

**What is Original about Original Sin?  
Looking at the Canonical Context  
(April 6, 2011)  
Calvin's Faith and Science Series**

I must confess that coming as late as I am in this series of presentations, I have been anxious that the former speakers would not leave me anything more to talk about. This is the 7<sup>th</sup> talk about the relationship between Christian faith and the science of human origins and one might think that everything that needed to be said has been said already.

Actually, I am a college professor, after all, so I have managed to think of a few more points that I believe may need clarification, and I hope to make a collegial contribution to our conversation about these matters, taking into account both the ideas of previous speakers as well as the two articles published by my friends and colleagues, Prof. Harlow and Prof. Schneider.

My goals tonight are both rather narrow and very broad: narrow in that I intend to limit my investigation to what the Bible has to say about human sinfulness while ignoring the wealth of theological theory developed over the history of Christian interpretation; on the other hand, my topic is broad in that I am tackling both the Old and the New Testaments in one brief presentation.

I plan to do two things. First, I want to make a few comments on method and ways of reading the Bible that I think are helpful and unhelpful. Second, I will briefly comment on the Biblical evidence pertaining to the doctrine of "original sin."

Let's begin with some observations on method:

1) . First, let me be explicit about my own interpretive starting point, which I believe should be basic to all faithful Bible reading. Our God, the author of Scripture, is *the Creator for whom all things are possible*. By faith, I read the individual books of the Old and New Testament within the larger context of the Christian canon as a divinely inspired account of God's work in the world. Genesis is the canonical book of beginnings, proclaiming the Creator's transcendence and sovereignty over all things. The succeeding chapters of Genesis, and every subsequent book as well, must be interpreted in light of this initial faith commitment. A process of mutual interpretation then unfolds between the Old and New Testaments as I trust the testimony of the apostles and the subsequent Christian tradition. These books contain the authoritative story of God's work in history – both human and natural history – from the beginning of the cosmos to the final consummation of God's plan of redemption. I believe that reading Scripture in this way means that some type of "harmonizing" engagement between science and Biblical interpretation is always necessary (call it "concordism" or whatever else you like). Most if not all of this, I'm sure, is noncontroversial.

Certainly, Christians cannot stick their heads in the sand and ignore the discoveries of modern science. On the other hand, neither can the advances of scientific discovery be allowed to set the terms for what is theologically permissible. The two must work together in conversation – I frankly confess – with theology as the guiding partner when it comes to matters of Christian belief. This means every Christian academic needs to be prepared to look foolish at times in the eyes of his/her professional peers. What the apostle Paul describes as the "foolishness of the cross" looms large over the whole of Christian faith, and it may well cast a

particularly long shadow over the believer's academic work, as well. It is a dangerous thing to worry inordinately about how I can avoid looking foolish to the rest of my professional guild.

2) My second introductory comment raises a question of method. A crucial component in at least one of the articles that has sparked the current discussion features the arrangement of parallels or similarities between Genesis 1-3 and other ancient Near Eastern creation stories. Typically a table is constructed that catalogues isolated features from Genesis in one column and similar (even identical) features from other creation accounts in another column. (There is no doubt that a sizeable list can be drawn up). The point of these parallel columns is to show the close similarities of content between the different accounts. Similar content is then assumed to demonstrate a similar genre (typically described as "myth"). This apparent similarity in genre is then further assumed to indicate a common lack of historicity, which then sets the stage for all the stories to be described as unhistorical. Yet, it seems to me that there is a serious flaw in this method of comparison leading to some erroneous conclusions. Juxtaposing discreet pieces of a story's content, isolated as they are from the broader context of the story's form, function and the differences that may exist between the stories, can lead to some confusion.

Let me offer a few examples of what I mean: My dog and I once won a flat screen TV in a look-alike contest. Now that you know how much the two of us look alike, would drawing up a list of our similarities, such as long hair, whiskers, one nose, two eyes, two ears, etc. tell you very much of significance about either my dog or myself? I don't think so.

