

PRECIOUS IN HIS SIGHT

By

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In his book *Precious in His Sight*, Harold Eberle seeks to present a polemic against Reformed theology and Calvinism. He argues that we are not born with an inherited sin nature, but that we are sinners because we do acts of sin and surrender to the “force of sin” operating external to us. Eberle’s view of the nature of man is nothing new. It is a version of Pelagianism with a twist.¹ Like the fifth-century Pelagius, he believes that man is born without a sin nature and without alienation from God. He is born with an orientation toward God; however, because he lives in a world ruled by sin, he is unable to live righteously unless aided by God’s grace. This is his central thesis, and predictably, every chapter in his book is aimed at establishing that man is not a sinner by nature. At the heart of Pelagianism is pride—the idea that man is innately good, though he may do bad things at times, and is endowed with libertarian freedom. Any change to his nature is only *accidental*, not *essential*. That is, any modification to his nature is superficial, not in the core of his essence.

The tactic Eberle uses is to make his case by building a straw man who holds to a distorted Reformed theology regarding the nature of sin, the nature of moral depravity, and human free will and then debunking him with his interpretation of the relevant Scripture. So what I would like to do in this critique is to address the central thesis of his book, that is, man is born without a sin nature. I start with the proposition that we are sinners not because we commit sins; we commit sins because we are sinners. This proposition runs counter to Eberle’s view—that is, sin is a “force” or “thing” external to us seeking to gain entrance into us.

What is sin?

In Chapter 3, *The Origin of Original Sin*, Eberle writes about the debate between Augustine and Pelagius regarding original sin, but does not define what sin is ontologically. Elsewhere in the book,

1. Pelagianism is a doctrine that says that we are born in a state of moral innocence as Adam was before his fall, without an inherited sin nature (original sin). Adam’s sin and guilt affected Adam only and are not transmitted to his posterity. We are born morally neutral with an unfettered free will to do good deeds or to sin. We are sinners because we commit sinful deeds by following the bad example of Adam. This doctrine has been condemned as heresy by the Synod of Carthage in A.D. 418 and the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431. Though it was condemned by the early church fathers, Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism still continue to this day.

he identifies sin as a “force that pushes people to sin.” In his view, man is born innocent as Adam was before the fall and becomes a sinner because “he/she opens his/her heart to sin which is in the *kosmos*.” Eberle sees sin purely in terms of sinful acts that we do. We are sinners because we commit sins, not that we commit sins because we are sinners. Thus he holds to an existential view of the nature of sin.²

At the fundamental level, sin is not a “thing” or some “force” but a relational construct, a falling away from a good relationship that once existed. Nearly all biblical words referring to sin in the Bible point to this idea: *pasha* (transgression), *chata* (to miss the mark), *shagah* (to go astray), *hamartia* (shortcoming), and *paraptoma* (offense). This falling away from a relationship with God is called alienation, which is a result of not conforming to the “law of God in act, habit, attitude, outlook, disposition, motivation, and mode of existence.”³

But Eberle does not believe sin as alienation from God, because he sees it as a “thing” that “enters into each person when he or she opens his or her heart to it.”⁴ This is not the teaching of Scripture. The apostle Paul quotes from the Old Testament: “As it is written, ‘there is none righteous, no not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one’” (Rom. 3:10–12). Parenthetically, I might add that Eberle quotes verse 12 to make the point that if one has to “turn aside,” he or she must have turned towards God in the first place. This is a distortion of the meaning of the text and a classic example of eisegesis. The Greek word πάντες ἐξεκλίναν (*pantes exeklinan*) means “all avoid.” In other words, “all avoid him [God].” They avoid him because in their natural fallen estate they have no inclination to follow after God.

What is Paul saying in this passage that is so profoundly diagnostic of the human condition? He is saying that the basic problem with mankind is our alienation from God. Paul uses words such as “righteousness,” “understanding,” and “seeking” in this text in terms of relationship to God. When Paul says that there is none righteous, he does not mean that there is absolutely no goodness in us, that people are as bad as they possibly can be. Clearly, human experience shows that people do good deeds from time to time. Jesus Himself exhorted His disciples to let their light shine so that people

