

# DOCTRINE OF ORIGINAL SIN IN THE EVANGELICAL REFORMERS

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The ‘Evangelical’ Reformers are those giants of Christian history who reformed the Church Catholic (or at least part of it) in the sixteenth century. We conventionally call them the Protestant Reformers, but ‘Protestant’ was from its beginning a political word signifying those princes of the Holy Roman Empire who banded together to make their protest at the Diet of Speyer. The more appropriate theological term is Luther’s own term, ‘Evangelical’, referring to those who sought to reform the life and theology of the one holy, Catholic Church according to the Evangel—the Gospel. That is a significant starting point in a paper which sets out to examine the Reformers’ doctrine of original sin, for it reminds us that original sin was not their starting point or foundation. It was rather for them a doctrine which was implied by the Gospel.

## LUTHER

We begin with a study of Luther, and with the picturesque passage from the *Table Talk* brought to our attention by Paul M. Bassett:

The original sin in a man is like his beard, which, though shaved off today so that a man is very smooth around his mouth, yet grows again by tomorrow morning. As long as a man lives, such growth of hair and beard does not stop. But when the shovel slaps the ground on his grave, it stops. In just this way, original sin remains in us and exercises itself as long as we live, but we must resist it and always be cutting off its hair.<sup>1</sup>

Before we conclude that Luther is a virulent feminist (since having no beards, women presumably have no original sin!), we have to remind ourselves that this is ‘table talk’, picturesque speech, metaphor. We must not fall into the fallacy that when Luther uses such metaphor for sin as a beard, or when Wesley uses such a metaphor as a root, that they intend them to be taken literally and therefore hold ‘substantial’ views of sin. We are the ones who are naïve if we think that either Luther or Wesley took their metaphors in such a literal fashion.

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<sup>1</sup> *Weimar Ausgabe: Tischreden*, I: No 139; quoted in Paul M Bassett and William M Greathouse, *Exploring Christian Holiness*, Vol 2 (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1985), 158.

Yet Luther is talking about a human condition which he takes to be real and not imaginary, and this is apparent from his comment on the relationship between original sin and baptism, also quoted by Dr Bassett. Luther wrote:

Since original sin has been taken away in baptism, why do we say that it still remains and that one must constantly battle with it? Augustine answers the question this way: Original sin is certainly forgiven in baptism; but not in such a manner that it no longer exists. Rather in such a manner that God no longer imputes it to us.<sup>2</sup>

Quite clearly, Luther has in mind here Augustine's differentiation between the *reatus* of original guilt, guilt for the original sin which we all share with Adam, and the *vitium*, the 'disease' as it were or condition which we inherit. As Augustine taught, so Luther teaches, that the original guilt is absolved at baptism so that we are no longer condemned for Adam's sin, and yet the sinful condition continues as long as we live in the body, right until the shovel slaps down the ground on our grave.

But to speak of original sin as a *vitium* or disease is just as metaphorical as to speak of it as a beard. Can we not approach more closely to a literal denotation of what Luther thinks this human condition actually is?

To approach that question, I go back to that classic interpretation of Luther by the British Methodist, Philip S Watson, *Let God Be God!*<sup>3</sup> Watson identifies what he calls 'The Motif in Luther's Theology' in his second chapter, a motif which arises out of the spiritual biography he gives in the first chapter. Similarly, James Atkinson, in his Didsbury Lectures here in this chapel exactly twenty years ago, similarly grounded Luther's theology in his experience of God.<sup>4</sup> According to Philip Watson, Luther was not motivated in his spiritual search by the hope of heaven or the fear of hell, but rather by a need for a right personal relationship with God. To find 'a gracious God' he followed the ascetic discipline, prayer and meditation which, he had been taught, would foster that perfect love to God and man which would make him acceptable to God. Certainly, according to the *via moderna* of William of Occam and Gabriel Biel, this attainment of perfect love by discipline could not *merit* God's acceptance. Rather, divine grace was required to make this perfect love meritorious. Although we could never earn our salvation, God had decreed in his *pactum* that if we did our best, he would graciously give us salvation as his gift. But unless a man did what in him lay (the key phrase: *facere quod in se est*), he could not acquire the merit of congruence (*meritum de congruo*)—a merit

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<sup>2</sup> WA, 17, II:285; quoted in Bassett and Greathouse, 158f.