In 1962 the Jewish scholar Samuel Sandmel, of Hebrew Union College, published a now classic article entitled "Parallelomania." In this study, Prof. Sandmel looks at the ways NT scholars tend to use rabbinic "parallels" to Biblical material and criticizes exactly this type of comparison where discreet items of content are isolated from their original contexts while ignoring formal and functional considerations. He describes the entire process as "confusing a scrutiny of excerpts with a genuine comprehension of the tone, texture, and import of a literature." It is not my intent to walk through the parallels typically listed between Genesis and the *Enuma Elish*, for example; I only want to point out that such excerpts have real significance only when they are evaluated according to "*the intent and the nuances*" of their original literary contexts. In this light, *the differences* between parallel stories become every bit as important as (perhaps even more important than) the similarities; sometimes it is a story's uniqueness that points the way to its proper interpretation.

I was recently reading a story about Prince William's impending marriage to Kate Middleton. It reads very much like a fairy tale, but it's not. I could easily construct a parallel list of excerpted similarities, including a prince, a girl in love, a dramatic courtship, a king, a queen, a palace and a beautiful wedding with a happy ending, yet all of it would ignore the crucial fact that one story is taken from a news magazine while the other is from a book of fairy tales. Perhaps millennia from now archaeologists will dig up a copy of William and Kate's story lacking the journalist's byline, compare it to the library archives of Grimm's fairy tales and conclude that it too provides nothing in the way of historical information.

3) My third concern arises from the second. It concerns the problem of *false alternatives*. The article under discussion not only offers the reader a long list of "similarities" between Genesis and other ancient myths, but it then concludes that since no one today takes the ancient myths of the *Enuma Elish* or *Gilgamesh* as historical writings, it is therefore a

mistake for us to expect to find historical information in Genesis 1-3 today. Not only is the problem of parallelomania placed center-stage, but it is complicated by a slippery use of language that leads to the offering of false alternatives. Note that the article restricts us to only two possibilities: we can *either* read Genesis 1-3 as “historical” (here the article seems to mean that we can read Genesis as a literalistic description of events in space and time), *or* we can treat Genesis 1-3 as another “myth” like *Gilgamesh* (here the implied meaning of the word myth seems to connote “fictional,” “unhistorical”). The problem, it seems to me, is that our limitation to only two options has begged the question of what is meant by the word historical, for a literalistic reading of Genesis 1-3 is not the only possible way of finding historical information describing actual, past events. There is a spectrum of feasible interpretations falling between the extremes of literalness or fiction; it need not be an all or nothing proposition. I am not compelled to defend the literal existence of one man and one woman as the progenitors of the entire human race in order to find historical information in Genesis 1-3. There are several ways in which symbolic or representational readings of the story of A&E can appreciate its literary character while still maintaining the historical “event-character” of the narrative, which I believe is important, while also avoiding the problems raised by literalism. [For a good example of how this may be accomplished, I encourage you to visit the Calvin website and listen to Prof. Jamie Smith’s excellent lecture on that subject. I find myself in close agreement with him on this topic.]

Usually, God’s activity appears to us as an abiding faithfulness that we identify as “the laws of nature,” but sometimes God’s activity is identifiably unique, such as, let’s say, in Jesus’ bodily resurrection. I highlight the resurrection because it is essential to Christianity, and yet its historicity is also regularly challenged by the methods of modern historical-criticism. Long lists of parallels can be drawn up showing the similarities between the Gospel stories about the death and resurrection of Jesus, on the one hand, and a variety of ancient myths about other dying and rising gods, on the other hand. I can’t help but wonder, what principle of method stops me from concluding that since no one here today believes in the ancient myths of a dying and rising Osiris or Dionysius that there is no reason to believe in the historicity of the Gospel story about the empty tomb? Simply choosing, as a brute act of the will, to believe in one and not the other may be enough to get a person into the Kingdom of God, but it leaves Christian faith on a very slippery intellectual slope.

