a bit.

So, ironically, I hope to clarify the issues by complicating things. Let me try to make sense of this by an analogy: I’ve always been intrigued by Monet’s impressionist project. Take, for example, his series of paintings of the British Houses of Parliament. The works are an implicit critique of a tradition of representationalist painting which, in its clarity and precision, was actually unfaithful to realism. One could find all sorts of paintings of the Palace of Westminster that exhibited the intricate detail of Barry’s Gothic masterpiece. But in the dingy smog of industrial London, there’s no way that one could actually *see* this: so, in fact, the foggy fuzziness of Monet’s hazy paintings were actually more faithful to what was in front of him.

In a similar way, my goal is to clarify the issues by complicating matters. From a zoomed-out perspective, we might think we know what’s at issue, and thus already be confident about what conclusions we think we need to reach. But if we zoom in, then I think we’ll see that the issues are different than we might have thought. So let me begin by suggesting what the current debate¹ is *not* about.

¹ I will generally refer to “the current debate,” “the current conversation,” etc. as a shorthand for referring to the college-wide conversation about evolution and the Fall that has been occasioned by the publication of the articles by Schneider and Harlow. However, I don’t want to make my paper a referendum on their articles, though I do want to honor that we’re having this conversation because their articles were a catalyst. I have specific criticisms of these articles, but I will not be floating those in this paper.

I. What's *Not* At Issue

While this might be an adventure in stating the obvious, let me begin by suggesting what's *not* at issue in the current conversation. In doing so, I mean to address some informal assumptions that have been operative in our on-campus discussions; but I'm also addressing problematic portrayals of what's at issue in second-hand reports²:

- This is *not* about “whether we can discuss these sorts of issues at Calvin.” This sort of claim overstates the case. Those who make this claim paint the debate as if those who resist proposals as inconsistent with the confessions really want to shut down all discussion about these issues. But that is just patently false. No one has said these are not important issues and no one has said that we shouldn't be discussing these issues. The question is: what range of conclusions about these issues are consistent with the Reformed confessions.³ Obviously in order to discern that, we need to be talking about these difficult issues and in this sense I'm grateful to John Schneider and Dan Harlow for tackling questions that need to be addressed. But to suggest that those who demur from their proposals are thereby opposed to “discussing these issues” is overstating the matter.
- This is *not* about whether we “affirm science” or not. It is not simply a matter with science-affirming scholars on one side and science-rejecting fundamentalists on the other.⁴ It is not a matter of Enlightened, rational scholars on one side and benighted traditionalists on the other. To even implicitly paint the debate in this way is to poison the well. This is not a referendum on whether or not we take science seriously but *how* we take science seriously.
- This is not a replay of the Howard Van Till case, nor is this our “Galilean” or moment. Those previous debates were about the mechanics of creation (about which Scripture is silent) or general cosmologies. While traditionally-held cosmologies were certainly deeply ingrained in collective consciousness (and thus questioning them engendered strong, visceral opposition), theological discernment would show that such cosmologies were not essential to the Gospel. So those debates did not impinge on the core doctrines of sin and salvation, whereas I think the current debate does. So I suggest that there is a qualitative difference between the current debate and those earlier issues such that the analogy between then and now does not work.
- This is not a matter to be settled by “general revelation,” as if general revelation is something that operates autonomously from special revelation.⁵ Any appeal to general revelation that naively invokes this as a license to simply set up natural science as a new

² I have in mind, for instance, the flat-footed portrayal of the issues in *The Banner*, but also the equally flat-footed take on things we keep getting from Michael Ruse's *Chronicle* blog.

³ Perhaps we should also note that this is *not* about whether certain positions or proposals are “heretical,” or whether a Christian can hold such positions. Our question is narrower than that: Calvin College is not a generically Christian college, it is a specifically Reformed college whose confessional parameters are established by the Three Forms of Unity.

⁴ This is not to deny that there *are* in fact many Christians who seem quite contented to ignore—or worse, distort—relevant evidence. I don't mean to give any comfort to those, but only want to signal that there are people who *do* take the genetic evidence very seriously but will still not claim that this requires jettisoning the doctrines of original sin or a historical Fall.