2. Eberle’s version of Pelagianism is inconsistent and confusing. His theological grandfather, Pelagius, was at least consistent in what he believed. Pelagius believed that man is born innocent as Adam was before his fall. The consequences of Adam’s sin applied only to him. We are born with a libertarian freedom to turn to God or turn against Him, to choose to commit sin or not to commit sin. Therefore, grace of God is not necessary for us to follow after God, for God does not ask us to do anything for which He has not given us the capacity to do. Consistent with this view, Pelagius rejected the Augustinian doctrine of inherited sin and believed that some people are able to live a perfect and a sinless life by choosing to deny sin in their lives. In fact, he said the phrase “Forgive us our sins” in the Lord’s Prayer does not apply to some. Eberle, on the other hand, rejects the doctrine of inherited sin and upholds libertarian freedom, yet thinks that we need God’s grace to turn toward God. He believes that people become sinners because they choose to sin, yet he says, “People are not free or able to live righteously without the grace of God.” If we become sinners because of our volitional sins, why can’t we also volitionally turn to God? Eberle cannot have it both ways. He needs to be consistent within his theological framework even if it is faulty.

3. J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology* (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 1993), 82.

4. Eberle uses the term *κοσμος* (*kosmos*), as it relates to sin, strictly to refer to the world minus humanity. This skewed view is not shared by respectable Greek scholars and theologians. The word *κοσμος* (*kosmos*) as used by Paul in relation to sin includes humanity and the entire created order.

will see their good works and glorify the Father (Matt. 5:16). The apostle Peter wrote to the Christians in Asia Minor to live honorably among the heathens so they may see their good works and glorify God (2 Pet. 2:12). Unconverted people can do good works from a human perspective. Even the drunkard thinks he is better than the thief. But this kind of man-oriented goodness is not what Paul is talking about in Romans 3:10–12. His argument is that in relationship to God, from a divine perspective, no one is righteous, no, not one, because even what we perceive to be a most noble deed lacks any soteriological merit.

Similarly, when Paul says “no one understands,” he does not mean that sin has obliterated our capacity to reason and that we are devoid of any understanding. Human experience suggests quite the contrary. Many non-Christian scientists and philosophers have made phenomenal contributions to human civilization by their power of reasoning. The psalmist rightly extols: “What is man that You are mindful of him, And the son of man that You visit him? For You have made him a little lower than the angels, And You have crowned him with glory and honor” (Ps. 8:4–5). To say that Reformed theologians believe that there is no goodness in non-Christians is putting up a straw man to score a point.

What does Paul mean when he says, “no one understands”? Again, the meaning of this expression becomes clear when we examine it in terms of our relationship to God. Sin has darkened our understanding so that we cannot understand spiritual matters without the aid of the Holy Spirit. A person alienated from a relationship with God lacks the capacity and the desire to understand spiritual matters (1 Cor. 2:14). On the road to Gaza, Philip encountered the Ethiopian eunuch who was reading from the scroll of Isaiah. Obviously he was an educated man and could read and understand Hebrew. When Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading, the Ethiopian Eunuch replied: “How can I, unless someone guides me?” God used Philip to enlighten the Ethiopian eunuch so that he could understand what he was reading. The natural man does not understand the things of God without the aid of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:14).

This is the same situation with the word “seeking” in Romans 3:10–12. Though the natural man sees signals of the transcendent in nature and perceives His deity, power, and invisible attributes, he does not seek after Him or “glorify Him as God” (Rom. 1:21). Instead he worships a god of His own making. He may seek happiness, freedom from guilt, peace of mind, and other benefits, that only the true and the living God can give him, but he does not want Him. The difference between an unregenerate and a regenerate person is that the former seeks these benefits without the need for God, while the latter seeks these benefits, knowing that only in Christ does one find these blessings and is made complete (Col. 2:10).

The crux of Romans 3:10-12 is that sin has alienated us from God. We became unrelated to God and irresponsible to Him due to our broken relationship. Alienation means that man on his own merit cannot find his way back to God unaided by the Spirit of God. The diagnostic term for this condition is “spiritual death.” A dead person cannot bring himself to life. He needs to be made alive from the outside. He needs to be regenerated by the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44).

When Adam and his wife sinned, their first response was to hide from the presence of the Lord. They knew that there was a change in their relationship to God. They became conscious of their nakedness and fear entered into their experience. They were expelled from the Garden. They became estranged from God, but not irretrievably separated from God. Their alienation from God is described with words such as “hid,” “afraid,” “naked,” and “covering.” Alienation also caused

Adam to shift the blame on his wife and God. Yet God reached out to them by making a tunic of skin to cover their nakedness. This was God's act of mercy. Nonetheless, there was a change in their relationship to God. And they were thrown out of the garden.

