

Founded on the Holy Scriptures, the Christian Church has historically confessed that Adam's first sin was imputed to the entire race of humans descending naturally from him. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism summarizes, “The covenant being made with Adam, not only for himself, but for his posterity; all mankind, descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him, in his first transgression¹.” In this doctrine the orthodox have believed that God made a covenant with Adam in which he acted as the federal or representative head of the human race. This covenant was a probation to test Adam's obedience, promising him life if he perfectly obeyed. As the federal head in this covenant of works, or covenant of life, Adam's probation was the probation for the whole human race that would naturally descend from his loins, so that his keeping of the covenant would be our keeping of the covenant, or his breaking of the covenant would be our breaking of the covenant. Since Adam broke the covenant by disobeying God, this sin was imputed to all his natural posterity. The imputation has been described as *immediate* and *antecedent*². It was immediate in that all Adam's natural descendants were made guilty in Adam as a direct result of his sin, not as an indirect consequence. It was antecedent to our personal existence, in that we became sinners before we were born. This doctrine of the imputation of Adam's first sin, however, like all other fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith, has not been without controversy.

The doctrine of the imputation of Adam's sin has not always been taught with the same force and clarity. Doctrine develops over time in response to heresy. The refutation of errors brings a focus and distinction to Christian doctrines which otherwise would not

¹ *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Answer 16.

² Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1992), vol I, 620.

receive much attention. As John Girardeau explains:

It has become almost an adage, that the Church has developed her theology mainly through conflict with error. This must be so from the nature of the case. Attention is not apt to be specially directed to what is undisputed, and our clearest judgments are derived from comparison. The contrast of truth and error, induced by the assertion of the latter, enhances our comprehension of both.³

History shows that like many other Christian doctrines, the doctrine of federal headship: that Adam exercised as a *public person* on behalf of all his natural descendants, and the consequent guilt imputed to them for his sin, did not develop with great refinement until the seventeenth century.

In the fourth century the Pelagians denied that Adam's sin had any real effect on his posterity other than setting a bad example. They believed that man's natural condition after the fall was essentially the same as it had been before the fall. They taught that all men could keep themselves from sinning if they exercised enough will power, and that the sin which is in the world is not propagated naturally, but by imitation. That is, men sin simply because they imitate the bad example of their ancestors. For the Pelagians, the grace of God given in creation, by which he gave to man a free will and the ability to do well, were sufficient to enable him to not sin. The celebrated doctors Augustine and Jerome ably refuted this Pelagian doctrine. It was condemned by the synod of Carthage in 418 A. D. and the Council of Orange (529 A. D.).

Until Trent most Roman Catholic scholars taught the correct doctrine of immediate imputation⁴, with some exceptions. This explains why the expositional emphasis of Calvin and the other Reformers was on the inherent corruption derived from Adam by propagation and not on the imputation of guilt by God's decree. The doctrine

³ John L. Girardeau, *The Federal Theology: Its Import and Regulative Influence*, (Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic Press, 1994), 15.

⁴ e.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.html, 1428, 1429.

of imputation was not, however, absent from their thought. Calvin clearly taught that we sinned in Adam when Adam sinned, before we came into the world⁵. Hodge notes:

As at the time of the Reformation an influential party in the Romish Church held, after some of the schoolmen, that original sin consists solely in the imputation of Adam's first sin, and as the Confessions of the Reformers were designed not only as an exposition of the truth, but as a protest against the errors of the Church of Rome, it will be observed that the Protestants frequently assert that original sin is not only the imputation of Adam's sin but also hereditary corruption of nature; and the Reformed theologians often made the latter more prominent than the former, because the one was admitted by their adversaries, but the other denied⁶.

During the Reformation of the sixteenth century, then, there was a general consensus among many of the prominent theologians of the Protestants and Romanists that Adam's sin was imputed to the whole human race according to the principle of representation.

However, at landmark Council of Trent, the Roman Church defined the effect of Adam's sin on his posterity strictly in terms of the sinful nature which is transfused into his natural descendants by propagation⁷. Rather than speaking in terms of the imputed guilt of Adam's sin, Trent spoke only of a shared liability that Adam's sin brought on mankind by natural generation because we inherit his inherent corruption of nature. The Arminian evangelicals have likewise described the effect of Adam's sin as having brought common punishment on the human race, and deny that Adam's *guilt* is imputed to us⁸.

In the mid-seventeenth century an influential lecturer at the French Reformed theological school at Saumur named Josué La Place (or Placeus) taught that the hereditary corruption derived from Adam (and not his first sin) is the ground of that condemnation which has come on mankind⁹. His teaching was formally condemned by the National

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 210, 211, 214, 215.

⁶ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), vol II, 194.

⁷ John Murray, *The Imputation of Adam's Sin*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing), 14.

⁸ Turretin, 614.

⁹ Hodge, 205.

