

LIBERTY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

**THE MINISTRY OF SAINT AUGUSTINE AS
RELATED TO THE DOCTRINE OF ORIGINAL SIN**

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Introduction

Theologians, including Augustine, have debated the doctrine of original sin for centuries, but it couldn't be more clearly stated than by the Apostle Paul in Romans 5:12 when he said "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." (NASB) With that statement Paul makes it known to his readers that sin entered through Adam and then spread to all of humanity, yet "no religious teachings generate as much hostility as the Christian doctrine of original sin"¹. Much of the discussion, still hotly debated today inside and outside the church, can be contributed back to Aurelius Augustinus (Saint Augustine of Hippo) and those who opposed him.

The western church, and Christendom in general, owes much of what we understand as the "doctrine of original sin" to the theological work started by Augustine in the late 4th and early 5th centuries. Born Aurelius Augustinus in A.D. 354 and known to us today simply as Augustine, his views on original sin are said to be, at least in part, derived from his previous life experiences, through his study of Manichaeism, the Genesis account of Adam and Eve, and even sins of his youth in Northern Africa.² Augustine was certainly not the first to contemplate on the sin of Adam (many of the "church fathers" wrote about original sin including Saint Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan, who baptized Augustine, who said in his commentary on the Gospel of Luke "before we

¹ Alan Jacobs, *Original Sin, A Cultural History*, 1st Edition (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2001), ix.

² Jacobs, 23-30.

are born, we are all infected with the contagion [of sin]”) but Augustine was able to expand and develop these ideas into a more formal Christian doctrine.³

The doctrine of original sin, sometimes also referred to as “the doctrine of inherited sin”, is the explanation of Adam’s sin using scripture in two basic ways; inherited guilt (Romans 5:12-21), which is sin contributed to us from the first sinful act of Adam.⁴ The second, inherited corruption, is taken from Psalms 51:5 when David says “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me” (NASB), which is the consequence of Adam’s first sin, (the taint of) sin that is now passed on from generation to generation. Put in a more metaphoric way; “some people are born with a malady of some kind resulting from the mistransmission of a disorder (HIV, hepatitis) passed from mother to child through the umbilical cord” is another way to understand the inherited transfer of sin from one person to the next.⁵ In Augustine’s *Confessions*, he wrote about the taint of this inherited corruption within himself “Who can recall to me the sins I committed as a baby? For in your sight no man is free from sin” and also in his mother, Monica, “the torments which she suffered were proof that she had inherited the legacy of Eve” and this theme (the taint of sin) would surface again in *City of God*, his sermons, and even letters the Bishop would write against those who opposed his views.⁶

As Bishop of Hippo, once Augustine began to establish his philosophy of how the taint of sin (original sin) is placed on our will, he set in motion a debate in his day that

³ Íde M. Ní Riain Saint Ambrose (Bishop of Milan), *Commentary of Saint Ambrose on the Gospel according to Saint Luke* (Halcyon Press in association with Elo Publications, 2001).

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine, Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith*, ed. Jeff Purswell (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 213-214.

⁵ Jacobs, xiv.

⁶ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York, NY: Dorset Press, 1986), Book I,7; Book V,8

continues on in our modern churches. Augustine would collect a long list of opponents to his theories on original sin (among many other theological issues he debated alongside original sin) like the Donatist, the Manichaeism and Platonist philosophies he once claimed as his own, Pelagius, and even fellow Bishops. As he would sufficiently refute one, another would inevitably rise up against him and he would once again take on the task of refuting the specific nature of their arguments. In somewhat of a final stand for Augustine, late in his life, Julian of Eclanum would enter into a “personal duel” with Augustine that would last “until Augustine’s death” on issues such as original sin, baptism, and free will.⁷ Julian would eventually say in his own writings “original sin was contradicted by logic” and would inundate Augustine with eight volumes of writings, possibly, which may have kept Augustine from completing a final cataloguing of his personal letters to be included in his *Retractationes* before his death.⁸

Today we find that the debate over original sin is still progressing through Christendom and it is still hotly debated both academically and within the church body. If you were to ask the average, modern church attendee his or her opinion of original sin you might receive a wide variety of answers. These might range from complete unawareness of its existence, to it doesn’t or didn’t exist as we know it explained by Paul in Romans 5:12, to discounting the original sin as sex instead of disobedience as the direct result of Adam’s first sin. Augustine will go as far as bringing one of his own struggles, that of lust, into the debate on original sin (and free will), “reminding his

⁷ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo, a Biography*, 2nd Edition (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 386.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 386, 419, 433.

congregation of the exact circumstances of the Fall of Adam and Eve”, which is certainly still a key issue in the life and growth of the modern Christian believer today.⁹