Eberle's Reformed straw man believes that there is an unbridgeable chasm between God and man, that Adam's sin caused man to be eternally separated from God. This is not what Reformers believed, nor is it an accurate representation of Reformed theology. R.C. Sproul, a Reformed theologian, captures the essence of alienation: "Man is incapable of elevating himself to the good without the work of God's grace within. We can no more return ourselves to God than an empty vessel can fill itself with water."⁵ Alienation results in spiritual death and physical death. Yes, the moment Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they were "dying to die." That is physical death. But there was an instantaneous change in their relationship to God, which is called spiritual death.

Eberle writes, "God is very close to every human being. Of course, people make choices to accept or reject God's love, but He is always close." He makes this comment to refute that there has been an eternal separation between man and God. I believe Eberle confuses divine immanence with alienation. Divine immanence or God's involvement with His creation is a fact supported by Scripture. God's common grace permeates every part of God's creation. While God is close to us, we can still be estranged from God. A couple going through a divorce may be still living in close proximity, but they are estranged from each other. I can be living with my wife in the same house, yet be alienated from her. As one song writer put it, "so close, yet so far apart."

As stated earlier, alienation renders man spiritually dead; that is, spiritually separated from God and impotent to respond to Him unaided by the Holy Spirit.

Whatever happened to the image of God?

In the Chapter *Created in the image of God*, Eberle makes reference to the fact that Calvin thought that the image of God in man is obliterated by Adam's fall. He corrects Calvin by reminding that the image of God stamped in us is not obliterated. Even after the fall, humanity bears the image of God and the glory of God. He says we should see ourselves not as sinners (although he admits that all sin) but as created in the image of God. It is worth noting how the apostle Paul, who was more noble than Eberle, regarded himself. He said, "I am the chief of sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15). This is how he saw himself, though he told the churches, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1).

Eberle is not entirely correct when he claims that it was Calvin's view that the image of God in us is obliterated due to Adam's fall. Although initially Calvin thought that the image of God was obliterated, he later recognized that human beings carry the lineaments of God's image, which motivate us to love our enemies and show compassion toward others. Calvin believed that the thought of people bearing the image of God should enable us to love our enemies. He writes:

Scripture helps in the best way when it teaches that we are not to consider that men merit of themselves but to look upon the image of God in all men, to which we owe all honor and love.

5. R. C. Sproul, *What Is Reformed Theology: Understanding the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 123.

However, it is among members of the household of faith that this image is more carefully to be noted (Gal. 6:10), in so far as it has been renewed and restored through the Spirit.⁶

Calvin also said that even if your enemy does not deserve your help, the image of God, which “recommends him to you, is worthy of your giving yourself and all your possessions.”⁷ Notice how wisely Calvin qualified his statement. It is only in Christ that a shattered image of God is renewed and restored.

The question before us is what happened to the image of God due to Adam’s fall? Once Jesus took a coin from one of his listeners and asked, “Whose image and inscription is this?” They replied, “Caesar’s.” The Greek word used here for image is *εικων* (icon). Though the coin belonged to the person who gave it to Jesus, in a real sense it belonged to Caesar because the coin carried his image. Similarly, as bearers of God’s image, we belong to God. We are meant to be related to Him. It is important to keep in mind that, when we say that we are created in God’s image, we do not mean that His image is imprinted on the surface of our body like a rubber stamp. His image is stamped into our constitution or being and all that it entails. Philosopher and theologian Norman Geisler writes:

Since the whole person is made in God’s image, and since sin affects the whole person, the first thing to be said is that the effect of sin on God’s image in fallen human beings is pervasive, extending to every dimension of his being—body, soul, mind and will.⁸

The image of God in us has been shattered by sin, resulting in an identity crisis. This identity crisis is an integral part of our alienation from God. The defaced image of God is unable to reflect the goodness and beauty of God. A pool of clear water is able to reflect the beauty of the shining moon on a summer night. But if the water is disturbed by throwing a stone into the pool, or if the pool is churned by a blowing wind, it fails to reflect the full beauty of the moon. The moon is still there, but the broken or disturbed water in the pool cannot reflect the full beauty of the moon. We can only see a distorted image of the moon. This is the same with the shattered image of God in us. The image is there, but it is ruined. It needs to be restored if it is to reflect the beauty of God. The broken image of God is restored only in Christ because He is the invisible image of God (Col. 1:15).