Synod of France (Charendon, 1644) on the grounds that it denied the imputation of Adam's first sin to his natural posterity. In response, La Place contended that his doctrine did indeed affirm the imputation of Adam's sin, but that it was imputed *mediately* through natural generation. In other words, the imputation of Adam's first sin to us depends on our participation with him in his corrupt nature that we derive as a consequence of that sin. We become personally guilty of Adam's first sin by approving of it and affirming it with our own sin which we have inherited from Adam. While La Place used his idea of *mediate imputation* as a defense against charges of heresy, it is clear that what he meant by *imputation*, and what the French Synod meant by that same term were two very different things. While by consensus the Reformed churches in France and elsewhere held that God has judicially reckoned Adam's natural descendants to have sinned in him and with him in his first transgression based on the principle of representation¹⁰, La Place defined imputation only in terms of our common suffering in the effects of his sin, and our own corruption which follows. La Place's doctrine was essentially the same as the Roman (Tridentine) and Arminian teachings because it reduced the imputation of Adam's sin to a hereditary corruption derived from Adam.

In opposition to this error, the Reformed churches of all nations further clarified the doctrine of the *immediate* and *antecedent* imputation of Adam's sin to his posterity based on the principle of federal headship. The Reformed churches of Switzerland decreed in their Formula of Consensus (1675):

We are therefore of opinion that Adam's first sin is imputed to his whole posterity by the secret and just judgment of God. Rom 5.12,19 (through one man sin entered into the world and death

¹⁰ Turretin, 614., Heinrich Hepp, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thompson, ed. Ernst Bizer, (London: The Wakeman Trust), 313, 314.

through sin: and death passed unto all men, for that all sinned...through one man's disobedience the many were made sinners...) 1 Cor. 15.21,22 (...by man came death...in Adam all die).--Nor does any reason appear, as to how hereditary corruption can fall like a spiritual death upon the entire human race by the just judgment of God, unless some fault of the same human race preceded, inducing liability to such death, since God the most just judge of the whole earth punishes none but the guilty person. 11: Thus on a double count man after sin is by nature and so from his birth, before he admits any actual sin unto himself, liable to the divine wrath and curse; first because of the *παραπτώμα* and disobedience which he committed in Adam's loins; secondly because of the consequent hereditary corruption ingrained in his very conception, by which his whole nature is depraved and spiritually dead, so much so, that rightly original sin is laid down as twofold, namely imputed and inherent by heredity. 12: We cannot preserve heavenly truth and straightway give assent to those who deny that Adam represented his posterity directly (*αμεσως*), while on the pretext of indirect and consequent imputation they abolish the non-imputation of the first sin only, but expose to serious danger the assertion of hereditary corruption as well¹¹.

In fact, the worldwide consensus of Reformed and Lutheran theologians during the latter seventeenth century established the federal or representative view of the imputation of Adam's sin as the accepted Protestant doctrine¹². In this they rejected the medieval distinction between *culpa*--“guilt” and *poena*-- “penalty” which Rome had used to support its doctrines of purgatory and penance¹³.

Another view contrary to the received doctrine is known as the *realistic* view of the imputation of Adam's sin. As the name implies, this doctrine contends that based on the unity of the whole human race naturally descended of Adam as our progenitor, we all really, actually, personally, and voluntarily sinned in his first transgression. Representatives of this view include William T. Shedd¹⁴, James Henly Thornwell¹⁵, and Augustus H. Strong¹⁶. This doctrine is based on the premise that it is unjust to punish someone for sins in which he had no real and voluntary participation. According to this doctrine there was an un-individualized unified nature of the entire mass of human beings

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Hodge, 194.

¹³ Murray, 79.

¹⁴ Ibid., 24.

¹⁵ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 436.

¹⁶ Murray, 25.

that were to be born naturally of Adam, acting voluntarily in Adam when he sinned¹⁷.

That sin is therefore not imputed to us because Adam was our federal head, but because we in Adam voluntarily and personally sinned as members of the un-individualized human nature residing in Adam.

In defining imputed sin, it must be noted that only the first sin of Adam was imputed to his posterity. Adam acted as the federal head of all his natural descendants according to the provisions of the covenant of works. This covenant promised to him and his posterity life if he perfectly obeyed, and death if he disobeyed. One act of obedience was not enough for Adam to pass the probation and gain life for himself and his posterity.

Girardeau says:

A course of obedience – how extended, we cannot know – was required of him in order to the acquisition of the reward. Consequently, had Adam stood, the whole series of holy acts up to the moment of justification would have been representative acts, and would therefore have been legally shared by his seed. But there was no necessity that all his sinful acts should be representative. A single act of transgression, from the nature of the case, entailed condemnation. It was the signal of doom. The legal probation was closed; the reward of the covenant was forfeited, and its death-penalty incurred¹⁸.

Adam was required to maintain a life of perfect obedience for the duration of the probation. However, one sin was enough to fail the probation and therefore plunge Adam and all his natural descendants into death. By this first sin Adam broke the covenant, and the representative probation of the human race having been already decided in Adam, he ceased to be our representative head.

