RESPONSES:

FIVE CONSIDERATIONS FOR A REFORMULATION OF THE DOCTRINE OF SIN (ORIGINAL AND PERSONAL)

Trevor Hutton

Not only would it be incredibly foolish, but also incredibly arrogant, to assume that we were now in a position to write a definitive and all-embracing doctrine of Original Sin in the light of these conference papers. However, it is my personal contention that in the light of our collective theological discussions in the last few days, we are in a position to bring what I would call 'considerations' to bear on any possible reformulation of the doctrine of Original Sin. These 'considerations' are not only applicable to this theological doctrine in general but are applicable in particular to our own doctrinal formulation of the doctrine as found in the *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene in the Articles of Faith. Therefore although I will not present a written replacement for Article 5, nor even an amended version, I do want to bring what I consider to be five important premises and concepts that ought to guide us in our revisitation of the *Manual* statement, either today, or more likely, in future days.

Of course it is not possible, given the time limit, to share in detail why I believe the following concepts should guide us in our revisitation of the doctrine of original sin, but I hope they will in some way become self-evident given the nature of our discussions over the last days. My final sentence in this preamble is to remind us that it took the Church approximately 451 years to reach a conclusive Christological settlement—so, given ten minutes I will be amazed if I even reach the end of this presentation, never mind bring anything substantive, to the debate! However, I am encouraged by the words of Hebrews 11:1, 'Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen'. What important 'considerations' do we need to firmly establish as foundation stones as we seek to examine, evaluate, and express the doctrine of Original Sin?

We must approach the subject of Original Sin in the context of a Christological formulation of doctrine.

How good it was to end the conference on the point we ought to have begun—i.e., by placing any understanding of Original Sin clearly in a Christological context. All Christian doctrine must be formulated in the context of *Christology.* Christology is the *primary* Christian doctrinal concern and all other doctrines must be rooted in, and related to, this chief theological pillar. However, in Western Christian theological traditions there has been a preoccupation with approaching the subject of Original Sin from an anthropological perspective—at best loosely related to Christology, at worst devoid of it altogether! As we revisit

the doctrine of Original Sin, and the statement in Article 5, we must be careful not to construct a framework preoccupied with anthropology and hamartiology, but recognise that these doctrines can only be formulated and indeed understood correctly in the light of Christology.

I am presuming (always a dangerous thing) that all of us are presupposing the primacy of Christology as the context in which we have had our discussions. However, I raise this first consideration for two reasons. First we can actually inadvertently fall into the very trap we are trying to get away from by focusing on the problem and not the solution, and secondly we find that even in the *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene (following Western traditions) the doctrine of Redemption (the consequence of Christology) is defined in the light of the doctrine of Sin (The articles of faith place 'Redemption' after 'Sin'). Perhaps some would argue that this is just a matter of 'chicken and egg', a matter of determining sequence which in the end does not matter, but I think it is worth reminding ourselves that any understanding of sin must be a consequence of what we understand about Christ and His work.

We must be careful in how we use language, particularly in the use of metaphors.

I think this has emerged as a key 'consideration' in this conference. How often have we been at cross-purposes in this conference, or finding ourselves debating terms, phrases and language only to find out that we often meant the same thing in essence? This is further compounded because we already come to debate with preconceptions about what we think others mean by a term, phrase, metaphor, analogy, etc, and this compoundedness is further compounded (I illustrate the difficulty of metaphor) because there are certain terms, phrases and usages of language which themselves have a long and often diverse history.

Let me give you a simple and very non-theological example. If you love watching the cartoon, 'The Flintstones', and enjoy singing, you will be happy to join in the opening and closing verses of the title tune by singing the words, 'let's have a gay old time'. However, I suspect that in the year 2000 if we sit and sing and express our desire that we desperately want to have a 'gay old time' we will not convey the same thing as the phrase was originally intended. And here is the serious point—language changes, metaphors become dead metaphors, words develop, new words emerge. As we approach a revisitation of Original Sin we would do well either to clearly express what we mean and what we do not mean by a particular term, or perhaps even better, to look for alternative words that are not so 'loaded'. Although I personally recommend the latter, I am well aware that even once we have found new terms we will still end up needing to explain what we mean and what we do not mean by the alternatives. I am also aware that human language itself at best is in a fallen condition and so words are always

going to be inadequate and imperfect to express Divine truth. This latter point ought to keep theologians humble!

We must be aware that the corporate nature of sin is an essential dimension of the doctrine of Original Sin.

It has been evident from this conference that we have much to learn in our own denomination about the fundamental 'corporate' nature of human sinfulness. The West in its preoccupation with 'individualism' has mainly understood and defined sin in almost exclusively personal and individual terms. There is little attention in comparison given to corporate, structural, and social sinfulness. Sin is personal and each person bears a responsibility for their sin, but sin is also communal for we all have a responsibility for other people. Therefore it is not only essential and correct that we talk about 'my' sin, but it is essential and correct that we talk about 'our' sin.