A shattered visage of God is the result of sin. The visage of God stamped into our nature is ruined. It is effaced but not erased. The remedy is to recreate the image of God. Only in Christ can the effaced image be restored. The apostle Paul writes: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good work, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in Him” (Eph. 2:10).⁹ “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). It is worth noting that the word “new” translates the Greek

6. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 1:696.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2004), 146.

9. The Greek word for workmanship is *ποιημα* (*poema*), meaning masterpiece. The word also is used to describe the creation of a poem.

καινη (*Kainae*), which means *new in kind*.¹⁰ As long as the image of God in us is not restored in Christ, we remain in a state of alienation from God, and the image of God in us eclipsed by our sin.

Eberle says that he does not see any longer sinfulness as the number one characteristic of the human nature in spite of the fact that everyone sins; instead, the most fundamental aspect of human nature is that mankind is created in the image of God. In describing humanity, we need not take an ether-or position. We are created in the image of God, but that image is defaced by sin and stands in need of a total makeover. When God decided to destroy the world with the flood, His charge was “The wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every *intent* of the *thoughts* of his *heart* was only evil *continually*. And the Lord was sorry that He made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart” (Gen. 6:5–6, italics mine). There is no mention of the image of God as a mitigating factor for relenting from divine judgment. Even after destroying the whole human race (with the exception of Noah and his family), God said: “I will never again curse the ground for man’s sake, although the imagination of man’s heart is *evil* from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done” (Gen. 8:21, italic mine).¹¹ Even after destroying humanity with the flood and before repopulating the world, the divine verdict was that mankind is evil. That’s the condition of the fallen man. So it is thoroughly biblical to call man a sinner.

This is not to say that the image of God (*imago Dei*) in us is erased. Like a wheel that gets misaligned when it hits a curb, our nature has become distorted, misaligned, and out of joint as a result of sin. Sin has affected every aspect of our being, like the mingling of wine with poison.

Are we born with a sin nature?

Eberle’s believes that we are not born with a corrupt nature. We become corrupt when we succumb to the force of sin that is in the world and commit sinful acts. To prove his point, he takes several passages that Reformed theologians commonly use to affirm the corruption of human nature and reinterprets them to support his thesis. He begins with the claim that Jesus had a more positive view of people and called some people “good,” which implies you can be good without being a Christian. Eberle claims that he had been taught that (a) non-Christians are so bad that they cannot even love another human being and (b) Christians can love because only Christians have experienced God’s love. He attributes these statements to Reformed theology. Where has he been?

This is a gross misunderstanding of radical depravity, a term commonly associated with Calvinism. Eberle then sets out to establish that there is no such thing as radical depravity. Even sinners, he says, are able to love their children or families sacrificially. Admittedly, Jesus recognized people for their good deeds (Matt. 7:11). He also referred to His own disciples as evil, while acknowledging that despite their evilness they were able to give good gifts to their children. “If you then, being evil,

10. Greek scholar Vine defines *kainos* (καινος) as “new, not in time, recent, but “new” as to form or quality, of a different nature from what is contrasted as old.” Vine, Unger, and White, Jr. (ed), *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words; A complete expository dictionary of the Old and New Testaments in one volume* (Nashville: Nelson, 1970), 430.

11. The Hebrew word *na’r*, translated “youth,” has a wide range of ages—babe, boy, lad, youth, servant, attendant. In Ex. 2:6, *na’ar* refers to infant Moses and in 2. Sam. 12:16 it refers to the infant son of Bathsheba. It is interesting to note that Eberle uses this verse to justify that we are born innocent and become sinful or evil only later in life as we engage in sinful acts. The plain meaning of the text is that from very early in life we express our evil and sinfulness without anyone teaching us how to be evil.

know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him” (Matt. 7:11).

It is a fact of human experience that people do good deeds from time to time. But doing good deeds does not negate the reality of radical depravity. Radical depravity does not mean that people cannot perform good works in either man’s or God’s sight. What it means is that at the root (*radix* means root) of our being, we are corrupted by sin; therefore, no good work that we can do will earn favor from God for our salvation. Depravity does not mean that man has no conscience, understanding, or will, but that these faculties are affected by sin such that they cannot be relied for guidance or salvation. Neither does it mean that people are *utterly* depraved.