¹⁷ While Jonathan Edwards' discussion of this topic is sometimes reminiscent of realistic terminology, further investigation reveals that he regarded Adam's relation to his posterity as representative (*On Original Sin, The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, (Peabody, MA: 2003), vol I, 183.) The apparent inconsistency in his language has more to do with his philosophical idea that all things which exist and all events that occur are continuously created new by God in every moment. In Edwards' view, then, the only possible continuity which may exist between past and present is only based on God's decree, and therefore he may regard our participation in Adam's sin as both real and imputed by God's decree. cf. Hodge, 217-218; Murray, 54-62.

¹⁸ Girardeau, 27.

The inherent and sinful corruption that all of Adam's natural descendants have derived from him since the fall is not the ground of the imputation, but rather the just punishment that God inflicted on the human race with Adam in his first transgression. We natural descendants of Adam were thus made sinners in Adam before we were born (when he sinned), but the corruption that enslaves our nature did not properly exist until we were conceived--until we existed. Protestant theologians have never denied that corruption is passed on from generation to generation by propagation. But that is not the full story. Antecedent to this hereditary corruption is our guilt in Adam's first sin, and the corruption of our nature is punishment for that sin. When we say that Adam's sin was imputed to all of his *natural posterity*, it is obvious that Christ is excluded. Christ was conceived of Adam's seed, but miraculously, not by ordinary generation, and therefore he was not federally represented in Adam¹⁹.

The doctrine here expounded is not that we are merely punished with Adam as Adam was punished because we deserve the same punishment that he deserved. Rather the argument is that we were guilty with Adam in his first sin. This does not mean that we voluntarily and personally sinned in Adam. Although the sin is properly and really ours, and we are properly guilty of it²⁰, this guilt is not personal, but representative. By God's just decree Adam represented all of his natural posterity in the covenant of works that God made with him, and with all his seed in him at creation, and therefore his sin is our sin representatively as our federal head.

¹⁹ Heppé, 291. Turretin, 615.

²⁰ The great Princeton theologian Charles Hodge speaks with some inconsistency on this point. While at times he affirms that the guilt of Adam's sin is imputed to his posterity (*Systematic Theology*, vol. II, 210), at other times he seems to exclude guilt in saying that only an "obligation to satisfy justice" is imputed (Ibid., 194), and that this "does not mean that" Adam's posterity "committed" his sin (Ibid., 195). However Hodge's explanation does not seem to do justice to the apostle's assertion that in Adam's first sin "many were made sinners." (Rom 5:19) To be a sinner is to have committed sin.

The ground and justification of this federal representation of the human race by Adam is found in our common descent from him and our organic unity with him as the father of our race. However this alone was not enough to establish federal representation in that test of obedience known as the covenant of works. It was by God's sovereign and just decree that we were united representatively with Adam according to the provisions of the covenant. We thus share a "common blameworthiness"²¹ with Adam in his first transgression. Adam's first sin bore two aspects, including rebellion against God by throwing off the whole yoke of subjection to his most righteous law written into his creaturely constitution, and disobedience to God's one express commandment.

The apostle Paul in the 5th chapter of Romans compares and contrasts the justification of sinners in Christ with the condemnation of all men in Adam, "who is the figure of him that was to come" (v.14). His emphasis is on the nature of justification and Christ's righteousness imputed to undeserving sinners. However in this passage Paul teaches emphatically (by way of repetition) that we natural descendants of Adam sinned in Adam when he committed his first transgression, and that therefore death passed on all men. He says in verse 12: "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned:" This statement sets forth the doctrine that Adam's sin was properly our sin. We do not merely inherit a corrupt nature from Adam (although that thought is included); we sinned when he sinned, that is, before we were conceived--before we existed. Neither the Tridentine, Arminian, nor the *mediate imputation* doctrines do justice to the Apostle's teaching on this point. If death entered into the world because when Adam sinned, we sinned, this language goes

²¹ Turretin, 620.

well beyond the doctrine that we merely suffer the effects of a corrupt nature as a result of Adam's sin. The verb translated “sinned” --ἥμαρτον appears in the aorist tense, which simply denotes an action in the past without any idea of continuation. The distinction of verb forms (between the perfect “have sinned” and the preceding “entered”, “passed”) that appear in English translation weakens the continuity of thought between the clauses, but in the Greek text each of the verbs in this sentence is in the aorist tense. The force of this construction leads to the conclusion that the event by which sin entered into the world is the same event described by “all sinned”. But lest he be misunderstood, the apostle makes this assertion emphatic by repeating the assertion again and again in the chapter in close proximity. “For if through the offence of one many be dead”...”the judgment was by one to condemnation”...”by one man's offence death reigned by one.”...”For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners.”