It must be pointed out that the *Manual* statement does have some consideration to speak of personal and corporate human sinfulness. Indeed in reading Article 5 we see the use of corporate language, e.g., 'everyone' and 'our'. However, in the light of this conference we must forcefully advocate that the corporate dimension of human sinfulness is far more prevalent and integral to the Old and New Testament understanding of sin than it is in our denominational understanding. The *Manual* is far too individualistic in its definition of sin and therefore fails to deal adequately with the corporate nature of human sinfulness and its consequences for society as a whole.

We must attempt to integrate ontological and relational concepts and language in understanding and expressing the doctrine of Original Sin.

It is my concern that since the ontological mindset has been to the fore in the formulation and expression of the doctrine of sin in our tradition, we have failed to properly understand and express sin in relational terms. The ontological and the relational ought to be fundamentally tied together just as for example, a trinitarian doctrine incorporates the Divine Being (Ontological) in a Three Persons (Relational) framework.

It the light of this integrated approach we must reject concepts that are exclusively ontological, or are exclusively relational. Therefore, for example, we must oppose the ontological concepts of transmitted guilt, and the understanding that sin is a hereditary disease passed on from one generation to another as an inbred condition. Likewise, we must oppose the purely relational concepts of sin that are advocated by many contemporary social sciences that deny in essence the reality of sin.

In our tradition we have focused primarily on the ontological dimension of sin. The fact that sin is understood and defined primarily as a 'thing' (an entity in itself), not only brings us to an inadequate (nay, dangerous) understanding of sin, but equally dangerous, to an inadequate understanding of what entire sanctification is intended to achieve. There is much more that needs to be said on this point but time will not allow it here.

We must avoid an 'ivory tower' theology.

I leave this last note primarily as a pastoral concern. Theology that does not belong to the Church ceases to be legitimate theology—indeed it may not be defined as theology at all no matter how well sounding it may be. Theology needs to be formulated, owned and applied in and through the Church. Theology that is not applied, is theology that has died. Yes, there may be times of theological dispute, of theological debate, and of theological heresy, but this never means that true doctrine ought to be obscure, hidden, and unrelated to ordinary Christians living in the real world. Theology must be living; theology must be active; theology must be practical; theology must be applied and owned by all. I also recognise that some areas of theology may be taken by a few to a level beyond the interest and grasp of the majority. However, even when this happens, it is still 'dead' theology if it fails to impact the Church or the human life in a practical way. There is always a danger that theology can be relegated to the 'ivory tower', the academic classroom, and the scholastic Church, but if it remains there alone then it fails most miserably. Theology must always be applied following the same model as God Himself, i.e., it must be incarnational. The Word made flesh was an active Living Word interacting and impacting the lives of real men and women. When theology is studied for theology's sake, it contracts this greatest and most fundamental of all theological revelations.

A good contemporary example of such a methodology of 'applied theology' comes from Alister McGrath (Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and Professor of Systematic Theology at Regent College, Vancouver). He is concerned to keep theology away from the ivory tower. Indeed in a recent book, *The Journey,* he tells of his own pilgrimage of faith that led him away from 'kicking ideas around' to realising that theological truths ought to really have an impact on human life. He writes:

> I had given much time to trying to understand the basic ideas of the Christian faith, and appreciating the wonderful way in which those ideas interlock. I had gained a lot from grasping the wonderful coherence of Christian doctrine.

> Yet, at times, this seemed to be little more than just kicking ideas around. It was as if there was one part of my life which dealt with ideas, and this somehow never seemed to come into contact with anything else. It began to seem unreal and irrelevant. As I wrestled with this, I began to realise that

my faith was actually quite superficial. I had *understood* things, but had failed to *appreciate* them. I had not made the connections that would have led to the enrichment of my faith and the deepening of my spiritual life. Quite simply, I had missed out on some of the great riches of the faith. As I began to discover them, I found myself wishing that I had encountered them before. Then I began to do some serious reading and reflection. It took me ten years to sort myself out, but it was worth it.[1]

There is always a danger that theology can remain so abstract that it fails to impact the lives of the followers of Jesus. If we are going to re-visit the doctrine of original sin, or indeed any doctrine, we must do it with an eagerness, determination and desire to communicate and interact with the whole Christian Church, for the Church is ultimately the guardian of Christian doctrine.

ORIGINAL SIN REVISITED

Calvin Timothy Samuel

Rather than attempting to summarise all of the main points of this conference this paper shall instead focus on the primary themes highlighted in our discussion which I think are of particular significance as we come to revisit the doctrine of Original Sin as enshrined in Article 5 of the Nazarene *Manual*. In addition, this paper will not attempt to reformulate the doctrine, as much as seek to delineate the general shape and character of any reformulation.

It seems to me that there are two major themes arising out of our discussions which must inform any attempt to reformulate the doctrine of Original Sin. The first of these is the corporate solidarity of the human race, and the second is the relational nature of sin.