<sup>3</sup> London: Epworth Press, 1947.

<sup>4</sup> James Atkinson, *Martin Luther: Prophet to the Church Catholic* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1983).

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which God awarded even though we did not actually earn it. God would award this grace, they said, if he did ‘what in him lay’.<sup>5</sup>

According to Watson, Luther threw himself into the pursuit of this goal, but constant self-examination convinced him that he did not possess perfect love for God and neighbour, and never did succeed in doing all ‘that in him lay’. Instead he was acutely aware of *concupiscentia*. Watson quotes the famous passage from Luther’s *Commentary on Galatians*:

When I was a monk, I thought by and by that I was utterly cast away, if at any time, I felt the lust of the flesh; that is to say if I felt any evil motion, fleshly lust, wrath, hatred, or envy against any brother. I assayed many ways to help quieten my conscience, but it would not be; for the concupiscence and lust of my flesh did always return, so that I could not rest, but was continually vexed with these thoughts: This or that sin thou hast committed: thou art infected with envy, with impaciency, and such other sins: therefore thou art entered this holy order in vain, and all thy good works are unprofitable.<sup>6</sup>

In an important note,<sup>7</sup> Watson draws our attention to the fundamental point that *concupiscentia* in this passage and generally in Luther’s writings, does not mean sensuality or sexual lust. It means essentially self-love or self-seeking. In the passage just quoted, *concupiscentia* shows itself not only in lust, but also in envy, in hatred, in wrath, and in impatience. Watson quotes several passages where Luther expressly disagrees with the scholastic tendency to interpret *concupiscentia* in a narrow way as sexual lust. He further quotes passages where Luther explicitly denies that as a monk he was troubled by sexual lust. Watson comments: ‘Luther’s sensitive soul had more serious and subtle difficulties to wrestle with than sexual desire.’ What Luther wrestled with was the question whether *concupiscentia*, understood as self-love or self-seeking, was in itself sinful. The scholastic theologians had denied this. The *concupiscentia* which remained after baptism was merely a remnant, a ‘tinder’ or fuel for real sin. Real sin only arose when the will consented to it. But Luther was not convinced. He could not regard his *contritio* as perfect when he went to confession, because it was not marked by a whole-hearted or perfect love for God.

What is evident in Watson’s analysis of Luther’s pre-conversion experience then is the same polarity we find in the thought of Augustine, the real clue to Augustine’s analysis of original sin, namely the polarity between *concupiscentia* and *caritas*.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf Alister McGrath’s fuller analysis of the *via moderna* in *Luther’s Theology of the Cross* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 53-62.

<sup>6</sup> *Galatians*, ET, 367, commenting on 5:17. (This is on page 504 of the James Clarke edition of 1953).

<sup>7</sup> Watson, 30, note 41.

Luther was aware that he could not love God perfectly with all his heart, if he was still dominated by self-love. It is this polarity essentially which Watson then goes on to identify in Chapter 2 as ‘The Motif of Luther’s Thought’. There he follows up the assertion of other Luther scholars that Luther instituted a ‘Copernican revolution’ in theology:

For just as Copernicus started with a geocentric, but reached a heliocentric conception of the physical world, Luther began with an anthropocentric or egocentric conception of religion, but came to a theocentric conception.<sup>8</sup>

All religions, according to Watson, display some traces of theocentricity, but in one way or another, these may be subjected to the egocentric tendency. Although we admit that God should be the centre of existence, it is the easiest thing to live as if I myself were the centre around which everything else, including God, moves. Egocentricity may take the crudest form of pagan sacrifices to gain benefits from the god, or it may appear at the more refined levels as moralism or legalism. Luther is a Copernicus in the realm of religion, says Watson, because he found the religion of medieval Catholicism as essentially egocentric (despite theocentric traits), so that he himself began with an egocentric quest for ‘a gracious God’. But Luther’s spiritual revolution, leading to the Reformation, was the rediscovery of the theocentric character of primitive Christianity.