⁵ For relevant discussion, see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Volume 1: Prolegomena, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), pp. 301-322.

magisterium has not adequately understood the Reformed doctrine of general revelation. General revelation is not a trump card; the dynamics between general and special revelation are a two-way street.

Those are some tacit, environmental factors that I wanted to name. But let me also suggest, more germane to the specific issues:

- This is *not* about whether or not we should posit a historical couple, Adam and Eve. In other words, this is *not* a referendum on evolution *per se*, and so those who resist recent proposals are not thereby committed to a scenario that denies evolutionary history. Nor does an “orthodox” understanding of the Fall require positing a historical couple. If we mistakenly think this is really just about whether or not we accept evolution as an account of the mechanics of creation, then we will quickly (and rather condescendingly) dismiss any opponents of reinterpretation *as if* they were trying to take us back down the road to creationism. In other words, if we mistakenly think that we’re engaged in a debate about evolutionary theory *per se*, then we will make two mistakes: (1) we’ll think a defense of evolutionary account is sufficient to warrant abandoning, say, the doctrine of a historical Fall; and (2) we might mistakenly fall into the trap of thinking that the affirmation of an evolutionary account *requires* abandoning the doctrine of a historical Fall. But the issue is *not* merely a revisiting of evolution vs. creationism; or at least, it *need* not be such.⁶ The issue is this: if we accept an evolutionary account of the emergence of humanity, does that entail that we must reject the doctrine of a historical Fall and received, catholic (“Augustinian”) doctrines of original sin? The conversation so far has treated this all as one package when, in fact, the issues are separable. This is why I suggest we need to “zoom in” to properly locate the issues.

Figure 1. A “zoomed-out” perception of the debate.



“From a distance,” so to speak, it might seem like there are two clusters that constitute two unified “positions” that hang together. Or it might seem that there are “packages” on offer and that we need to take them *as* packages. So from a distance, it might seem that the package that includes a historical Fall and a Reformed/Augustinian understanding of original sin is part of a “package” that requires that we also buy a historical couple and ultimately something like creationism. And since “we” know creationism is wrong, we suspect that we might need to reject the whole package. On the other hand, “we” know that we ought to affirm theistic evolution, and given that argue theistic evolution entails rejecting a historical Fall in favor of something like “original fallenness,” then our commitment to theistic evolution would seem to require that we buy the package that includes original fallenness. But I suggest this is a mistaken perception of “packages,” an

⁶ This is why, for the life of me, I can’t figure out why this campus conversation has generated so much discussion about intelligent design.

impression that we've gained from a distance. If we "zoom in" more closely, we'll begin to see that what looks like a package actually has separable elements.

Figure 2. A "zoomed-in" picture of the debate.

creationism

theistic evolution

historical couple common ancestry
 historical Fall "symbolic" falliveness
 Augustinian original sin
 Irenaean theodicy

What I mean to suggest is that these are pieces that can be arranged in different ways. While there are affinities between various stances, the elements are separable and can be configured in different ways. In particular, in my final section I suggest that one could imagine viable models that could affirm a historical Fall and an Augustinian notion of original sin *along with* affirming common ancestry and theistic evolution. Conversely, while there is a historical connection between creationism, affirmations of a historical couple, and an understanding of a historical Fall, these too are separable elements. So an affirmation of a historical Fall should not be taken to be *ipso facto* some kind of covert creationism.

- Finally, this is *not* about whether or not we will be "always reforming." The church is *reformed* and always reforming. To be always reforming is *not* to be engaged in a process of "updating" the faith to tack to current intellectual winds. Or, to put this otherwise, historic orthodoxy is not allergic to the *development* of Christian doctrine (Newman). What's at issue is precisely what constitutes a *faithful* development of Christian doctrine. So rejecting proposals that would jettison the historic doctrines of the Fall and original sin does not require that we simply repristinate a premodern theological tradition; but it does require that we be faithful to it. Arguing about what constitutes a "faithful" extension of a tradition is part and parcel of a tradition—and establishing *parameters* for such extensions is also intrinsic to a tradition.