The *realistic* understanding that we all existed in Adam and in a sense acted personally in him might seem like a viable option based on these verses, but the apostle also makes clear in this chapter that when we sinned in Adam we did not sin in exactly the same way as Adam sinned. Verse 14 reads: “death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression”. Here Paul makes a distinction between our sin in Adam and Adam's own sin in the event. There is some aspect in which our sin is different from Adam's sin, for there are some humans who have “not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression”. How then can it be asserted that we sinned personally and voluntarily just as Adam sinned? Also, if we really existed and personally acted in Adam, why is only Adam mentioned and not Eve? As the mother of the human race, surely we were just as much included in her

ovaries as we were in Adam's loins. There must be something more indicated here. Why was it only Adam's first sin in which we were implicated, and not all of the sins he committed over his lifetime? Only the one sin is mentioned here. So then it seems from this passage that a correct understanding of the imputation must take into account our real and proper sin in Adam's first transgression while at the same time recognizing that we did not sin consciously as Adam sinned. This consideration destroys the realist conception. Furthermore it is against reason to suggest that we, Adam's posterity, can be properly said to have existed and to have acted personally when we have no consciousness of the event.

The Scriptural testimony indicates that God at creation made a covenant with Adam, and not only for him, but for his posterity. All of the blessings, threatenings, and curses that God gave to Adam in Genesis chapters 2 and 3 apply to all his posterity just as much as to himself. God made a covenant with Adam promising life if he obeyed, and death if he disobeyed. "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." (Gen 2:16, 17) Either life or death was contingent upon Adam's fulfilling or breaking of God's law illustrated by a commandment not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The reward or punishment incurred applied to Adam's descendants just as much to him. If Adam obeyed perfectly, his descendants like him would enjoy all the blessings and benefits of glorious communion with God for eternity and adoption as sons, but since he disobeyed, all mankind descending from him naturally died both physically and spiritually like Adam. The manifold extent of this penal death, and its application to the

whole human race naturally conceived, are proved by the event. Likewise the temporal curses inflicted on Adam and Eve as a result of Adam's first transgression apply equally to all their descendants following them. (Gen 3:15-19) The upshot of all this is to prove that Adam represented all of his natural descendants as their representative head in a covenant of works, which also explains why in Romans chapter 5 the Apostle describes Adam's sin as our sin, although at the same time recognizing that our sin was not in all respects the same as Adam's sin. Adam's sin was our sin—not personally—but representatively.

The presumption that all mankind has inherited corruption from Adam, but not because we are guilty in Adam, impugns God's justice. Surely the almighty and all-knowing God could have prevented the sin of one from corrupting the whole human race, his crowning achievement of creation and his own image-bearer. The assumption that sin is only accidental, an arbitrary effect not founded in God's just decree, that passed on the whole human race, not based on our own guilt, but simply by propagation, is an affront to the goodness and perfect perspicuity of the Alpha and Omega. Francis Turretin remarks,

...the immediate imputation of the first sin being denied, the principle foundation of the justice of the propagation of sin is removed. Nor can a sufficient reason be given why God willed that hereditary and inherent stain to be transmitted from the parents to their posterity. Since it holds the relation not only of base evil (*mali turpis*), or pollution, but also of said evil (*mali tristis*) or punishment, it ought necessarily to suppose some antecedent sin on account of whose guilt it is inflicted by the justice of God.²²

That the inherent corruption which has been inflicted upon man since the fall is a punishment, is clear from God's threat to punish Adam by death if he disobeyed. "...in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." (Gen 2:17) The punishment²³

²² Ibid., 622.

²³ In light of the explicit Scriptural evidence, it is difficult to comprehend John Murray's suggestion that human depravity is not a penal consequence of the imputation of Adam's sin. (*The Imputation of Adam's Sin*, 92.)

executed on the human race was both physical and spiritual death. But it is a fundamental principle of God's justice founded on Scripture that there is no punishment without guilt. "The soul that sinneth, it shall die." (Ezek. 18:20) Punishment is not inflicted on the innocent. Yet the Spirit clearly states that we became guilty in Adam, calling us "sinners". (Rom 5:19) Therefore since we did not sin voluntarily and personally in Adam's first transgression, but we are punished by death with Adam, it must be that we are guilty with him because we sinned in him by representation.

The principle of guilt imputed by representation is common in Scripture. In Exodus 20:5, 6, God adds a threat to the breach of the second commandment, "For I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments." This representative principle (which is echoed elsewhere in Scripture e. g. Deut 29:14, 15) bespeaks a covenantal relationship in which the guilt or reward of one is imputed to another by reason of the covenant. This representative principle in the Scriptures is declared by God to be just, and who may dare question the judgment of the one who is truth?

The representative principle is known and accepted in all human societies. Our elected officials represent us officially and make decisions in our stead. Governments have been constrained to pay reparations for acts of war or other injuries inflicted on various parties, and these fines ultimately devolve upon the taxpaying people who did not personally vote in the deliberations which led to the offensive acts in question. A child born of one American citizen is recognized as holding the same claim to citizenship as his parent (whether the parent be naturalized or natural-born), not due to any choice he has

made personally. Likewise in the natural condition the sins of the parents often have a very great and permanent damaging effect upon their children, and conversely children may be reap great reward from the industry or sagacity of their forebears. Hodge says, “All men are led as it were instinctively to recognize this principle of representation. Rulers represent their people; Parents their children; Guardians their wards²⁴.”