Radical depravity means that every aspect of our being has been affected by sin, including our nature, thus rendering us helpless and impotent to save ourselves or regenerate ourselves without the aid of the Holy Spirit. The apostle John writes, “If we say that we have no sin [singular noun], we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. . . . If we say that we have not sinned [volitional act, verb], we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us” (1 John 1:8, 10). In these two verses John reminds us that we are sinners by nature and by choice. He refers to sin both as a principle working in us (sin) and as an act we do (sinned).

In Matthew 5 and 12, Jesus gives the analogy of a good and a bad tree to illustrate the truth that a tree is known by its fruit. Commenting on this passage, Hodge notes: “The very pith and point of these instructions is that moral acts are a revelation of moral character. They do not constitute it, but simply manifest what it is. The fruit of a tree reveals the nature of the tree. It does not make that nature, but simply proves what it is. So in the case of man, his moral exercises, his thoughts and feelings, as well as his external acts, are determined by an internal cause.”¹²

Eberle admits that everyone sins because no one is able to escape the “force” of sin working in the world, yet he also says that sin tries to push itself into us until we open our hearts to sin. This implies that we have the ability and the freedom to let sin in or not. If it is possible for us to open our heart to let sin in, it stands to reason that it should also be possible to close our heart to keep sin out with the force of our free will. Pelagians believe in libertarian freedom, that is, the freedom to do otherwise. But why is it that everyone in the world opens his or her heart to sin and not otherwise? The fact that we can walk does not mean that we have to walk always in one direction. The fact that no man can choose to live a sinless life is an incontrovertible proof that our will is in bondage, and without the Holy Spirit regenerating us, we willingly and of necessity choose to sin. We cannot do otherwise.

Jesus understood this point well when He said, “For out of the heart¹³ proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornication, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things that defile a man” (Matt. 15:19–20). If we listen to His words carefully, we realize that we gravitate toward sin and find it more pleasurable because our nature has become corrupt. Our action or fruit is merely the result of the kind of people we are—sinners by nature. These things proceed from within the

12. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 241.

13. The term heart means more than the organ we call the heart. It is a reference to our basic nature, the core of our being. In Latin “core” means heart. Heart is also called in the Scripture to refer to the “the flesh,” “the carnal mind,” and “the old man.”

heart (Mark 7:21). As a result of fall, we have become by nature *τεκνα ὀργῆς* children of wrath (Eph. 2:3). Regarding man's sinful nature, we read:

How then can man be righteous before God? Or how can he be pure who is born of a woman?
(Job 25:4)

What is man, that he could be pure? And he who is born of a woman, that he could be righteous.
(Job 15:14)

The wicked people are born sinners; even from birth they have lied and gone their own way.
(Ps. 58:3, NLT)

For vain man would be wise, though man be born [like] a wild ass's colt. (Job 11:12, AV)

Behold I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me. (Ps. 51:5)¹⁴

Because sin has corrupted our nature, it is natural for us to desire sin and move towards it. It is like placing a bundle of hay before a lion. The lion has the freedom and ability to eat the hay, but it does not like it or wants it. The reason is the lion is a carnivorous animal by nature. Its natural affinity is for meat, not hay. The carnivorous nature drives the lion toward flesh.

Reformers understood this truth to say that because we are sinners by nature, our natural inclination and desire is not to seek after God but to seek after what gratifies our flesh or body. But they also understood that the remedy for a sinful heart or nature is not reformation but receiving a new heart, a new nature, or being clothed with the New Man, Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself speaks of making a tree good or making it bad (Matt. 12:33).

Jesus said that out of a good heart comes good fruit. That is a statement of potentiality. But the existential reality is that there is no one good, no, not one, as measured by God's standard of holiness (Matt. 19:17). This is not to say that people cannot do good deeds; it simply means that these good deeds do not merit divine favor. Our corrupt nature must be changed so that our good works stem from faith in God and a motivation to glorify Him. The Bible says, "For whatsoever is not of faith is sin (Rom. 14:23). The Bible also teaches that without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). "By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain" (Heb. 11:4). The apostle John tells us that Cain belonged to the evil one (1 John 3:12). Cain did not become evil