Perhaps I've merely stated the obvious in this map of the terrain of the current debate. If so, I apologize for taking so much time to do so. But my sense is that perhaps we need to articulate these points lest they go unarticulated and thus lost amidst other assumptions.

In the remainder of the paper, I want to address the last two points, in reverse order. First I'll sketch an account of theological development within a confessional tradition in order to provide a "meta" account of what we're doing when we're engaged in this sort of conversation and discernment process. Then, in conclusion, I will try to float a model that decouples elements of the "packages" above, with the hope that this might loosen up our theological imaginations to consider possibilities not currently on the table.

II. Always Reforming: Theological Development in a Confessional Tradition

Assertions of confessional orthodoxy and recognition of theological development are not mutually exclusive. So we shouldn't be too hasty to assume that any and all assertions of confessional orthodoxy necessarily stem from backward, defensive stances that would merely

repristinate 16th-century documents.⁷ Or, to put this otherwise, claims that certain proposals or conclusions fall outside the parameters of confessional orthodoxy do *not* assume that there cannot be legitimate theological development within a confessional tradition. Given our current concerns, I think it might be helpful to come up with something of a “meta” account of theological development within a confessional tradition which honors the *dynamic* nature of such development without abandoning the *boundary-marking* function of a confessional tradition. To sketch this, I want to extrapolate from Alasdair MacIntyre’s account of how a tradition’s practices are revised and extended.

Let’s take the Reformed confessional tradition to be a “tradition” in MacIntyre’s sense.⁸ By the “Reformed confessional tradition” I refer to a catholic theological heritage, catalyzed by the Scriptures, carried in the practices of Christian worship, and articulated in the ecumenical creeds (Apostles’ Creed, Nicene Creed, etc.) and further specified in the Reformed confessions (our three forms of unity) and worship. This is already a living tradition with expanding layers of articulation, expansion, and revision internal to the tradition.

Now, as a “tradition” in the MacIntyrean sense, the Reformed tradition is “carried” in a community of practice which, roughly speaking, is “the church.” And what characterizes such a practice, according to MacIntyre, is precisely the creative extension of the tradition by the community of practice. In other words, a tradition requires a dynamic of creative repetition rather than mere repristination. MacIntyre puts it this way:

What is distinctive of a practice is in part the way in which conceptions of relevant goods and ends [...] are transformed and enriched by these extensions of human powers and by that regard for its own internal goods which are partially definitive of each particular practice or type of practice. Practices never have a goal or goals fixed for all time—painting has no such goal nor has physics—but the goals themselves are transmuted by the history of the activity. It therefore turns out not to be accidental that every practice has its own history and a history which is more and other than that of the improvement of the relevant technical skills. This historical dimension is crucial in relation to the virtues.⁹

The tradition “lives on” just insofar as the community of practice reappropriates the tradition *creatively* but also *faithfully*, and those two dynamics are not mutually exclusive. So a tradition is not merely a restatement of past formulations; *as* a tradition—especially as a tradition that enlivens a community of practice—new “performances” aim to “extend” the tradition. These (re)performances develop, refine, improve, and extend the tradition. And part of that extension will include internal critique. In other words, it is of the very essence of a tradition to debate what constitutes “the tradition”—and especially what constitutes a “faithful” extension of the tradition. So part of the tradition is debating and revising the goals of the tradition.

However, like improvisation in jazz, such debate and internal critique is normed by the tradition. So there is a dynamic of authority that is also at work in this process of extension.

⁷ Note HCL 1’s recognition of different stances vis-à-vis confessional subscription and the CRC’s unique spot on the spectrum of possibilities, pp. 13-15.

⁸ In what follows, I’m going to treat “practice” and “tradition” as roughly synonymous. That’s not precisely how it works in MacIntyre—a tradition is carried in a community of practice; however, there is a symbiotic relation between the two that permits my treating them as roughly synonymous.

⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 193-194.

Indeed, MacIntyre emphasizes that “[t]o enter into a practice is to enter into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in the practice, particularly those whose achievements extended the reach of the practice to its present point. It is thus the achievement, and *a fortiori* the authority, of a tradition which I then confront and from which I have to learn.”¹⁰ So being part of a tradition, being involved in the dynamics of extension and reform, comes with a price of admission, *viz.*, submission to the authority of the tradition.

It is the tradition, then, that yields its own internal criteria for what *counts* as a “faithful” extension of the tradition. In other words, what “counts” as a reason or warrant or evidence or a “good move” in this game is tethered to the heritage of the tradition.¹¹ This doesn’t mean there isn’t room for innovation or creative extension, but it does mean that in order for a “move” to *count* as an extension it will have to be judged as faithful to the tradition.¹² And this is an inherently social, communal project of discernment: it is the community of practitioners—the community of those who have submitted to the tradition—who judge whether a “new” move is a creative extension of the tradition, or whether such a move has broken the rules and is really playing a new game.¹³ “The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets” (1 Cor. 14:32).

This seems an apt description of how a confessional tradition faithfully extends the tradition, “reformed, but always reforming.” In particular, I think it honors something that’s deeply embedded in the *polity* of the Reformed tradition of which we are a part: that discernment about “faithful extensions” is (scandalously) entrusted to the people of God, the priesthood of all believers that includes the laity. There is a deep affirmation of, and trust in, the “sense of the faithful” (Newman) and the operation of the Spirit in leading the community into truth.¹⁴ This is *not* meant to be a recipe for repristination or stubborn repetition: it is rather a dynamic for discerning what counts as a “faithful extension” of the tradition.

I think it’s important to recognize this dynamic because it highlights something of a “clash of epistemologies” here, or at least a tension between two very different *epistemes* (Foucault): our guilds tend to have an “encyclopedic”¹⁵ approach which sees knowledge’s advance as a straight line of progress and development, where new knowledge supersedes old knowledge in the triumphant march of intellectual advancement.¹⁶ On this model, every story is what Charles Taylor calls a “subtraction story”: old ideas are jettisoned when they are *replaced*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 194. See also MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science,” in *Paradigms and Revolutions: Applications and Appraisals of Thomas Kuhn’s Philosophy of Science*, ed. Gary Gutting (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), pp. 54-74.

¹¹ I have in mind here Robert Brandom’s account of the “pragmatics” of reasoning and his almost ethnographic account of rational discourse as the “giving and taking of reasons. See also Matt Walhout’s recent paper, “What Scientists Say and Why They Say It,” which develops similar themes from Brandom’s teacher, Sellars.

¹² So, for example, new moves in the tradition are not primarily based on their “relevance” or their “compatibility” with other regnant paradigms.

¹³ Imagine that soccer develops as a game which requires one to touch the ball only with body parts below the waste. But then later it is judged that I can still be playing the same game and perhaps touch the ball with my belly, or even my head. But somehow it is also discerned, internal to the game players, that touching with my hands or elbows is a foul.

¹⁴ It should also be noted that such a community of practice engaged in discernment would also need the requisite *virtues* to pull this off.

¹⁵ Again, I’m thinking of MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991).

¹⁶ While I’m contrasting the “encyclopaedic” episteme of the academic guilds with the “tradition-based” reasoning of the church, one could also point out how the “encyclopaedic” is science’s “tradition.” But I’m not pressing that point here.

by new ones. We need to appreciate that this epistemic framework (and its attendant practices) is what shapes the sciences as we've received them, as well as most of the academic disciplines of which we are a part. But we also need to appreciate that, in contrast, the church is a *tradition* where advances in knowledge and understanding are understood as organic developments of a heritage. "Reasons" and "advances" are understood differently because there is a weight granted to the tradition *as* tradition; there is a requirement that any advance be seen as an extension, not a supersession, of the tradition. There are no prizes for novelty in a tradition.