The apostle Paul does not leave us to grasp the representative headship of Adam merely in abstract terms, but in expounding the foundational doctrine of justification, he provides an illuminating parallel between Adam as “the figure of him that was to come” (Rom 5:14) and Christ the “last Adam” and “second man.” (1 Cor 15:45, 47) “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.” (1 Cor 15:22) and “the judgment was by one to condemnation, but the free gift is of many offences unto justification.” (Rom 5:16) Here we have a direct parallel between man’s condemnation in Adam and the sinner’s justification in Christ. The nature of the imputation of Adam’s sin to his posterity is of the same nature as the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to his spiritual seed. But as Christ’s imputed righteousness is described as a “free gift” (Rom 5:15, 16, 17), i. e., antecedent to any merit on the part of the sinner, the imputation of Adam’s sin must also be antecedent to the personal demerit of his descendants. “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (Rom 5:8) As Christ’s righteousness is imputed *immediately* to his spiritual seed, that is, as sinners are justified (or declared righteous) by God by virtue of their union with Christ, so Adam’s sin is imputed *immediately* to his posterity. That is, not *mediately*, by means of hereditary corruption that is transfused into them, but by God’s just decree based on

²⁴ Hodge, 122.

Adam's first disobedience. Just as Christ's death was imputed to sinners *immediately* for justification, so Adam's sin was imputed *immediately* to all his posterity unto condemnation. The apostle's analogy excludes any idea of a *mediate* imputation in either case.

Some have objected to the idea that they are guilty for sin which they did not personally, voluntarily, and consciously commit. Not content with the revelation that God has provided of his own will, they would rather stand or fall by their own two feet, and think it is unjust that they should have been represented by covenant with our common ancestor. Yet they have not correctly considered the matter. What man does not recognize the representative principle when it comes to elected representatives in a republican government? Yet is not God, the only just and wise, better able to choose a man fit to represent us, than we are for ourselves? Moreover God gave to Adam our public head all the abundant blessings and conditions that should have confirmed him in righteousness and enabled him to pass the probation. Enjoying perfection of nature and life in the glorious garden that God had created to meet his every need and recreation, he lacked no gift, happiness, or desire. There was nothing that should have led him to rebel. Who are we to think we would have chosen to do better under the same temptation?

Herman Witsius says:

...what mortal now can flatter himself, that, placed in the same circumstances with Adam, he would have better consulted his own interest? Adam was neither without wisdom, nor holiness, nor a desire after true happiness, nor an aversion to the miseries denounced by God against the sinner; nor, in fine, without any of those things, by which he might expect to keep upon his guard against all sin: and yet he suffered himself to be drawn aside by the craft of a flattering seducer. And dost thou, iniquitous censurer of the ways of the Lord, presume thou wouldst have better used thy free will²⁵?

²⁵ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, (Kingsburg, CA: den Dulk Christian Publications, 1990), 59.

Not only is it extremely presumptuous to suppose that we could have fared better than Adam, but what if he had passed the test and been confirmed in perfect righteousness? Who among those who now murmur against the justice of God would offer any complaint if, based on Adam's perfect obedience, they would have received eternal life in him and been forever confirmed in righteousness, enjoying full communion with the Almighty in glory? What professing Christian now complains that men are justified freely in Christ based on his merit? But without this just principle of covenant representation, men could no more be represented in Christ and his righteousness imputed to them than they could have been made sinners in Adam. Man would be in a much more precarious situation. So these arguments commonly raised against the justice of God, in ordaining Adam to be the federal head of all his natural posterity, are without merit.

Others have argued that Adam's sin was not a violation of the law of God summarized in the Ten Commandments. But the Scriptures define sin as a violation of the law, *ἀνομία*. (1 John 3:4) The law is essentially an expression of God's perfect character, and sin is anything which is out of conformity with that character. The law of God given in the form of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai was not new; it was the same law that man has had written on his heart as God's image-bearer since creation. (Rom 2:15) Paul makes an inference from Adam's sin that he had been given the law, because sin is only imputed under the law. "For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law." (Rom 5:13) According to the apostle, the fact that Adam sinned is proof that he had been given the law. The letter of the law as revealed to Moses was only a representative summary, a necessary guide for rebellious sinners who need to be continually reminded of their duty to God and neighbor.

Although God summarized the law in ten commandments on Mount Sinai, Christ summarized it in two commandments (quoting from Leviticus and Deuteronomy (Matt 22:37-40; cf. Deut 6:5, Lev 19:18)). Christ pointed to the fuller scope of the law in the Sermon on the Mount when he applied it not only to outward actions, but to man's innermost thoughts.