As the beginning of the Book of Beginnings, Gen. 1-3 describes the creation of both natural and human history. Genesis offers us the inspired, canonical viewpoint that all history begins with divine involvement as an essential ingredient. That God acts in history is axiomatic for Christian theology, otherwise there can be no such thing as salvation-history. Reading the Genesis story as a mere archetype or a myth explaining the universal human experience of sinfulness is, I believe, a rationalistic and a reductionistic move that is not very different from any number of critical attempts to undercut the essential Christian claim that God can and does reveal himself historically.

Now let me quickly move on to my second task tonight. I want to address the question: what does the Christian canon tell us about “original sin?” Well, let’s first talk about “sin” and then we’ll be ready to sneak up on what we mean by “original” sin.

We must begin by remembering that sin is not primarily a psychological or sociological term; it is a Biblical and theological term. For the Judaeo-Christian tradition, ethics and morality are closely related to the question of sin, but they are not synonymous. A person does not need to believe in God in order to have a concern for ethics or to think in moral categories. But sin is different. The problem of sin can only be revealed to us in Scripture, and there it is revealed as disobedience to God. Everything entailed within the concept of sin falls squarely within the realm of faith. Sin must be understood as (i) brokenness in the divine-human relationship due (ii) to human disobedience against God (both witting and unwitting), making (iii) the individual sinner both guilty and personally responsible before God (whether this is recognized or not). Only human beings have the capacity to sin, for only human beings are created as God's own Image, and only human beings are then given a specific word to obey: "*Do not eat from this tree.*" There are no independent standards apart from God anywhere in the heavens holding us to account as "law breakers." There is only a holy, just, righteous and merciful Creator who instructs us in the personal expectations derived from his eternal character. As the psalmist confesses in Ps. 51:4, "*...my sin is always before me. Against you, only you, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight...*"

This quality of personal sinfulness now describes the whole human race throughout the entirety of every individual's life. It begins early in life; Ps. 51:5 says, "*Surely I have been a sinner from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.*" The point is not that sexual intercourse is wicked, but that the whole of one's life is conditioned by sinfulness. Rom. 3:10-18 lays out the extensiveness of our personal guilt: "*There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away; they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one... There is no fear of God before their eyes.*" There are no exceptions. Every constituent aspect of every individual (with the exception of the divine image; see below) is tainted by sin, including our reasoning faculties. Our original fellowship with the Creator has become hostility, a hostility for which we are each personally responsible, which makes us all guilty and deserving of God's judgment.

This description is made more complex by the fact that sin is sometimes described as an independent entity, an autonomous force, while at other times the word refers to the discreet acts of disobedience that reveal our nature as sinners. This ambiguity appears as early as Gen. 4:7 (the first reference to sin) when the Creator attempts to warn Cain about the dangers of his hostility towards his brother Abel: "*If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.*" The intertwining of (a) sin as an independent power with (b) sin as a personal decision is evident. This ambiguity also correlates with a second nuance that appears in the NT; in the writings of the apostle Paul, the power of sin takes up residence within the individual as a power agitating rebelliousness against God. Paul refers to this power as "the flesh" (often translated as the "sinful nature"). But it is not always clear how we are to think about the relationship between the power of sin within us and our individual acts of sinfulness. Which is the chicken and which is the egg? This is one of the theological quandaries of human existence. Confronted by an independent power that works to control us in choosing the wrong, we nevertheless remain responsible for our individual decisions, which reflect our willing surrender to the power of sin in our lives. We commit acts of sin because we are sinners. We are sinners because we surrender to the power of sin.

[By the way, I find it interesting that some of the medieval rabbis speculated that this struggle begins within the womb when we are infants – recall Ps. 51:5. This explains how we can be sinful from birth. Apparently, our tossing and turning *in utero* was not always innocent (!); sometimes we were kicking against mom’s full bladder very deliberately. I think that this is an interesting idea, but I only offer it as an observation from rabbinic thought.]