14. Eberle states that "sin" in this text is a reference to the sin of adultery committed by David's mother, since he was born out of adultery and was not a legitimate son of Jesse. This is unquestionably a far cry for two reasons: (a) if what Eberle says is the correct interpretation of this text, every child born out of wedlock should be stigmatized as born in sin. Every child birthed by a mother who is not guilty of adultery should be called born not in sin. The broad context of David's prayer indicates that David was alluding to the fact that he was a sinner by nature. The Jewish Study Bible by the Jewish Publication Society comments: "So extreme are the psalmist's guilt feelings that he sees himself as sinful even before birth; in other words, he is, by nature, a sinful being." I hasten to add that, while Rabbinic Judaism, in general, does not believe in the doctrine of inherited sin, the commentators of the Jewish Bible agree that the intense feeling expressed by David is very suggestive of man's sinfulness by nature. They make no mention of David being born out of adultery. (b) David's emphatic mention that God desires truth from the inward parts and that in the hidden part that God will make him to know wisdom suggests that man's sinfulness operates from within and works itself out by our sinful actions.

because he murdered his brother; he murdered his brother because he was evil. The superiority of Abel's sacrifice was based not on the content of his sacrifice but on the condition of his heart.

For us to have the God-faith (*pistin theon*) or faith of God and be able to live by faith, we need a new heart resulting from regeneration. That is why regeneration is the key to victory over the principle of sin that works within us. Indeed, the corruption of the human nature is one of the most empirically verified realities of life. I don't have to teach my two-year-old granddaughter to be selfish or to lie. To the contrary, I have to make a concerted effort to teach her good morals.

Romans 5:12–19

Eberle quotes Romans 5:12 to establish that we are sinners because we sin. He claims that Augustine relied on a Latin mistranslation of the Greek word εφ' ω (*eph ho*) in Romans 5:12 for developing his doctrine of Original sin. The word was translated “in whom” all sinned when it should have been translated “because” all sinned. His point being that we are sinners not because we sinned in Adam but because we sin individually. The verse in question is:

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, *because* all sinned— (Rom. 5:12, italics mine).¹⁵

It is interesting to note that Eberle takes one of the most intensely debated and contested passages in the New Testament and anchors his argument on one word “because” in Romans 5:12 to say that we are sinners because we sin. Scholars differ on what this passage says, especially the meaning of the word εφ' ω (*eph ho*) in Romans 5:12. There is no unanimous agreement on the precise meaning of εφ' ω among scholars. While some see it as a causative word, which would support Pelagianism, others see this construction as consecutive and not causative. This word can also mean “in that,” “in so far as,” “on the ground of the fact that,” or “on the condition that.”¹⁶

The *New Greek English Interlinear New Testament* translates the text as follows:

Therefore as through one man into the world entered and through sin death, so-also to all men death came, *in as much as* all sinned.

Another literal Greek translation renders:

Therefore, even as through one human sin entered into the world and through sin death, and thus death passed through into all mankind, *on which* all sinned.

15. In his classic, *The Normal Christian Life*, Watchman Nee gives an insightful exposition of the nature of sin from the book of Romans. He shows that Romans 1 to 8 is a self-contained unit. In Chapters 1:1 to 5:11 the plural word “sins” is used predominantly and in Chapters 5:12 to 8 the singular “sin” is primarily used. Watchman Nee elegantly demonstrates from these chapters that the singular “sin” and the plural “sins” deal with two different problems of mankind, requiring two different solutions. The singular “sin” is a reference to the principle of sin working in us. It is descriptive of who we are by nature. The plural “sins” refers to the sins we commit daily. The answer to the problem of “sins” is the remission of our sins by the blood of Christ. The answer to the problems of “sin” is deliverance from the power of sin within. “Sins” require forgiveness, but “sin” requires dying with Christ on the cross. See Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1961), 1–2.

16. Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 274.

Young Literal Translation reads:

Because of this, even as through one man the sin did enter into the world, and through the sin death; and thus all men the death did pass through, *for that all did sin*.

A. Nyland, a renowned expert on New Testament manuscripts translates:

So it is that, just as sin entered the world through one person, and death entered the world through sin, thus death passed through to all people, *seeing that all sinned*

In view of these alternative meaning of εφ' ω (*eph ho*), Romans 5:12 may be translated, “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, *for that* (because) all have sinned.” I would argue that whatever translation one adopts, the general meaning of the text is that when Adam sinned, we sinned in him by virtue of our shared humanity with him.

First, the idea of corporate sin and the associated guilt is not alien to Jewish thought. Eberle states that “Jews do not believe in original sin.” While the concept of original or inherited sin is not espoused in modern Judaism, the idea that all of humanity is burdened by the act of Adam has been in Jewish thought in the first century. We read:

[Adam] transgressed . . . Thou didst appoint death for him and for his descendants. . .

