

Introduction

GARY ANDERSON SAYS THAT “sin has a history.”¹ That is, there is a story behind the theology of sin. The thesis of this book is that there is a story behind the theology of original sin, and that the history of that story by the time we reach its classical formulation in Augustine in the late fourth and early fifth century is a long way from the beginning of the story in the narrative of Genesis 3.

I grew up in a conservative evangelical home and community in which I was taught that I was “born in sin.” That is, I was a sinner from birth, and, therefore, I needed to repent of my sin and put my faith in Jesus Christ in order to be forgiven of my inherited or original sin plus the sins I had committed as a child growing up. I did as I was taught, and at a young age in a revival meeting in which the evangelist frightened me with a graphic sermon on the horrors of hell, I repented of my sin/sins and confessed my faith in Jesus as my Savior.

The general teaching in the Mennonite Brethren Church of which I became a member, the Christian high school which I attended, the Christian liberal arts college which I attended all reaffirmed in general terms the doctrine of original sin. It was not until my senior year in college that I received specific teaching about the theology of original sin. In a course entitled “The Essentials of Christianity” taught by J. B. Toews, my father, I was required to read Eric Sauer’s *The Dawn of World Redemption* and Augustus H. Strong’s *Systematic Theology*. From Sauer I learned that Satan had been a prince or viceroy of God who had rebelled against God and been expelled from the heavenly court, although Sauer admitted that there was no biblical evidence for this understanding.² This Satan was responsible for the temptation of Eve and “the fall” of Adam and Eve.

1. Anderson, *Sin*, 6.

2. Sauer, *Redemption*, 32–34.

The Story of Original Sin

Because Adam was the organic representative of “mankind,” “the fall” was universal and “death established itself upon all his descendants.”³ Every individual was “in Adam.”⁴

Strong articulated the same theology but with different language. The context for the discussion of original sin was the law. Adam’s sin in the Garden was the violation of the law.⁵ Adam’s sin was “imputed to all his posterity so that “in Adam all die.”⁶ Strong explicitly embraced a theology of sin articulated by a church father named Augustine in the mid-390s and early 400s: “God imputes the sin of Adam immediately to all his posterity, in virtue of that organic unity of mankind by which the whole race at the time of Adam’s transgression existed, not individually, but seminally, in him as its head. The total life of humanity was then in Adam; the race as yet had its being only in him. In Adam’s free act, the will of the race revolted from God and the nature of the race corrupted itself.”⁷ Traducianism is the theory of sin transmission that Strong embraced; that is, in the sexual act, the male transmits sin through the sperm that fertilizes the female egg. The result is that all of Adam’s posterity is born into the same state into which Adam fell, that is, total depravity. All humans are born with the complete corruption of their moral nature and a bias toward evil.⁸

The Virgin Birth of Jesus, we were told in class, was necessary to remove the male from the reproductive cycle in order to stop the transmission of sin.

It seemed a little strange to me, so I recall pressing my father at home. He told me that Strong had been the textbook he had virtually memorized in the theology classes with Professor H. W. Lohrenz as a new immigrant student from Russia at Tabor College in Hillsboro, Kansas, in the 1930s. He assured me the same theology was taught at Western Theological Seminary in Portland, Oregon, where he earned his Th.M. in 1940 and at Southwestern Theological Seminary in Dallas, Texas, where he pursued doctoral studies in theology in the mid-1940s. It was the orthodox understanding of sin and the basis for the orthodox interpretation of the atonement of Christ, he said.

3. Ibid., 56.

4. Ibid., 56–57.

5. Strong, *Theology*, 533f.

6. Ibid., 593.

7. Ibid., 619.

8. Ibid., 637f.

To use theological language, I was taught as a young Christian and a college student that sin was an ontological reality, that I was sinful by nature apart from any choice or action of my choosing. Sin defined my being from the moment of conception. There was nothing that I could do about it because my nature, my being had been corrupted by Adam's sin in the Garden.

One man many centuries ago determined how my church, and most Protestant, and all Catholic churches understood sin. And that understanding shaped the churches theologies of salvation. How could one man have so much influence? How could he have so much influence especially when I had difficulty finding his theology supported by my reading of the Bible? But, then I did not know Hebrew and Greek at the time. I checked some other evangelical books on theology, and they all seemed to agree with my father, Eric Sauer, and A. H. Strong. But I remained unpersuaded. The traducian theory of sin transmission via sexual intercourse seemed especially farfetched. The explanation of the Virgin Birth as necessary to remove the male from the reproductive process really seemed strange. I thought Jesus was to be exactly like us in order to redeem us, but now suddenly he was very different from us. Was I alone in wondering about these things?

My doctoral studies in New Testament made me very aware of how history puts glasses on the way we read and understand biblical texts. My study of early church history and literature (patristics) helped me realize the paradigmatic effect on biblical interpretation of people like Constantine and Augustine. In my early study of Romans I saw a disconnect between what Paul said about sin in Romans 5:12 and what Augustine said about the meaning of Romans 5:12, but I did not have the time or the courage as a young teacher in the church to address the issue openly; I would whisper to my students that there were problems they might want to explore. I would occasionally hear or read scholars say Augustine's doctrine of original sin was not biblical (e.g., James McClendon),⁹ but they did not support these claims with a study of the critical biblical texts or trace the history of the emergence of the doctrine. This book tries to do what I found missing, to carefully trace the history of the interpretation of Genesis 3 that led to the formulation of the doctrine of original of sin.

9. Strong, *Theology*, 125.