So, the conundrum of our lifelong struggle with the power of sin, both from within us and from outside of us, is lamented by the apostle Paul as he describes his own wrestling with “the flesh.” Personally, I believe the clearest description appears in Rom. 7:7-25 (although this is a notoriously difficult passage, I take it to be relevant at this point in our discussion), “(8) *But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire... (11) For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment deceived me... (15) I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... (17) As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh/sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out... (20) Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it... (24) What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” Paul admits that in his “flesh” he is “a slave to the law of sin.” Without Christ Paul is (and we are) powerless against the power of sin. It is only in Christ that this power is broken, and we are set free.*

We are now in a position to address some additional complications:

(A) Exactly HOW the problem of sin’s power and individual sinfulness are perpetuated from generation to generation is never explained in Scripture.

Not even the classic text, Rom. 5:12, solves the problem: “*Just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, so also death came to all humanity because all sin.*” The next several verses continue to focus on the entrance of *death* in this world through Adam (see verses 15, 17, 18). Finally, in verse 19 Paul says again, “...*through the disobedience of the one man the many were made/caused to become sinners.*” We are clearly told that Adam is responsible for introducing sin to the world; his (and Eve’s) was the “original sin.” But neither verse 12 or 19 explains the causal relationship between Adam’s first sin and our subsequent sinfulness. How does Adam’s sin cause us to become sinners ourselves? There is no explanation. We are simply told that *we all sin just as Adam did*. Therefore, we all suffer the same consequences as Adam: death. Why we all sin like Adam is unclear.

The second important NT reference, 1 Cor. 15:21-22, is no more helpful: “*For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead also comes through a man. For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.*” Notice, once again, that the focus is not on sin but on the universality of death. The second sentence is an elaboration of the first. Death came because of Adam; life comes because of Christ. Once more, the text says nothing about the propagation or perpetuation of sinfulness from one generation to another. Furthermore, the phrase here translated “as in Adam all die” could just as properly be rendered instrumentally as “by means of/through Adam all die.” The standard translation of “in” rather than “through” appears because it maintains the symmetry with “in Christ,” a favorite Pauline turn of phrase elsewhere in the NT. However, we should realize that this phrase, too, may just as properly be rendered as “by means of/through Christ shall all be made alive.” Therefore, it is inappropriate to take these verses as positing some type of Adamic “federal” or “corporate”

headship as the explanation for the universality of sin. The notion that “all humanity sinned in Adam” is not found in the NT. It’s just not there. What Paul actually says is that we each suffer the consequences of our own sins.

What about the question of sin’s perpetuation in the narrative of Gen. 1-4? Let me first say that observing, as many do, that the terms “fall” and “original sin” do not appear anywhere in Gen. 1-4 is something of a red herring that does not get us very far, for the concepts denoted by these terms most certainly do appear in these chapters. Genesis 3 describes the introduction of disobedience into the divine-human relationship and its consequences for the rest of the cosmos. While Gen. 4, I am convinced, is intended to illustrate the propagation of that original disobedience. The final author of Gen. 1-4 intends us to see a direct connection between the disobedience of our first parents in Gen. 3 (however artfully or symbolically it may be depicted) and the subsequent sin of the next generation in Gen. 4. The one somehow leads to the other. This is why Cain’s story reads as if it were a ‘second fall,’ except that the circumstances have deteriorated significantly and sin now appears as an active ingredient in the human story for the first time. Notice the numerous parallels, both similar and dissimilar:

Genesis 3	Genesis 4
<p><u>Similarities:</u></p> <p>A Crime/Disobedience</p> <p>God asks, “Where are you?”</p> <p>God asks, “What have you done?”</p> <p>God pronounces a curse</p> <p>Painful labor on the earth</p> <p>Clothing: act of grace and judgment</p> <p>Leaving the presence of God</p>	<p>A Crime/Murder</p> <p>God asks, “Where are you?”</p> <p>God asks, “What have you done?”</p> <p>God pronounces a curses</p> <p>Painful labor on the earth</p> <p>Cain’s mark: act of grace and judgment</p> <p>Leaving the presence of God</p>
<p><u>Dissimilarities:</u></p> <p>A&amp;E begin in perfect fellowship with God</p> <p>Eve requires external persuasion to rebel</p> <p>A&amp;E receive God’s judgment in silence</p>	<p>Cain begins with God rejecting his sacrifice</p> <p>Cain persuades himself/ignores God’s warning about sin</p> <p>Cain objects to God’s judgment</p>