For the first Adam, burdened with an evil heart, transgressed and was overcome, as were also all who were descended from him. Thus the disease became permanent. (2 Esdras 3:7, 21–22)

O Adam, what have you done? For though it was you who sinned, the fall was not yours alone, but ours also who are your descendants. (2 Esdras 7:118)

In the Old Testament, we learn that the sin of Achan, which caused the defeat of Israelites at Ai, was attributed to whole Israel. God said to Joshua, “Get up! Why do you lie thus on your face? Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded them. For they have even taken some of the accursed things, and have both stolen and deceived; and they have also put it among their own stuff” (Josh. 7:10–11). Achan was the one who stole it and hid the forbidden stuff, but God says Israel has stolen the accursed things.

The writer of Hebrews establishes the superiority of the priesthood of Jesus Christ by comparing His priesthood to the order of Melchizedek. He does it to show that the priesthood of Jesus Christ is greater than the priesthood of Levi. Then he says, “Even Levi, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, so to speak, for he was still in the loins of his father [Abraham] when Melchizedek met him” (Heb. 7:9–10). The writer of Hebrews establishes the superiority of Jesus’ priesthood saying that even Levi paid the tithes through Abraham.

Apostle Paul reminds us that “we have been united together in the likeness of His [Christ] death . . . that our old man was crucified with the Him [Christ]. . . Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him” (Rom. 6:5–8). It was Jesus who died on the cross two thousand years ago, but we are reckoned as being crucified with Him by virtue of our union with Christ through His redemption.

These examples support that when Adam sinned we also sinned by our participation and union with Him. This is not such a far-fetched thought or concept, nor is it irreconcilable with human experience. The reason many oppose the idea of inherited sin is because they think that such an idea

is at variance with free will and absolves one of personal responsibility. The focus of Paul in Romans 5:12–19, however, is not to deny human responsibility, but to draw a contrast between Adam and Christ and to show that in Christ the curse brought on by Adam has been reversed.

Second, the grammatical construction of Romans 5:12 supports the interpretation that what Paul had in mind was not one's personal sins, but the idea that we have sinned in Adam. It is instructive to note that the phrase *because all sinned* or *in as much as all sinned* is in the aorist indicative, meaning a finished or completed act in the past. In Paul's view, at the time he penned these words, all have sinned—those who lived before him, those who were living during his time, and those who were yet to be born. He included all humanity—past, present, and future—in the finished act of sinning. Another way of saying this would be “On the basis of sin and death entering into the world through one man [Adam] all people have sinned.”¹⁷ Paul reinforces this thought by parenthetically inserting Romans 12:13–4, where he writes:

For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed to when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. (Rom. 5:13–14)

Paul's point is that even though people who lived before Moses were not guilty of transgressing the revealed will of God, they died. Sin was not imputed to them in the absence of the law, yet they died. How should one account for their death? Paul's argument is that they were accounted as transgressors of the law in Adam. Of course, sin was in the world before Moses. People who lived during the days of Noah and those who lived in Sodom and Gomorrah were punished for violating the moral law written on their hearts. But what about the infants and mentally retarded individuals who were not guilty of sinful acts? They too died, and the most plausible explanation is that they were accounted as sinners in Adam.¹⁸

Third, the larger context of the text shows that Paul's main objective is to show how death and condemnation have come to all of us because of the sin of Adam. Paul writes, “For it by the one man's offense many died” (Rom. 5:15). Our death is attributed to the single act of Adam. In 1 Corinthians 15:22, Paul gets even more precise and forceful. He says, “For as *in* Adam all die, even so *in* Christ all shall be made alive.” This verse clinches the whole matter. We are dead *in* Adam. If we are dead *in* Adam, we are also sinners *in* Adam, for the wages of sin is death.

Finally, Paul comes to the grand conclusion and says, “For as by one man's disobedience many *were* made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:19). In essence, because of one man's trespasses we all are accounted as sinners and dead in Adam. But in Christ, as a result of His obedience, we are given life and are made righteous. If, as Eberle argues, we die because we commit acts of sin, then it is logical to say we become righteous by doing righteous acts. That would turn the whole Pauline theology upside down. No one shall be justified by the works of the flesh or by the deeds of the law (Gal. 2:16). We are accounted righteous on the basis of faith in the one who lived a perfect and righteous life (Rom. 5:1). Blaise Pascal beautifully sums up the essence of the doctrine of original sin:

17. Eberle emphasizes that *kosmos* is world minus humanity. That is a stretch! Virtually all Greek scholars regard this term to mean the created order and all that it contains, including humanity. Eberle makes this distinction to advance his position that sin only entered the world but not humans.