God's commandment to Adam not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil forbade something which was indifferent in itself. Only God's bare commandment made the act of eating the fruit sinful. Seen in this light, that commandment was perfectly suited as test of his obedience. At the heart of Adam's first sin was a rejection of God as the supreme object of his desire, and the only one in whom he hoped to find fulfillment. When Adam rebelled against God's commandment, he questioned God's wisdom and authority in giving the commandment. Sin is a lack of obedience to God as authoritative law-giver. Therefore his sin was in one sense a breach of one particular commandment, but in another sense it was a violation of the whole law. And it is the same with every sin. Hence James says, "For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one *point*, he is guilty of all." (2:10) By violating God's express command, Adam became guilty of breaking the whole law of God. That law revealed to Adam in nature was the same law summarized on Mount Sinai and on the Mount²⁶. Witsius says:

It is, moreover, to be observed, that this law of nature is the same in substance with the decalogue; being what the apostle calls, *την εντολην την εις ζωην*, a commandment which was ordained to life, Rom vii. 3, 4. that is, that law by the performance of which, life was formerly obtainable. And indeed, the decalogue contains such precepts, "which if a man do he shall life in them," Lev. xviii. 5. But those precepts are undoubtedly the law proposed to Adam, upon which the covenant of works was built. Add to this, what the apostle says, that the law, which still continues to be the rule of our actions, and whose righteousness ought to be fulfilled in us, was made weak through the flesh, that is, through sin, and that it was become impossible for it to bring us to life, Rom viii. 3, 4. The same law therefore was in force before the entrance of sin, and if duly observed, had the

²⁶ Matthew 5-7.

power of giving life. Besides, God in the second creation inscribes the same law on the heart, which in the first creation he had engraven on the soul²⁷.

So then when Adam sinned, he broke one commandment, and he broke the whole law²⁸.

He became guilty, and the whole human race became guilty in him.

Not a few have questioned whether God's providential dealing with Adam before the fall is properly termed a *covenant*. John Murray is among those who have objected to the term as being unbiblical in the case of Adam²⁹. I think this is due in part to their idea that a covenant must involve two equal parties that mutually agree on terms of a contract. In the case of Adam, God drew the terms and the conditions upon which he was pleased to reward or punish Adam, and he imposed these provisions on Adam. Yet the same can be said for all of God's dealings with men that the Scriptures term "covenants." No one has ever entered a covenant with God on an equal footing. God has no equals. He can only covenant with his own creatures, and these covenants of course are by nature obligatory on the creatures. In the case of Adam it can at least be said that he consented to the terms of the covenant after he was created. Adam did not immediately stage a protest when God imposed the terms of life in the garden; he only rebelled later, when he was enticed by the serpent's subtlety. Witsius explains that all covenants need not imply equal parties:

Man, upon the proposal of this covenant, could not without guilt, refuse giving this stipulation or acceptance...On account of the high sovereignty of God, who may dispose of his own benefits, and appoint the condition of enjoying them with a supreme authority, and without being accountable to any: and at the same time enjoin man, to strive for the attainment of the blessings offered, on the condition prescribed. And hence this covenant, as subsisting between parties infinitely unequal, assumes the nature of those, which the Greeks called *Injunctions*, or *covenants form commands*³⁰;

²⁷ Witsius, 62, 63.

²⁸ Heppe, 303.

²⁹ Although Hosea 6:7 might seem to settle the question, "they like Adam have transgressed the covenant" (ASV), many commentators prefer to translate the Hebrew here rendered "Adam" as "man." The word means both "Adam" and "man", depending on the context.

³⁰ Witsius, 47.

Having proved that there is such a thing as covenant between superior and inferior, let us examine the provisions of this providential arrangement.

God gave Adam one commandment not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He promised Adam eternal life if he obeyed, symbolized by the tree of life. (Gen 2:9; cf. Rev 2:7; 22:2, 14) That this life promised was not only a continued existence in the garden, but a full, glorious communion of Adam and his posterity with God in heaven for eternity is evident³¹. Adam had an innate desire for a fuller knowledge of God which was perverted through the serpent's temptation when he ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is not in keeping with the goodness of God that he would give his most prized creature this inherent desire of a greater contemplation of God, if it could have never been fulfilled. Additionally the tree of life given to Adam was and remains a symbol of eternal life in the Son of God. (Rev 2:7; 22:2, 14)

God tested Adam with one commandment. The probationary aspect of that commandment and the punishment contingent upon disobedience imply that there was something promised above that which Adam then enjoyed. This punishment was not just any punishment, but death physical, spiritual, and eternal. As a result of the fall, Adam and his descendants did not only die physically, but spiritually as well.

And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others³².

This passage describes the natural human state as one of spiritual death, and walking according to disobedience. It refers to the wrath of God to which all humans born into

³¹ Hepp, 295.

³² Eph 2:1-3

this world are naturally subject due to their sin. This spiritual death is that death which God threatened to inflict on Adam, and on his posterity in him, if he disobeyed. “...for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.” (Gen 2:17) According to the nature of a probation, the promise contingent upon perfect obedience ought to correspond to the punishment threatened. Since the punishment was no less than eternal death in all its manifold aspects, so it follows that the life promised was not only physical, but a glorious, immanent fellowship with God in heaven for all eternity.