Watson refers to six representative passages where this contrast appears. First, in his *Lectures on the Epistle to the Romans* of 1515-16, Luther begins:

The sum of this Epistle is to break down, pluck up and destroy all carnal wisdom and righteousness, be they exercised never so sincerely and from the heart.

Luther is not referring to false righteousness, but to sincere righteousness—genuine righteousness. *That* is what is to be plucked up and destroyed. It is precisely our trust in our own goodness which we have to repent of: not the goodness itself, please note, but our *trust* in our own goodness. The reason is that if our trust is in our own righteousness and morality—no matter how genuine that righteousness or morality is—it will minister to our own self-complacency and self-centredness. This is the opposition between theocentric and egocentric religion. We have to stop trusting in, putting our confidence in, boasting in, our own righteousness, and trust instead in what Luther called in a genuine theological innovation, the ‘alien righteousness’ of Christ.

Secondly, Watson takes us to Luther’s little treatise, *A Short and Good Exposition of the Lord’s Prayer Forwards and Backwards*. To pray the prayer ‘forwards’, says

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<sup>8</sup> Watson, 34.

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Luther, is to pray first for the coming of God's kingdom and the doing of God's will. By those who pray the prayer 'backwards' he means those whose first priority is their own salvation from evil and misfortune so that they may live in happiness and please themselves. They will pray even the first three clauses selfishly. That does not at all mean that Luther excludes petitionary prayer: quite the contrary. Petitionary prayer in its proper context is the expression of our reliance upon God. To omit it would be to fall into egocentricity in another mode, namely self-reliance and self-sufficiency.

Thirdly, Luther discusses two kinds of faith, a faith founded on God alone, and in contrast, a faith that tries to serve God so long as he bestows perceptible benefits. He makes this contrast in expounding the *Magnificat*. Mary teaches us to love and praise God for himself alone,

But the impure and perverted lovers, who are nothing else than parasites and who seek their own advantage in God, neither love and praise His bare goodness, but have an eye to themselves and consider only how good God is to them, that is, how deeply he makes them feel his goodness and how many good things he does to them.<sup>9</sup>

Fourthly, theocentricity is evident in a favourite theme to which Luther returns again and again, the exposition of the First Commandment as the epitome of the entire Law of God. The right interpretation of this commandment gives a complete understanding of the true relationship between us and God. It means:

Since I alone am God, thou shalt place thy confidence, trust and faith on me alone, and on no one else.' For that is not to have a god, if you call him God only with your lips, or worship him with the knees or bodily gestures; but if you trust him with the heart, and look to him for all good, grace, and favour, whether in works or suffering, in life or death, in joy or sorrow.<sup>10</sup>

Fifthly, Watson notes that Luther's constant insistence that God is the great Giver might seem to invite us to seek God not for his own sake, but for what we can get out of him. But for Luther the meaning of salvation and true blessing is 'to will the will of God and his glory and to desire nothing of one's own either here or hereafter'.<sup>11</sup> Those who seek the kingdom of God to gain heavenly delight or to shun hell 'seek only their own, and their own advantage in heaven'.

Finally, Watson points to the implications for Luther's ethics: that he utterly repudiates the idea of merit and reward as a motive for the service of God. Only

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<sup>9</sup> WA VII.556

<sup>10</sup> WML I, 194ff.

<sup>11</sup> WA II.94.13ff.

when I refuse to see my ethical attainments as in any way meritorious, can I be set free to do good selflessly for its own sake. To ask why I should do good deeds if they are not necessary for heaven is to reveal precisely an egocentric point of view.

