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# THE FALL: ORIGINAL AND ACTUAL SIN

DS212—Doctrine of Humanity  
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- In the second volume of his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Geerhardus Vos describes several theories of sin.<sup>1</sup> I've included selections from his treatment under this heading:
  - The dualistic theory, that sin is an inseparable characteristic of matter.
    - Spirit = good, matter = evil.
    - Against it counts:
      - This theory, if it does not wish to see God as author of sin, must posit something that exists as a substance independently of God.
      - It removes the moral element from the concept of sin to replace it with a physical element and thereby weakens the concept of sin.
      - It also removes the responsibility of man by making sin necessary.
  - The theory that sin is merely a limitation of existence.
    - All existence is good, only the lack of existence, that is, finitude and limitedness, is evil.
    - Finite man must always remain sinful.
    - This view: (1) is pantheistic (2) removes all responsibility.
    - Only weakness, viewed in this way, is evil. Might is right.
  - The theory that sin is a necessary reaction against what is good.
    - For its existence, everything in the world rests on opposition.
    - There is no rest without weariness, no joy without sorrow, no desire without pain, no good without evil.
    - This also makes sin necessary.
  - Schleiermacher's theory.
    - Sin is the imperfection that arises because the higher principle of God-consciousness does not rule the lower principle of self-consciousness and world-consciousness.
    - According to this conception, sin is general and absolutely necessary. Even in the original state of man it was unavoidable. Here the concepts of sin and guilt become merely subjective.
  - The theory that the sensual nature of man is the seat and origin of sin. However:
    - The worst and most sinful beings, namely the devil and the demons, are not sensual because they have no body.
    - The most hateful of all sins have nothing to do with the body; for example, pride. This view would justify the monastic system and asceticism, which, however, are not approved by Scripture.

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<sup>1</sup> Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:21–24.

- According to this theory, the older a man gets and the more the sensual nature in him dies down, the more he should also grow in holiness. This is not the case.
- The theory that all sin is selfishness.
  - Of all theories, this one comes closest to the truth.
  - Against it, however, we have to note the following:
    - There is unselfish sin. When, for example, a mother, out of an excessive love for her deceased child, in despair takes her own life, this suicide is sin. This, however, is plainly not to be called selfishness.
    - In some sense there is selfish virtue. Man has duties toward himself. He has to esteem the image of God that is in him and he cannot hate his own flesh. God's word requires love to our neighbor as ourselves.
    - Sin, in the strict sense, is only conceivable as sin against God, and one can speak of sin against one's neighbor only in a derivative and figurative sense.
    - It is absolutely necessary to grasp this clearly. It is not selfishness as such that constitutes the essence of sin, but selfishness as shutting oneself off toward God, as seeking after our own honor while *not* wanting God's honor.

## THE NATURE OF SIN

- In the garden, the tree of life offers confirmation in eschatological glory, but a threat or warning of death upon condition of disobedience accompanies the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.
  - God promised a reward for obedience, but he also threatened a curse for disobedience.
  - In Genesis 2:17, God said, “but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (טוֹב וְרָע) you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it dying you shall surely die (מוֹת תָּמוּת).”
- In our consideration, we want to explore the nature of Adam's probation symbolized in this tree and the nature of the threatened curse.
- Probation Symbolized in the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil
  - Adam's situation in the garden was not permanent. He was offered a higher, consummate life under probation.
    - Whether he would attain that life depended on his obedience.
    - A probationary period of testing would terminate at some point for Adam to enter a higher estate.
      - Adam was bound under the covenant for Sabbath rest.
      - His probation could not have been endless. We don't know how long the probationary period was meant to last. All we know for certain is that Adam did not meet the terms of his probation.
  - The Symbolic Significance of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil
    - Many different views have been offered regarding the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