Witsius biblically defines a covenant as “an agreement between God and man, about the way of obtaining consummate happiness; including a commination of eternal destruction, with which the contemner of the happiness, offered in that way, is to be punished³³.” According to this definition, (which also fits all of the other covenants of which we read in Scripture,) there is no reason why God's providential arrangement with Adam at creation should not be properly called a covenant. And since this covenant promises eternal life upon condition of perfect obedience, there is all the more reason to call it a covenant in conformity to other biblical examples.

Paul the apostle speaks of Christ as the second “Adam” (1 Cor 15:45) who by his holy life and propitiatory sacrifice fulfilled all the righteous obligations of God's law for his people, for those who had sinned in Adam. (Matt 5:17) He fulfilled the terms of the law that Adam had broken, and then bore men’s punishment for breaking the law. The Scriptural testimony explicitly states that Christ came to fulfill the covenant. (Luke 1:72) He as the second Adam brings to sinners eternal life by succeeding for them where Adam failed. By Christ's obedience, according to the terms of the new covenant, those who

³³ Witsius, 45.

believe in him receive eternal life. "...by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous...That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord." (Rom 5:19, 21) Christ in bringing sinners to eternal life took up federal headship for them like Adam, to fulfill the terms that Adam had broken, and this arrangement is termed a "covenant". Therefore: 1. God's arrangement with Adam was a covenant and 2. If Adam had perfectly obeyed, we would have received eternal life with him.

The *immediate* and *antecedent* imputation of Adam's sin to all his natural posterity, acting as their federal head in the covenant of works, bears great implications for the whole of Christian faith and life. Since God sovereignly inflicted spiritual death on all of Adam's natural descendants as punishment for Adam's first sin, and their sin in him, it follows that they are all spiritually dead by nature. Hence the Spirit says, "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one." (Rom 3:10-12) and, therefore, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him." (John 6:44) This spiritually-dead condition describes all men descended naturally from Adam. A person who is spiritually dead has no chance of being resurrected except by a miracle from above. This miracle God supplied in Christ, who is called the second "Adam". (1 Cor 15:45)

The Holy Spirit gives us a parallel description of Christ's role in salvation and Adam's role in our death. Based on this parallel we notice many similarities in the imputation of Christ's righteousness compared with the imputation of Adam's sin, yet

there are also differences. The manner of imputation in both cases is *immediate* and *antecedent*. This is the normative parallel to which the apostle refers, “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.” (1 Cor 15:22) The parallel is in the imputation. But the manner of union is different. In Adam's federal headship of the human race, he is linked to them by natural propagation as the natural father of the race. In the case of Christ, those united to him in the covenant are united not by natural descent, but *spiritually*. While we are united with Adam by natural birth, Christ's seed is united to him by birth *ανωθεν*—*from above*. (John 3:3) “Which [in contrast to natural birth from Adam] were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” (John 1:13) Therefore, just as we were counted sinners in Adam without our own personal choice, so all those in Christ are counted righteous (justified) in Christ *antecedently*--by the sovereign will of God before they were born³⁴.

Just as Adam's disobedience implanted a seed of corruption into the human race by propagation, so Christ's obedience implants a seed of righteousness by the Spirit into all those for whom he died and rose again. Yet just as it was not because of hereditary corruption that Adam's descendants were made sinners, so it is not by the implanted seed of righteousness in Christ's own that they are counted righteous, but only because of Christ's righteousness imputed to them. The parallel secures the proper origin of justification and sanctification, and the distinction between them. Because of this close connection historically those who have denied the principle of guilt in Adam by imputed sin have also rejected the doctrine of salvation by Christ's imputed righteousness³⁵.

Christ's imputed righteousness also secures the doctrine that no one for whom

³⁴ That is, for all those born since Christ's resurrection.

³⁵ Turretin, 623.

Christ died will ever perish. For if all who were represented in Adam in his disobedience, died, then all who were represented in Christ on the cross, live. In Adam's case the imputation is universal based on his fatherhood of the entire human race, but in Christ's case the imputation is by the Spirit, applying to all those whom the Spirit unites to Christ by giving them faith³⁶ based on the provisions of the covenant that Christ sealed with his blood. Hence, salvation in Christ is not universal, but special and particular, applying only to those whom the Holy Spirit unites to Christ.

In Adam we were justly punished for our sin in him, and therefore we deserve death. We ought to feel guilty for our sin in Adam because God has justly decreed that we were guilty in him. In Christ, however, we do not receive justice, but grace. Unlike the penalty that we incur in Adam, the salvific blessings that we receive in Christ are *undeserved*. Therefore we ought not to feel proud of ourselves for Christ's merit imputed to us. This was not imputed of justice, but of mercy.