What's the upshot of all this "meta" framing? Well, I hope it cuts two ways. On the one hand, it should remind us that no tradition worth its salt aims "simply to repeat or paraphrase the tradition."¹⁷ As I've tried to suggest, extension, revision, expansion and development are intrinsic to a tradition *qua* tradition. We should expect some "modifications" across the heritage of a tradition and should not be surprised if some doctrines are "reformulated."¹⁸ But on the other hand, I hope this account helps us to see that any modifications, revisions, and reformulations will (a) need to provide an account of how they are *faithful extensions* of the tradition and (b) have to concede that the discernment of what counts as faithful extension is determined *by the community of practice*, and not just the realm of "expertise."¹⁹ So we will indeed have to determine whether reformulations violate the "core"²⁰ or "essential" markers of the tradition; and we will have to concede that the determination of this is entrusted to the people of God which is wider than the realm of academics, scholars, and scientists (though scholars and scientists who are part of this community of practice also get to participate in this discernment process). For example, the community of practitioners who constitute the Reformed tradition (or more specifically, the CRC) will need to determine what is "essential" or "core" to the doctrine of the Fall: does this require affirming a historical couple? A single event of disobedience? Does a reformulation that is faithful to the tradition require that we see predation and biological death as the outcomes of a Fall? Or will we determine that the "core" of the doctrine of the Fall has room for reformulations and extensions on these matters because they are judged to be non-essential aspects of the "traditional"²¹ doctrine?

On the other hand, would this mean all is fair game? That everything's up for grabs? That we can revise at will? No, clearly not. Again, we'll have to collectively discern what constitutes a faithful extension of the tradition: perhaps we might determine that the picture of a historical couple lapsing in a single episode is not essential. But we might also discern that making fallenness basically synonymous with finitude violates the "core" of the traditional doctrine. We might discern that *some* kind of "episodicity" (i.e., some temporal aspect) *is* essential to the doctrine of the Fall, and thus we might discern that any reformulations which abandon this aspect of the tradition are outside the parameters of the tradition.

¹⁷ Harlow, "After Adam," p. 192.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 191, 192.

¹⁹ [Cf. MacIntyre and Habermas on "expertise."]

²⁰ Schneider, "Recent Genetic Science and Christian Theology," p. 197.

²¹ Permit me to make one curmudgeonly plea at this point: can we stop treating the Sunday-School, fundamentalist Protestant formulations of the Fall as if these just *are* the "traditional" doctrine? Some criticisms of the so-called "traditional" (or even "Augustinian") doctrine of the Fall amount to little more than criticisms of conservative evangelical renditions of this doctrine. But criticizing Millard Erickson hardly means you've toppled St. Augustine. In this respect, I think it's worth noting that those who have been criticizing the "traditional" doctrine of original sin and the Fall say almost nothing about Roman Catholic theological reflection on these doctrines. Instead, they let conservative evangelical straw men stand in for "the tradition."

I'm not going to settle those questions today; I only want to provide a frame in which we appreciate the communal dynamics of faithful extension of the tradition—a frame in which we see room for reformulation as well as the necessity for norms and parameters to govern such modification—and that the norms are *internal* to the tradition.

III. Rethinking Evolution and the Fall: A Modest Proposal

In conclusion, let me try a little thought project. So far, I have tried to emphasize two things: first, there are no predetermined “packages” when it comes to Christian thinking about creation, evolution, the Fall, and sin. What, from a distance, might look like “package deals” and necessary entailments are not so. Second, I have suggested that there is room for reformulation and revision *within* a tradition so long as such reformulations can narrate how they are faithful extensions of the tradition.

I should say that part of my goal here is to also reprioritize theology in this conversation. Cardinal Newman once famously said, “I believe in design because I believe in God, not in a God because I see design.” In a similar way, we don’t believe in sin and fallenness because of fossil evidence; we believe in sin and the Fall because we receive the Word of God.²² That’s not a recipe for sticking our heads in the sand, but it is a reminder that the issues before us are ultimately *theological* in nature.