Pandora’s Box is opened in chapter 3 and now that the monster is loose, it continues to wreak havoc in chapter 4. There is a direct connection between the original sin and all subsequent sins; because of A&E sin now crouches at Cain’s door waiting to devour him. So the progressive deterioration continues unabated until we eventually read in Gen. 6:5, “*The LORD saw how great humanity’s wickedness on the earth had become and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.*” The initial sin in the Garden has produced a fundamental transformation in all of humanity throughout all of its generations. But, again, we are not told anything about how this propagation occurs.

(B) The next complication concerns what the first human beings may or may not have been like prior to their disobedience. Again, Genesis gives us very little to work with. Were the first humans perfectly holy in every respect, or were they simply innocent in their obedient dependence upon God? Were they a type of righteous *Übermenschen* who used 100% of their Einsteinian brains all the time, or were they more developmentally “childlike” as was argued by the church father, Irenaeus? The Biblical text does not give us enough information to answer these questions. However, what we are told strikes me as indicating that human beings were fully capable of understanding what it meant to be personally responsible and held to account for their actions. The fact that God issues a specific set of instructions – i.e. “*This is what you may and may not do, and these will be the consequences*” – suggests that the first human being’s had the mental and moral faculties to understand their responsibilities and the obligations entailed in a relationship with God. Furthermore, they had been created as God’s own Image.

In the ancient world, it was typically the king who was designated as “god’s image.” As god’s image the king was delegated the responsibility to rule over the deity’s kingdom on the deity’s behalf. In order to facilitate this rule, the god may imbue the king with a measure of whatever attributes were required to rule successfully. Thus in Gen. 1, the Creator “*breathes the breath of life*” into the *Imago Dei* (Gen. 2:7), further distinguishing human beings from other creatures. Whereas all other creatures are made “*according to their own kind,*” (Gen. 1:21, 24, 25) human beings are created according to God’s kind, as it were, “*just a little bit lower than the angels*” (Ps. 8:5). Although this status first of all points to humanity’s functional responsibilities to rule as God’s vice-regents, kings and queens walking the earth, bringing the Creator’s will to bear upon his creation, we cannot be so reductionistic as to ignore the *constitutional* elements of what it means to be the Divine Image. As David Clines has pointed out in a seminal article, “The Image of God in Man” (1968), human beings are not only God’s “representatives” on the earth, we are also divine “representations” insofar as God chooses to share certain aspects of his nature and character with his Image that we might be adequately equipped with everything we need to fulfill our royal responsibilities. It is impossible to see human beings “merely as the most highly developed of the animals” (Clines, 53). In the light of these various components of the Genesis story, whether we imagine the first human beings as perfectly holy or as naively childlike, God remains just in holding them accountable for willfully disobeying his command.

God’s judgment causes the serpent and the ground to be cursed, but it is worth noting that human beings themselves are not cursed. The Image of God remains in force, although now the Image has become alienated from its Original. We need to find a way to understand how the Image of God and original sin coexisting simultaneously within each person. A&E’s first experience of fear and shame (Gen. 3:10) reveal their newly broken relationships with both God and with each another, but it also indicates a fundamental change within the human constitution. Human beings now know themselves to be guilty and worthy of God’s judgment. Though they are still the Divine Image, they are no longer the creatures God had intended them to be.