- Some see that the knowledge of good and evil would be attained by eating its fruit.
- Others see that by eating of the tree, and thereby disobeying God, Adam would place himself into God’s place, in a sense becoming the arbiter of good and evil.
- Geerhardus Vos and Meredith G. Kline argue that the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is the instrumental means appointed by God to test Adam’s kingly and priestly ability to decipher good and evil *as an obedient creature*.
- On this view, Adam already possesses the knowledge of good and evil, but the issue is whether he will exercise that knowledge *faithfully* as a covenant *keeper* or *sinfully* as a covenant *breaker*.
  - Adam’s place in the garden was reflective of God’s lordship. His dominion depended on the Lord, who is the absolute authority.
  - The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil forces Adam to confront this relationship.
    - He does not have *absolute lordship* but lives in subjection to God.
    - Therefore, he must obey the Lord without question. God’s command to Adam not to eat of this tree was a radical test of obedience.
  - The use of the language (טוֹב וְרָע) emphasizes that this test will occur in the context of temptation.
    - This language is found in Genesis 2:17 and throughout Scripture.
      - Micah 3:1–2—And I said: Hear, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Is it not for you to know justice?—you who hate the good (טוֹב) and love the evil (רָעָה), who tear the skin from off my people and their flesh from off their bones.
      - Malachi 2:17—You have wearied the LORD with your words. But you say, “How have we wearied him?” By saying, “Everyone who does evil is good (טוֹב כִּי עָשָׂה רָע) in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them.” Or by asking, “Where is the God of justice?”
    - The language “good and evil” indicates ethical consideration and judicial discrimination between polar opposites.
  - Adam acted autonomously in substituting his own consideration and judgment of good and evil.
- These considerations inform our understanding of the threatened sanctions. Given that Adam’s sin happened under the absolute lordship of God and within an eschatological covenant, his disobedience is construed as absolute rebellion and warrant eschatological punishment/death.
- Let’s look more closely at the *nature* of the threatened sanction. It is both *eschatological* and *just*.

- The threatened sanction is first *eschatological*.
  - The sanction threatened and symbolized in the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil are the converse of the Tree of Life.
  - The blessing offered is the highest form of blessing. The creature is offered to commune with the Creator-God in glory forever.
  - The flip side would involve the very opposite, eternal punishment and the loss of glory in some sense.
    - God created all things “very good.” At the same time, he had a plan for his image to progress through probation unto consummation.
    - Death is the failure to realize this originally-intended goal. It is a loss of original glory.
  - Judgment and the Day of the Lord
    - Genesis 3:8 instructs us regarding the eschatological nature of the threatened curse. “And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day (לְרוּחַ הַיּוֹם), and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God (מִפְּנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים) among the trees of the garden.”
    - Kline makes three important exegetical observations on this text that indicate the Lord comes in judgment. It anticipates what comes to be known later in Scripture as “the day of the Lord.”<sup>2</sup>
      - The Sound of the LORD God (אֶת־קוֹל יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים)
        - Kline observes that in other places in the Old Testament, קוֹל is associated with God coming in thunder and lightning, where the mountains quake and a consuming fire appears in the presence of Israel.
          - Exodus 19:16–25 and Deut 4:11 associate the voice (קוֹל) of the LORD with impending judgment and wrath.
          - Ezekiel confirms this with his description of the Glory-Spirit coming in judgment (cf. Ezek 1:4, 24, 25a, 28).
        - It is suitable to see the same thing in Genesis 3:8. The voice of God accompanies his coming.<sup>3</sup>
      - The Spirit of the Day (לְרוּחַ הַיּוֹם) in 3:8a.
        - לְרוּחַ refers back to the Spirit’s appearance in Genesis 1:2. He hovered over the waters at creation.
        - The Spirit (לְרוּחַ) is also often associated with the face of the LORD God (מִפְּנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים). It is fitting that both

<sup>2</sup> Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit*, 97.

<sup>3</sup> Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit*, 102.

would be mentioned when the Lord comes to Adam and Eve immediately after the fall.