Having said that, the Reformed tradition does presume a continuity between general revelation and special revelation, and thus we expect God to speak consistently through his two books. So Christian theology needs to rightly be confronted by just the sort of evolutionary and genetic evidences that our colleagues have been pressing us to address. As I said, I commend Schneider, Harlow, and all the contributors to this seminar series for pushing us to take these matters seriously.

So the question is: does taking this evolutionary and genetic evidence seriously *require* that we revise and reformulate the doctrines of original sin and the Fall to the point of eliminating any historical, episodic aspect to the Fall? Or could we imagine models that honor both increasingly evidence of ancestral evolution *and* take seriously the tradition’s understanding of the Fall and original sin? I think we can. So, for the sake of my argument, and as a thought project, let me float a provisional model as a kind of imaginative experiment. (Now please re-read that sentence and note all the qualifiers!) Without actually proposing this model or staking any claim to defend it, I want to paint a possible model, for the sake of argument, to show how affirming genetic and evolutionary evidence of common ancestry does not necessarily entail abandoning a historical understanding of the Fall. So what if we imagined a scenario something like this:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and earth. From what he seems to tell us via the book of nature, the mechanics of creational unfolding was an evolutionary process: the emergence of new life was governed by the survival of the fittest, such that biological

²² Let me also register one hermeneutic concern: the “traditional” doctrines of the Fall and original sin are not deduced from a single passage of Scripture like Gen. 1-3; similarly, a Christian understanding of evil would never be based on simply one book within the canon of Scripture. In an important sense, theological and confessional articulations are generated by a *canonical* (canon-wide) engagement with Scripture as unfolded by the church’s tradition and heritage of interpretation. So none of this is going to be settled by just figuring out how to read Gen. 1-11.

death and animal predation are part of this process, even part of what can be acclaimed as a “good” creation. So some of the phenomena we might have traditionally described as “outcomes” of the Fall seem to be part of the fabric of a good, emerging creation.

From out of this process there emerges a population of hominids who have evolved as cultural animals with emerging social systems, and it is this early population (of, say, 10,000) that constitute our early ancestors. When such a population has evolved to the point of exhibiting features of emergent consciousness, relational aptitude, and mechanisms of will—in short, when these hominids have evolved to the point of exhibiting moral capabilities--our creating God “elects” this population as his covenant people. The “creation” of humanity, on this picture, is the first election—the first of many (Noah, Abraham, Jacob, et. al.). And in that covenantal election of a population, Yahweh established a relationship with humanity that involved his self-revelation to them and established moral parameters for them and for their flourishing. In being so elected, these pinnacle creatures are also deputized and commissioned as God’s “image bearers”—the creator’s representatives to and for creation’s care and flourishing. They are charged with unfurling the latent potential enfolded into creation. And to some extent, creation now depends on their care and cultivation such that, should this emergent humanity fail to carry out its mission and obligations as articulated by God’s “law,” there will be “cosmic” consequences.

This original humanity is not perfect (the catholic theological tradition has never claimed that). They are able to carry out this mission—God’s law would not be established where obedience is not possible—but they are also characterized by moral immaturity, since moral virtue requires habituation and formation, requires time. So while they are able to carry out this mission, there are no guarantees, and also no surprises when they fail. Since we’re dealing with a larger population in this “garden,” so to speak, there is not one discrete event at time T_1 where “the transgression” occurs. However, there is still a temporal, episodic nature of a Fall. We might imagine a Fall-in-process, a sort of probationary period in which God is watching (not unlike the dynamics of the flood narrative in Gen. 6, a kind of second Fall narrative in the Torah). So the Fall might take place over time T_1 - T_3 . But there is some significant sense of before and after in this scenario.

And things change in the “after”: there are cosmic effects of some discernible nature (cp. Col. 1-2); there is also the cosmic fallout of humanity’s failure to cultivate and care for creation; and there is also some kind of (almost?) ontological shift in human nature, or at least a certain solidification of human character in a certain direction and tendency that will require the regenerating initiative of God to make rightly-ordered virtue a possibility. But this regeneration and sanctification will not constitute an undoing of their created tendencies and capacities, but rather a restoration²³ of creational possibilities and empowerment/formation to be able to realize that calling.