Although both man and woman do suffer negative consequences for their disobedience (Gen. 3:16-19), it is not clear that mortality is one of them. The appearance of the tree of life in Gen. 2:9, planted in the middle of the garden alongside the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, suggests that *this* tree (of life) was actually God’s preferred item on the menu that fateful day. If this reading is correct, then immortality was held out as God’s preferred possibility for A&E, had they made the right decision. They (and we) were consigned to physical death when

God excluded them from the Garden after the fall, thereby prohibiting access to the tree of life. What the story says about the possibility of physical death prior to the fall is unclear. Mortality may well have been a part of God's original design; something that humans could have overcome by choosing the tree of life. In this case, God's warning to Adam in Gen. 2:17 might still concern an impending *spiritual* death, not the threat of physical mortality. Personally, I think this is the most consistent way of reading the story. So Paul is able to say that "death came to all through Adam" even though God's warning to Adam principally concerned the immediate *spiritual* consequences of his actions.

The NT agrees that all of creation was affected by the fall, but it does so in very broad strokes with more attention given to the consummation of history than to the beginning. Rom. 8:20-22 describes how "...the creation was subject to frustration...by the will of the one who subjected it (i.e. God), in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time." But here the personified creation groans not so much because it labors under an evil burden, but because it waits impatiently in eager anticipation for something even better in the future, namely the resurrection of the children of God. There is room here to explore further the precise nature of creation's "bondage" and "decay," though the intent of the passage is to demonstrate that whatever the past has been like, since the resurrection of Christ the future will be immensely brighter for everything, animate and inanimate alike.

(C) Finally, I do believe that Jamie Smith had it right when he emphasized the importance of reading Genesis 1-3 as a story with a clear line of demarcation between a *Before* and an *After*; that is, the first sin(s) produced a fundamental change in creation and, in particular, in human beings. It is unacceptable, therefore, to suggest that "*the way things are now is the way things have always been.*" Here I may need to part company with some of my colleagues and insist that we work harder together on finding a way to relate science and Biblical teaching.

The fact that the Garden has no known parallel in other ANE creation stories is a crucial *dissimilarity* that serves to underscore its importance in this Before-and-After sequence; it is, I believe, theologically essential. To surrender this part of the plot line is to strip a key ingredient out of the Genesis story, consigning it to the most unhelpful permutation of mythology – i.e. "myth" in the sense of fiction. Time and again the NT describes our redemption in Christ as a "return" of sorts to a time *before* (or at least to a time *without*) the curse. In Rev. 22:2 the "tree of life" stands on both sides of the "river of the water of life" in the new heavens and the new earth. No longer is it guarded by the cherubim with its flaming sword as in Gen. 3:24. We are now invited to share in immortality as we were originally intended. Rev. 22:3 further adds that "*no longer will there be any curse!*" Eternal fellowship between God and humanity-in-Christ is depicted as a return to the pre-fall Garden which has grown amazingly better than it ever was before. Something like a "Before-After-Return" sequence is integral to the Biblical storyline. NT eschatology (its view of the last things) is, in part, determined by OT protology (its view of the first things). The beginning is a prototype for the end. I'm not insisting that the human race began with only two individuals, but I am emphasizing that *things now are not the way they have always been.* To surrender this essential *discontinuity* by fudging on the Garden (or whatever it may symbolically depict) seems to me eventually to produce two unacceptable developments: first, God becomes the author of sin; and second, the NT language of Christ's "redemption" (that is, rescuing us from bondage in order to restore us to right relationship with God) is evacuated of

its *prima facie* significance. I know that some will object at this point, but the problems strike me as unavoidable.

Finally, I want to conclude by reminding us all that the most meaningful discussions of original sin occur within the context of Christian faith. A certain attitude of personal *earnestness* is necessary in order to understand that learning about “original sin” is, first and foremost, to learn about oneself and what it means *for me* to be guilty before God. This mood of proper earnestness is only discovered in the situation where I am personally accused and convicted, where I take responsibility for my actions without excuse. Faith then leads me to deeper understanding as I am directed to confession and repentance, to trust in Christ’s work on the cross and then experience God’s gracious forgiveness. It is my hope that our discussion this evening may contribute in some small way to that kind of faithful self-understanding within us all.