Corporate Solidarity

The papers on *Original Sin and the Old Testament Proof-texts, Romans & the Human Condition*, and *Human Nature in Light of the Incarnation*, in particular, reminded us that any understanding of Original Sin must be formulated from the standpoint of the corporate solidarity of the human race. Whatever else the term *original sin* might refer to it is largely meaningless apart from this understanding of our shared humanity. While it is true that Augustinian, Reformed and Arminian-Wesleyan formulations of the doctrine all allude to this concept of shared humanity in some measure, not least in the allusion and reference to the federal headship of Adam, and the assertion that we are all descended from one stock, it is also true that the doctrine is nonetheless expressed primarily from an individualistic standpoint. The very suggestion of inherited sin (cf Article 5, 5.2) betrays this individualistic mindset and the questions and the concerns that are

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[1] Alister McGrath, *The Journey*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1999), 3.

raised by this formulation also relate to individuals, e.g., the fate of individuals who die in infancy, and the Pelagian insistence that there have been individuals who have lived righteously, etc. As has been highlighted on more than a single occasion in this conference the context in which doctrine is developed often helps to shape the doctrine itself. Hence, it is surely of significance that the primary thinkers in each of the traditions highlighted, Augustine, the Reformers, Arminius and Wesley, were each products of an increasing Western tendency to think primarily in terms of the individual, and only secondarily in terms of the collective—although it must be conceded that Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace presupposes the corporate focus of the atonement of Christ.

Therefore it seems to me that any revisiting and reformulation of our expression of the doctrine of original sin needs to take seriously this important perspective of our corporate solidarity and shared humanity, which we in the West are still rediscovering. Moreover, it must take into consideration the conditioning towards evil that is the inevitable consequence of being born into the solidarity of the human race, with its accumulated wrong-doing, wrong-thinking and wrong-being.[2] At the very least all references to inherited sin or guilt must be reconsidered and rephrased, and some clear acknowledgement of the corporate dimension of sin, original and actual, be introduced.

The relational nature of sin

The second theme builds on the first because the idea of corporate humanity is far more than simply a pluralising of individualism; it is far more than the collective, to which I previously referred. Rather the idea of corporate humanity implies a matrix of relationships rather than simply a collection or set of individuals. Augustine's mass of humanity, for example, approximates far more to a set of individuals than to an interdependent matrix of personal relationships.

This concept of relationship is an important one to bear in mind when we speak about sin if we are to avoid the error of the reification of sin. C K Barrett reminds us that the Jewish perception of sin is developed within the context of relationship, i.e., '…sin is primarily a relational word rather than an ethical word...sin is defined not in relation to an ethical system but in relation to God.'[3] For this reason, the identification of Original Sin with depravity and corruption of nature seems to me to be wholly inappropriate because it fails to take into account this relational focus of sin, righteousness, and sanctification, and seems uncomfortably close to classifying sin as a substance which is to be eradicated by the Holy Spirit (cf Article 5, 5.1).

With an understanding of Original Sin as referring primarily to the damaged (though not completely destroyed) relationship between Creator and creation, the

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[2] Cf Father Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (London & Oxford: Mowbray, 1979), 79ff.
[3] C K Barrett, *Paul: An Introduction to his Thought* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), 61.

issue of inheritance of sin and guilt thus fades away as do any questions about the fate of infants and those mentally incapable of coming to an understanding of moral responsibility.

That the entry of sin into the world by the one man, Adam, has resulted in a definitive, cataclysmic, and above all, ontological change in the created order must be reaffirmed, not in static terms, but in terms of this damaged relationship to the Creator. He is not only the source of being, but also the source of right relationships between humans as well as the created order, and therefore the source of right behaviour or *righteousness*. Moreover, this matrix of damaged relationships, which may be defined as three dimensional—God, humanity, creation—is both the cause and effect of ontological change since being does not exist apart from or outside of relationship. This is true not only of creation but also of the Creator, whose being exists in the context of the relationship within the godhead. Therefore, the damage to this matrix of relationships resulting from the primal sin of rebellion against the Creator results in damage to the creature. Out of our *deprivatio*, then, come not only our *depravatio*, but also our mortality, our weakness, our infirmity, and our faults (cf Article 5, 5.3). It is only as this right relationship between Creator and created is restored that the effects of sin, both primal and actual, can be ameliorated. Therefore, to the extent that the people of God are able to experience and propagate this restoration of relationship, to that extent we shall see some repair to the ontological damage which results from the sin of the first pair, which points to the ultimate restoration which Christ shall bring at the end of the age, and to which the whole earth looks forward in eager anticipation (cf Romans 8:18ff).

Any reformulation of the doctrine of Original Sin cannot but take seriously the assertion that sin and being are both determined in terms of relationship, not only to God but also to the corporate solidarity of the human race, and indeed the whole created order.