²³ Actually, redemption will ultimately have to be *more* than mere restoration, otherwise the Fall would still be a possibility. This is exactly why Augustine emphasized that original humanity “in the garden” was *posse non peccare* (able not to sin) whereas eschatological humanity “in the kingdom” will be *non posse peccare* (not able to sin). So redemption is restoration but also *more* than restoration. Jon Stanley has carefully pointed out how Herman Bavinck honors this “something more” dynamic of redemption in ways that Kuyper does not; so Stanley describes Bavinck’s account of redemption as “restoration *plus*.” See Stanley, “Grace Restores and Renews Nature,” *Kuyper Center Review*, Vol. 2: Revelation and Common Grace, ed. John Bowlin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011),

Redemption will also require a grace that is cosmic in scope, a grace that is the outcome of the cross (Col. 1:20).

Now, for some this might already look like a reformulation that has abandoned the tradition; some might judge this not as a faithful extension of the tradition but rather a compromising concession to “science”—one that has given up on a historical couple and a split-second Fall as the result of a single decision, etc. But I can also imagine how one could consider those particular features of the received doctrine as non-essential.

However, this scenario does remain committed to other features of the traditional doctrine. Let me highlight just two:

First, on this scenario, the Fall is still historical and temporal, even “episodic,” though it is something like an episode-in-process.²⁴ This also retains a sense of cosmic effects as part of an “after.” Such a historical picture seems to be required in order to retain a sense of sin as “not the way it’s supposed to be.”²⁵ And *that* seems essential to the tradition to me, such that any faithful extension of the tradition will need to articulate continuity with that sensibility.

Second, this model resists “ontologizing” the Fall. I think an important point of concern with some recent proposals for reformulation is the way that they would end up “naturalizing” sin—inscribing brokenness into the fabric of creation (such that describing this as a “symbolic fallenness” is really a bit of a ruse since there’s really no Fall *from* in this picture). There are important theological concerns at stake here, concerns that Christians have often discussed in terms of the relationship between nature and grace. While Protestants and Catholics have sometimes disagreed on their relation (grace “restores” nature *vs.* grace “perfects” nature), they were all agreed in their opposition to any notion that grace *opposes* nature or “nullifies” nature or “undoes” nature. In other words, the Christian tradition has consistently judged that any construal of grace/redemption which sees redemption as somehow anti-nature would be *ipso facto* anti-creation, and thus would posit a fundamental inconsistency within the biblical narrative. Making sin original is *not* the doctrine of original sin; it is a version of Gnosticism.²⁶

Conclusion

I’ve not even come close to dealing with all the complexity and details of these questions; that was never my intent. My goal was simply to offer some “meta” framing of our current discussion and interject a bit of a thought project with the hopes of loosening up any perceptions that the issue has been settled and it’s just a matter of deciding which “camp” wins. Instead, I hope we might continue to pursue these difficult questions together, in community, with the goal of discerning how to faithfully extend the Reformed tradition for the sake of God’s glory and kingdom—and for its proclamation in the Gospel.

²⁴ [I think we make room for something like this in other contexts. For instance, when did I “win” the Daytona 500? Only at the checkered flag? Or when did I earn a gold medal for the marathon? Only when I crossed the finish line?]

²⁵ I’m the last person to suggest that all of our debates can be settled by finding out what Abraham Kuyper said. However, on this point, I do find it hard to shake my appreciation for Kuyper’s insight in his Stone Lecture on “Calvinism and Science” regarding the distinction between *normalism* and *abnormalism* in science, and how/why abnormalism was essential to Christian understandings. Note especially his critique of “amphibious” scholars in *Calvinism*, pp. 133-134.

²⁶ I have criticized Stephen Mulhall’s *Philosophical Myths of the Fall* for just this point: ontologizing or naturalizing the Fall such that creation is always already fallen. See Smith, *The Devil Reads Derrida*, ch. 12.