Augustine’s View on Original Sin

Augustine, “inspired from the reading of Genesis 1-3”, formed the basis for what would later become known as the “doctrine of sin”, through his interpretation of the account of the great fall of man in the book of Genesis.¹⁰ In the most basic form, Augustine said that Adam was created good with the freedom to choose for God or against God¹¹. For Augustine it was a combination of many factors including the nature or source of evil, freedom of the will, and the power or ability for the will to overcome sin. Augustine held that from the point of Adam’s sin we are all born into an hereditary tainting by that sin, which is passed on through the generations, something we have no control over (that no will can overcome), yet becomes a part of us at the point of conception.¹²

Augustine leaned heavily on how powerful sin was over the will and, due to Adam’s sin, left us with only the ability to sin before being called home to Heaven. As Augustine explained it, before the fall Adam had the ability (freedom of the will) to choose to sin or not to sin and what’s left after Adam’s decision for us until redemption “[is only] the freedom to sin”, once redeemed we choose to “sin and not to sin”, and once

⁹ Brown, 390.

¹⁰ I. J. J. Spangerberg, "Can a major religion change? Reading Genesis 1-3 in the twenty-first century," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 28, Old Testament Abstracts, EBSCOhost, 2007: 259-279. (accessed August 4, 2009)

¹¹ Lane, Anthony N. S. 2006. "Lust: the human person as affected by disordered desires." *Evangelical Quarterly* 78, no. 1: 21-35. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed August 5, 2009).

¹² Spangerberg, 259-279.

called to Heaven we are “only free not to sin”.¹³ This interpretation or explanation was not a new invention of course. In the late second century, several hundred years before Augustine, Irenaeus of Lyons had discussed the authenticity of the Genesis account and regarded Adam’s sin as disobedience, sin that “entailed consequences for the whole race” and then again in the third century Tertullian and Origen would do the same.¹⁴ Augustine probably learned this concept in turn from his admired Bishop, Ambrose, and then formed the opinion that “[God] held that all human beings shared in the guilt of Adam’s fall and therefore deserved damnation”.¹⁵ In Augustine’s *City of God* he describes this disobedience, as a choice, using his [man’s] “free will in arrogance and disobedience” it would lead to death, a death that was not a result of being a natural human being (as was the Pelagian view) but a result of the disobedience to the One true God.¹⁶ He goes on to write about the human race created and placed by God in a state between the Angels immortality and the mortal beasts; “if they continued in perfect obedience they would be granted the immortality of the angels... whereas if disobedient... punished by death”, meaning at that point in history man was free to choose to sin or not to sin against God.¹⁷

Augustine’s View on Original Sin as it Ties to Baptism

One of the results of Augustine’s views on original sin was his view on baptism, and more specifically for the Evangelical church, infant baptism. The sacrament of infant baptism, like Irenaeus’ concepts of original sin, was not a new idea and had been

¹³ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, Vol. I (Harper San Francisco, 1984), 214.

¹⁴ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, Revised Edition (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1978), 170-174.

¹⁵ Lane, 4.

¹⁶ Saint Augustine, *Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 2003), Book XII, 22.

¹⁷ Augustine, Book XIII, 1.

practiced by the Roman Church long before Augustine would argue his points on baptism. Although scholars are not in agreement with infant baptism taking place in the early church, there are indications of infant baptism taking place as soon as the early third century.¹⁸ It was Augustine however who, in hearing the stories of despair of a mother over the eternal damnation of her child from the taint of original sin, and remembering the sin of his own youth, would eventually find of his own accord that it was necessary to baptize infants.¹⁹ The practice, that of Catholic baptism, which Pelagius and Julian would later argue against, but a practice that still goes on in the Catholic Church today. Augustine himself would recall that he, baptized by Ambrose in A.D. 387 after his conversion, wished he were baptized as a child (not necessarily an infant) and in doing so having God's grace protect him from his earlier transgressions in life.²⁰ In addition, Augustine also continued to encourage people not participate in delayed baptism (as was the case with Constantine around A.D. 337) where sins, up to the point of baptism, were said to be "covered" by Grace.²¹

Augustine's attention to infant baptism may have given him a good deal of criticism through the lens of history, especially well after the fact in the Evangelical church, when viewed as a means of salvation, but that was not his exclusive focus when it came to baptism. Earlier in Augustine's life, when he first returned to Africa, he was even perplexed by the local custom of infant baptism taking place; "how could this be truly valuable, he wondered, doing this to babies who had no understanding of what was going on", but being a new Bishop, he was compelled to not only continue the practice

¹⁸ Gonzalez, 97.

¹⁹ Brown, 387.

²⁰ Ibid., 510.