18. John Stott, *The Message of Romans* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 151–52.

For without doubt there is nothing more shocking to our reason than to say that the sin of the first man has made culpable those who, being so remote from this source, seem incapable of participating in it. This transmission not only seems impossible to us, it even appears very unjust...Certainly nothing shocks us more harshly than this doctrine. And yet without this most incomprehensible of mysteries, we are incomprehensible to ourselves. The knot of our condition takes its twists and turns in this abyss, so that man is more unintelligible without this mystery than this mystery is unintelligible to man.¹⁹

Our culpability as sinners in Adam does not free us of our personal responsibility and accountability for our personal sins. That's why it is more accurate to say that we are sinners by nature, choice, and divine verdict. The Bible says:

Fear God and keep His commandments,
For this is man's all.
For God will bring every work into judgment,
Including every secret thing,
whether good or evil. (Eccl. 12:14).

But I say unto you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. (Matt. 13:36)

So then each of us shall give account of himself to God. (Rom. 14:12)

And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account. (Heb. 4:13)

Thomas Schreiner proposes that in Romans 5:12, the expression "because all have sinned" could be applied to personal acts of sin without jeopardizing our sinning in Adam, if we consider the fact that we enter into the world "alienated from God and spiritually dead by virtue of Adam's sin." As a result of our alienation and separation from God, we are prone to commit sin.²⁰ He writes:

Our alienation and separation from God are due to Adam's sin, and thus we sin as a result of being born into the world separated from God's life. The notion that we are "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1; cf. Eph. 2:5; Col. 2:13) should be interpreted similarly. This phrase does not mean that first we commit trespasses and sins and as a consequence die. Rather, the idea is that we are born into the world ("children of wrath by nature," Eph. 2:3) separated from God, and our sins are a result of the spiritual state of death. The entire context of Eph. 2:1–10 supports this interpretation, for God remedies the situation by granting life to those of us who are dead and as a result of his life we do good works.²¹

19. Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, http://pcscrib.blogspot.com/2011/10/wednesdays-words-of-wisdompascal-on_26.html (accessed February 18, 2013).

20. Thomas Schreiner, *Romans*, 276.

21. *Ibid.*

Conclusion

The subject of “original sin” or “inherited sin” has been a hotly debated issue throughout church history. Historical Christianity and classical Protestantism always held that we are sinners by virtue of our solidarity with Adam, whose sin plunged us into a state of alienation and separation from God. We are born with a corrupt nature. At the same time, we are also sinners by virtue of committing acts of sin. We sin because we are sinners. God’s word also declares that we are sinners (Rom. 3:23).

In the final analysis, the urgent question before us is what is the answer to this human predicament? This is where Eberle fails miserably in his book. He is so bent on demonstrating the basic goodness of man that he offers, at least in this book, no real solution to deal with the “force of sin.” He pretty much leaves the matter to our own efforts. He writes, “We must hold our lusts in check . . . go for your dream, follow your desires, and trust your heart. However, keep alert for those tests along the way. Be watchful, but not paranoid.”²² Is this the answer to the human predicament? What a letdown! No word about the cross, new life in Christ, or having a new nature in Christ.

Yet Paul’s entire thrust in Romans 5:12–19 is that it is in Christ we have the remedy to the mess created by Adam. The answer is our union with Christ, who gives us a new nature. The answer is to rely on the Holy Spirit who indwells us and who helps us to do what we cannot do for ourselves. We need to enter into a new relationship with the last Adam, Jesus Christ. “There is therefore no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8: 1–2).

The remedy for the problem of “sin” is to reckon ourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 6:11). We need to experience the new life in Christ and live in His *ἐξανάστασιν* “out resurrection” power (Phil. 3:10–11). The remedy for the problem of “sins” is to be forgiven by God and be cleansed by the blood of Christ (1 John 1:9). Manfred Brauch puts the matter into perspective: “This Pauline understanding of sin as a dynamic, relational reality leads directly to *what* is his final word; namely, that this paradoxical reality of our bondage to, and freedom from, sin is overcome in *a new relationship*—one with Jesus Christ. Through that relationship, we are reconciled to God and in Christ we become members of *a new humanity*.”²³

22. Harold Eberle, *Precious in His sight*, 116.

23. Manfred Brauch, *Hard Sayings of Paul* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989), 33.