Sin is disobedience of the law of God, and Christ as the second Adam fulfilled the stipulations of the law where Adam had failed. “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.” (Matt 5:17) Christ in obeying where we disobeyed in Adam, fulfilled our obligation to keep God's law in keeping with the terms of the covenant that we had broken. (Hosea 6:7) Adam as our federal head was required to obey God's law not just once, but perfectly during the entire course of his probation to obtain the promise for himself and his posterity. So in obtaining the promise for us, Christ, as the “second Adam”, lived an entire life of active law-keeping as our covenantal representative. Hence it is not our righteousness in which

³⁶ Eph 2:8, Phil 1:29, 1 Cor 2:12-13

we are justified, but in Christ's righteousness. By virtue of our federal union with him in the covenant, his keeping of the law becomes our keeping of the law. In this way God's justice is glorified. He has not relaxed the standards of his holy law one jot or tittle, but he has decreed that Christ's own law-keeping be accepted on our behalf. Hence the law of God is not done away with in the new covenant, nor has God lowered his standards, but rather we the covenant breakers are represented in Christ, the covenant-keeper, and his obedience is imputed to us.

It follows then, that just as we derived a corrupted nature as a punishment for Adam's imputed sin, (although our corruption is not why we became sinners, but an after-effect), so by virtue of their union with Christ, the Spirit implants a holy element into all his spiritual seed, making them more and more to live unto the righteous requirements of the law of God. This is called sanctification. Rijssen says, "The one sin of Adam is imputed to us, and as a result of it we are sinners. Thus, we are acquitted by the righteousness of Christ and regenerated by his Spirit³⁷." The law remains as a standard for Christian obedience, although it is only by Christ's righteousness that we are justified. Sanctification, by which the Spirit makes the believer to live according to God's holy commandments, is a result, not the cause, of union with Christ. Just as the sinful corruption of the human race is proof of their guilt in Adam, so the sanctification by the Spirit in the life of believers is proof of their union with Christ. In speaking of this "new covenant", Jeremiah³⁸ prophesied:

Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day

³⁷ Leonard Rijssen, "On Justification", trans. J. Wesley White, *Mid-America Journal of Theology*, (Dyer, IN: Mid-America Reformed Seminary, 2005), vol XVI, 124.

³⁸ 31:31-33

that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD: But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.

The apostle Paul quotes this passage in reference to Christians in the New Covenant in Hebrews 8:8-12. According to the prophecy, the holy law of God will not be abrogated as a rule of obedience. On the contrary, the “law” will be ingrained in the “inward parts” of God's people. This prophecy comes true by the power of the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies all those for whom Christ died, based on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ in whom they are counted righteous as their federal head, enabling them more and more to keep the law of God in their lives.

While by the power of the Spirit Christ's seed are sanctified more and more in this life, they still bear the corrupted nature derived from Adam. They are still subject to physical death. They are still disobedient, (although to a decreasing decree, by the Spirit's work in them.) They are prone to take a little credit for their own salvation, and have to be reminded continuously by the word and sacraments that they owe everything to the mercy of God in Christ Jesus. Believers must continuously be reminded that they are guilty in Adam, and are justified only by the imputed righteousness of another--that they do not deserve salvation. They have to be reminded of the requirements of God's law, as a guide to sanctification, to obey God out of gratitude for his free gift of salvation in Christ. The church, which is the gathering of the redeemed in Christ, must bear in mind the sinful nature which still inheres in her own members, as well as the spiritual death seen all around her. This realization bears far-reaching implications for worship, evangelism, Christian education, church polity, etc. God's people must remember that it

is only by the Holy Spirit that dead sinners may be united to Christ. They must keep their own sinfulness in mind, and flee to Christ for the strength to obey his commandments in all of Christian life both individual and communal, while relying on him alone for salvation.

God would have been glorified in the covenant of works, had Adam perfectly obeyed. By grace he gave Adam many abundant blessings to help him keep the covenant. If Adam had perfectly obeyed, he would have obtained the prize of eternal life and communion with God for himself and all his posterity. This was a gracious arrangement to say the least. Yet in his infinite wisdom, God has chosen to make his strength shown in our weakness, so that we get absolutely no credit for the life that we receive in Christ.

Since then this counsel and purpose which has been manifested in Christ in the last times by the preaching of the Gospel and the operation of the H. Spirit was not born in God until after man's lapse, but before man had sinned, indeed before he had been created, before the constitution of the world, it had been hidden in Him from eternity: it is I think pretty clear that God refused to establish man's felicity and salvation upon his first state and constitution such as it was, but established it on his (man's) restoration predestined in Christ the Son, and He so arranged, that he should be redeemed and preserved neither by his knowledge of Himself (whence He even forbade him to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil) nor by the worthiness and merits of his own righteousness, but by the sole grace of mercy of his free election, when otherwise ready to perish, by the intervention of His Son³⁹.

When we behold God's wise and glorious plan for the salvation of his people revealed in Scripture, we cannot but wonder in awe. It is all to his glory, and all of his grace. Our justification like our sanctification is in Christ. Our physical resurrection and eternal glorification are only in Christ, of whom, to whom, and through whom are all things. Amen.

³⁹ Wolfgang Musculus Dusanus, quoted in Heppie, 304.