²¹ Ibid.

but find a way to justify the practice in his own mind.²² The sacramental practice of infant baptism seemed to do no harm spiritually, and had the benefit of removing the taint of the inherited sin passed on from Adam. From this conclusion, Catholic baptism, at least for Augustine, would be tied to the taint of original sin. Augustine would often preach to his congregation about the importance of baptism, combining and sometimes differentiating infant baptism with believer's baptism, with the acknowledgement of original sin often tied in with the ordinance. Through a sermon on the Lord's Prayer, given specifically to "those seeking baptism", Augustine reminded his audience how important it was to enter into baptism in the right state of mind, forgiving everything, and once again made the connection of baptism to original sin; "you can be quite certain that absolutely all your sins are forgiven, both what you have contracted by being born of your parents in line from Adam with original sin (that's the sin that has you running with your baby to the grace of the Savior), and what you have added in your life".²³ Today we often see Augustine's view on infant baptism tied to salvation (and original sin), but for Augustine it was a means to wash away the taint of original sin for those who were not old enough to make that conscience decision for Christ.

Opposing Views to Augustine's Original Sin

Augustine spent a fair amount of time in his life refuting arguments and writing against other philosophers, theologians, monks, and even fellow Bishops. The greatest

²² James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine, A New Biography* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2005), 296-297.

²³ Saint Augustine, *Essential Sermons*, 1st Edition, ed. Boniface Ramsey, trans. O.P. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: Augustinian Heritage Institute, Inc., 2007), Sermon 56, 13.

opposition dealing with the doctrine of original sin during Augustine's life was probably that of Pelagius and later in his life, Julian of Eclanum. This type of back and forth debate would go on for centuries long after Augustine's time, but can still be somewhat attributed to the foundational work Augustine accomplished in the 4th and 5th centuries. In just one example, in 1730 John Taylor (1694-1791) would write *Scripture Doctrine of Original Sin* refuting part of Calvin's work, but in opposition to the overall ideas of the doctrine of original sin. Taylor spent a good amount of time in this book writing a commentary about the same Genesis account that inspired Augustine. Taylor concluded, among other findings, "their sin [Adam and Eve], the evil action they committed, was personal, no body committed that sinful act of disobedience but they themselves, as such, was personal, done only by them; so also must the real guilt be personal and belong only to themselves."²⁴ This of course directly opposes the inherited nature of Adam's first sin and the taint (of sin), which was passed on to all humanity, a foundation of Augustine's view. Taylor is then refuted, posthumously by Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), in 1766 with Edwards' writing *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended*.

Not all Augustine's time dealt with the doctrine of original sin of course, he spent large portions of his Bishopric discussing different doctrines and fighting heresies from his past. Fighting the Donatist movement, which dealt more with those who renounced their faith under persecution and with the validity of baptism by the "lapsed" took a great deal of his time, as did his former Manichaeism and Platonist philosophies. These were not all vital oppositions to original sin, but all had an impact on Augustine's life, and

²⁴ John Taylor, *The Scripture Doctrine of Original Sin*, 4th Edition (London: New Castle, 1845), 6-9.

therefore views, and deserve mention seeing that some critics of Augustine contend his past heresies were a cause and effect of his later findings as Bishop of Hippo.

The Manichean Influence on Augustine's Original Sin

Some of his critics have, perhaps incorrectly, concluded that Augustine did not develop original sin from scripture but that of his Manichean beliefs and their view on evil.²⁵ While Augustine never specifically states that Manichaeism (labeled a Gnostic philosophy by the Roman church) influenced his view on original sin, some claim the connection still remained, due to his Manichean prejudices, and it was the Pelagians who eventually accused the Catholic Church and Augustine of Manichaeism (heresy).²⁶ The connection came from the Manichean answer to the problem or dualism of evil, and in making the connection (or claim) Augustine's opponents of original sin have also inadvertently pinned the "invention" of original sin directly on Augustine himself. A point made earlier that showed early foundations of original sin going back to Ignatius, but also to Saint Paul the Apostle. The Manichean's maintained that "evil could not come from a good God... but a force of evil, equal in power, eternal, [and] totally separate [from God]."²⁷

Linking the dualism of Manichean evil to the doctrine of original sin is probably superficial at best and, upon close review, we can probably conclude that Augustine's Manichean beliefs did not have a material effect on Augustine's ideology about original sin. Augustine himself would refute this many times, and write in *Confessions*, talking

²⁵ Harent, S. "Original Sin." *Catholic Encyclopedia*. (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911). Retrieved August 3, 2009 from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11312a.htm>

²⁶ Harent.