- The reference to הַיּוֹם is OT prophetic language for the Day of the LORD—the day of reckoning and judgment.
  - Judges 11:27—Therefore I have not sinned against you, but you wronged me by fighting against me. May the LORD, the Judge, render judgment this day (הַשִּׁפְט הַיּוֹם) between the children of Israel and the people of Ammon.’
  - Ezekiel 7:7—“Doom has come to you, you who dwell in the land; The time has come, the day of trouble (הַיּוֹם מְהוּמָה) is near.”
  - Zephaniah 1:14–15 describes the day of the Lord: “The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter, the mighty man cries aloud there. A day of wrath is that day (יּוֹם עִבְרָה הַיּוֹם הַהוּא), a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness.”
- The coming of the Lord in Genesis 3:8 serves as a prototype for the Day of the LORD spoken of by the prophets, the Eschatological Day of Judgment.<sup>4</sup>
- The Face/Presence of the LORD God (מַפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים)
  - This becomes even clearer with the language of the face of the LORD God (מַפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים).
  - He sees a parallel between the Spirit at creation and the Spirit at judgment, a type of de-creation.
    - The Spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters in Genesis 1:2 (רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל-פְּנֵי) (הַמַּיִם).
    - In Genesis 3:8, the face of the LORD God (מַפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים) comes in the Spirit of the day to judge.
- The threatened sanction is *eschatological*. It is also *just*.
  - As we discussed before with our treatment of Turretin, Adam’s obedience “merits” eternal life, because of the nature of the covenant God freely and graciously established.
    - If Adam could “merit” eternal life by obedience according to the terms of the covenant, he also can “merit” eternal death according to its terms.

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<sup>4</sup> Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 129.

- God is no less self-obligated to issue the curse for violating the terms than he is to grant the reward for keeping them.
  - Nonetheless, when God comes in the garden to judge, he announces the curse but does not bring the *eschatological* judgment yet. Rather, he issues another promise of eschatological life to be merited by the eschatological son, Jesus Christ.

## THE MYSTERY OF SIN

- The origin of sin is a profound mystery. We cannot deny that.
  - As creatures, we do not fully understand why God has allowed sin to occur.
  - We do, however, learn several truths in Scripture that must control our consideration of the mystery of sin and the so-called problem of evil.
- God has from eternity ordained whatsoever comes to pass.
  - Ephesians 1:11—In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.
  - But this seems to generate a problem.
    - If God is all good, he would not want sin.
    - If God is all powerful, then he would not allow sin.
    - Evil exists.
    - Therefore, the argument concludes that God is either limited in goodness or power.
  - Scripture does not allow us to compromise God’s sovereignty. What then about his goodness? That brings us to the next Scriptural principle.
- God is not the author of sin.
  - James 1:13—Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.
  - Canons of Dort, First Head: Article 15.
    - What peculiarly tends to illustrate and recommend to us the eternal and unmerited grace of election is the express testimony of sacred Scripture that not all, but some only, are elected, while others are passed by in the eternal decree; whom God, out of His sovereign, most just, irreprehensible, and unchangeable good pleasure, has decreed to leave in the common misery into which they have willfully plunged themselves, and not to bestow upon them saving faith and the grace of conversion; but, permitting them in His just judgment to follow their own ways, at last, for the declaration of His justice, to condemn and punish them forever, not only on account of their unbelief, but also for all their other sins. And this is the decree of reprobation, which by no means makes God the Author of sin (the very thought of which is blasphemy), but declares Him to be an awful, irreprehensible, and righteous Judge and Avenger thereof.
  - Heidelberg Catechism 6.
    - Q. Did God, then, create man so wicked and perverse?
    - A. No, on the contrary, God created man good[1] and in His image,[2] that is, in true righteousness and holiness,[3] so that he might rightly know God His

Creator,[4] heartily love Him, and live with Him in eternal blessedness to praise and glorify Him.[5]

- [1] Gen. 1:31. [2] Gen. 1:26, 27. [3] Eph. 4:24. [4] Col. 3:10. [5] Ps. 8.
- Belgic Confession 13: Of Divine Providence
  - We believe that the same God, after he had created all things, did not forsake them, or give them up to fortune or chance, but that he rules and governs them according to his holy will, so that nothing happens in this world without his appointment: nevertheless, God neither is the author of, nor can be charged with, the sins which are committed. For his power and goodness are so great and incomprehensible, that he orders and executes his work in the most excellent and just manner, even then, when devils and wicked men act unjustly. . . .
- Westminster Confession of Faith 3:1
  - God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: (Eph. 1:11, Rom 11:33; Heb. 6:17; Rom 9:15, 18) yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, (James 1:13, 17; 1 John 1:5) nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established. (Acts 2:23; Matt 17:12; Acts 4:27–28; John 19:11; Prov 16:33)
- It is true to say both that God ordains whatsoever comes to pass and that God is not the author of sin. These do not *ultimately* contradict one other (Romans 9:13–24; Acts 2:23; Luke 22:22; Deuteronomy 29:29).