²⁷ Brown, 35-37.

about the nature of God, that at the time of his study in Manichaeism he “did not know what [he] was saying, because no one had taught [him].”²⁸ Augustine would go on to say that he was “misguided enough to believe that evil, too, was not only a substance, but itself a form of life.”²⁹ Here Augustine broke with his tradition of Manichaeism citing man’s God given rational free choice, between good and evil, which was also “his chief peril” where Adam ultimately fell into sin.³⁰ From this, and other statements made by Augustine, we can determine that Manichaeism probably did not have a great influence on the doctrine of original sin as it is known in theology today, even though the connection still remains.

Pelagius and Julian Opposition as it Deals with Original Sin

One of the greatest oppositions Augustine dealt with in his own time regarding original sin was that with Pelagius (also that of Pelagius’ student, Celestius), and then later Julian of Eclanum. Pelagius, known as a pious British monk, traveled to North Africa around A.D. 400 and came in contact with Augustine’s teachings on free will, and ultimately that of original sin (though they never actually met).³¹ The conflict between the two theologians would become known as the Pelagian Controversy, and although it dealt a great deal with the issues of free will, original sin (and on a lesser note baptism) certainly played key part. Pelagius who once (perhaps) admired Augustine and quoted his work would, when Book X of *Confessions* was read in Rome, be “deeply annoyed by

²⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book IV,15.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Beginnings to 1500*, Vol. I, II vols. (Prince Press, 1975).

³¹ Carl Ph.D Diemer, *Church History 520, Lesson 14*, DVD, prod. School of Religion Liberty University (Lynchburg, VA, 2009).

its tone”.³² In particular Pelagius took exception to the famous statement by Augustine in *Confessions* “Give me the grace to do as you command, and command me to do what you will!”³³

Pelagius agreed with Augustine when it came to original sin on two points, but not a third. Pelagius contended that Adam was first, created [by God] innocent, second, with a free will [to sin or not to sin], and last, as a mortal human who would have perished unto physical death regardless of his sin.³⁴ It was this last point Augustine did not agree with and adamantly claimed that Adam was created into an immortal state where he would not have died had he chosen not to sin against God.³⁵ Pelagius concluded that because Adam was created mortal, his sin resided with him, and him alone. It was not passed down to his decedents; therefore each person was responsible for their own sin, not some hereditary taint from Adam and born into this world sinless with complete freedom [of the will] to sin or not to sin. From this Pelagius claims “there is no such thing as original sin, nor a corruption of human nature that forces us to sin. Children have no sin until they, on their own free will, decide to sin.”³⁶ This shows not only an opposition to original sin as taught by Augustine but one can also see that Pelagius would oppose Augustine’s views of infant baptism as well.

Augustine would spend many years refuting the claims of Pelagius only to gain another adversary in an Italian Bishop, Julian of Eclanum (c. 386 - c. 455), late in his life. Julian also held the views of Pelagius when it came to the non-existence of original sin

³² Brown, 171.

³³ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book X,29

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Diemer.

³⁶ Gonzalez, 215.

and would write volumes refuting Augustine's work. Like others, Julian had many issues with Augustine's theology, but would also focus his disdain with Augustine's practice of the unnecessary (to Julian) baptism of infants. Julian would contend with Augustine on the damnation of infants and children saying "tell me: who is this person who inflicts punishment on innocent creatures: God you say! He it is who sends tiny babies to eternal flames."³⁷ Julian, as with Pelagius, would once again argue with Augustine on the nature of hereditary sin from Adam. Julian would say of Augustine's doctrine of original sin that "it makes it seem as if the Devil were the maker of men", and that Adam's sin, was such a sin that "it blot out the new-born innocence of nature".³⁸ Over the long term, Augustine was able to successfully refute the claims of Pelagius but it would take him the remainder of his days to deal with Julian.

Conclusion

Augustine's contributions to the doctrine of original sin, although not without opposition, have certainly stood up to the scrutiny of history. Though we cannot contribute the "invention" of original sin to Augustine completely, we can see that through years of writing, study and research the Bishop of Hippo has provided everyone with a great understanding of the Genesis account of the fall of mankind. Augustine addressed and answered tough theological questions we still ask today like how do we deal with the concept of evil and sin? Is the taint of sin of those children not yet "of age" covered by sacramental baptism needed or is God's grace sufficient? Is man free to

³⁷ Brown, 394.

³⁸ Ibid.

choose his own path or is the Divine nature of God such that we as human beings only have a will that God has given us?

For Augustine, he spent a lifetime searching for the philosophical and spiritual answers to life and he is remembered as one of the greatest theologians in history. According to his own theology, Augustine was born into life, that of a sinner, through the hereditary nature of Adam's first sin and he left us with two monumental works (among over two hundred and thirty books, sermons, and letters) in *Confessions* and *City of God* that can take the discussion of original sin to another level of detail. Both great works, not written particularly to defend original sin, can provide us with continued insight into how Augustine's life shaped his theology and how God's grace is sufficient to cover all our sins.

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