It is here in this polarity between *egocentricity* and *theocentricity* that we may come as close as we can to Luther's understanding of original sin. For Luther, the heart of our sinfulness, our 'original sin', is our egocentricity. Now admittedly this is still metaphorical in the sense that most (if not all) language is metaphorical, especially when it ventures beyond reference to the physical. The metaphor here is to describe our motivation in terms of centres, for literal 'centres' are physical things. Come to that, even the word motive is originally metaphorical, coming from the Latin verb *movere*, to move. But this is at least closer to the literal than to speak of original sin as a beard or a spiritual *vitium* or disease. As close as we can get to literal speech, Luther's understanding of original sin is that it is egocentricity—self-seeking self-love.

Here Luther is the heir of the Augustinian tradition of course, and the Reformation has been described as a revival of Augustinianism, or at least a revival of the individualistic side, if not the churchly, corporate, catholic aspect, of Augustine's thought. Watson enters into dialogue here with John Burnaby, whose classic pre-war study of Augustine was republished recently with an introduction by Oliver O'Donovan. Burnaby entitled it *Amor Dei* with the significant subtitle: *A Study of the Love of God as the Motive for the Christian Life*.<sup>12</sup> There Burnaby argued (to some extent against Nygren) that Augustine's concept of love—our love for God—as *caritas* was a valid Christian understanding, and that the polarity between *caritas* and *concupiscentia* was the context in which the latter (identified as original sin) had to be understood. Burnaby goes on to trace the Augustinian tradition through the Middle Ages, finding this same polarity in Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas. According to Burnaby, therefore, it was wrong to say 'that Luther found Christianity egocentric and left it theocentric'. Rather the truth is that this theocentricity was inherited from the scholastics. Luther was therefore close to Duns Scotus in that his view of original sin was that it was essentially self-seeking, self-love, and pure love for God implied the absolute negation of self.

Watson agrees with Burnaby that Duns Scotus and Luther share the same concept of original sin and that Scotus taught Luther the necessity of an absolutely selfless love for God.<sup>13</sup> But (according to Watson) Luther also learned from Scotus that human beings by their own natural will could produce this selfless love, and that surely

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<sup>12</sup> London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938. (New edition with an introduction by Oliver O'Donovan, Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1990.)

<sup>13</sup> Watson, 49f.

gives the game away. Scotus here demonstrates (says Watson) that despite its grasp of the need for theocentricity, late medieval Catholicism in fact displayed ‘a singularly egoistic self-confidence.’ It believed that we could love God perfectly out of our own natural love. And it was this false theology, that we can love God perfectly out of our own resources by doing what in us lies (*facere quod in se est*), which brought Luther to spiritual bankruptcy and despair. According to Watson, earlier scholasticism, represented by Aquinas, also showed this egocentricity because of its concept of the *summum bonum*. If we are to love God because he is ‘our highest good’, then our love can never be anything other than self-seeking. Although Watson does not say so, this would also implicate Augustine, since for him *caritas* is to love God as our *summum bonum*.

It was Luther, Watson insists, who saw that a religion based in human need was precarious indeed. Long before Feuerbach he saw that this was false religion: for God does not exist to serve our ends, but stands over against us with sovereign authority. Self-serving, self-seeking religion was in fact the last and most subtle refuge of the *cor incurvatum in se*, that egocentricity which is of the very essence of original sin. The whole purport of Luther’s reforming work therefore was that we must *Let God Be God!*

It is in the light of this understanding of ‘original sin’ that we must see Luther’s insistence that it remains in us until ‘the shovel slaps the ground on our graves’. The same tension is also expressed in the life-long tension (as Luther sees it) between ‘the flesh’ and ‘the spirit’ which is expressed for example in his *Commentary on the Galatians*. Luther argues against the claim of the Schoolmen that we can fulfil the law by loving God perfectly:

There is not one man to be found upon the whole earth which so loveth God and his neighbour as the law requireth. But in the life to come, where we shall be made as pure and as clear as the sun, we shall love perfectly and shall be righteous through perfect love. But in this life that purity is hindered by the flesh; for as long as we live, sin remaineth in our flesh; by reason whereof, the corrupt love of ourselves is so mighty that it far surmounteth the love of God and of our neighbour.<sup>14</sup>

This sin ‘dwelleth in you as long as you live’, but it is not imputed to us because we believe in Christ. The Christian therefore experiences this tension between the flesh and the spirit all his life long. ‘The desires or lusts of the flesh be not yet dead in us, but spring up again and fight against the [human] spirit.’<sup>15</sup> He denies that ‘the concupiscence of the flesh’ refers to carnal lust (as the Schoolmen claimed). It

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<sup>14</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 495.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 497.

includes ‘all other corrupt affections’ (he says): pride, hatred, covetousness, impatience, faithlessness, distrust, despair, contempt of God, idolatry, heresies. ‘Concupiscence of the flesh’ understood in this way seems to accompany the life of the body as long as we live. This close connection is seen in one revealing passage when he writes:

And when I exhort you to walk in the Spirit, that ye obey not the flesh, or fulfil not the concupiscence of the flesh, I do not require of you that you utterly put off the flesh or kill it, but that ye should bridle and subdue it. For God will have mankind endure even to the last day. And this cannot be done without parents, which do beget and bring up children. These means continuing, it must needs be that the flesh also must continue, and consequently sin, for flesh is not without sin. Therefore in respect of the flesh we are sinners: but in respect of the Spirit, we are righteous.<sup>16</sup>

Here he is expounding the *simul iustus et peccator* with reference to Galatians 5:17, ‘For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh’, Romans 7 also brought in as exegetical support.<sup>17</sup> This passage from the commentary is interesting because of the way it seems to identify ‘the flesh’ with the physical life of the body. That is evident from his comment that we have not to kill ‘the flesh’, for God wants the race to continue, and where ‘the flesh’ continues (by which he seems to mean here physical bodily life), there is sin.

Yet Alister McGrath warns us against the idea that Luther is compartmentalising the human being.<sup>18</sup> ‘Flesh’ and ‘spirit’ are not man’s lower and higher faculties, but descriptions of the whole person seen from different aspects. Luther, that is to say, has a holistic understanding of man. McGrath explains that, for Luther, *caro* (flesh) is the whole man considered as turned in upon itself (*homo incurvatus in se*) in its irrepressible egoism, whereas *spiritus* is the entire man in his openness to God and the divine promises. It is because each of these terms refers not to a part, but to the whole man, that Luther’s doctrine of justification is paradoxical, for the whole man is at one and the same time justified, when seen *coram Deo* and a sinner, when seen *coram hominibus*. Original sin, then, is not simply something *in* us, not even a kind of disease or tendency. Sin remains in us until the death of the body, because ‘flesh’ is understood holistically in this fallen world—people whose whole being is inherently egoistic. This way of being is never eliminated while we live in this present evil age. It corresponds to our continued existence in the earthly kingdom as *caro* (flesh) and as *peccatori*. Meanwhile we are already citizens of the heavenly

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 499.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 502.

<sup>18</sup> Alister E McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 133.

kingdom, so that by faith we are already *iusti* (righteous, justified) so that each Christian is *simul iustus et peccator*, that is to say, *simul caro et spiritus*.

It is clear then that Luther's doctrine of original sin cannot be read of the surface of a few texts. It comes out of his grasp of the Gospel and of the very nature of saving faith. Unless we take time to see original sin therefore as integral to the whole of Luther's theology, namely the 'theology of the cross' centred on the Gospel, we really cannot grasp its full range and profundity.

## ZWINGLI

Zwingli's doctrine of sin was developed in controversy with Catholics, but also with Anabaptists and with Luther.<sup>19</sup> The earliest controversy was against the Roman position, and so discussion of sin is clearly set in the context of the Gospel. It is because salvation is by Christ alone that it is necessary to say that humanity is totally corrupted by sin and that we are unable to do anything to save ourselves. The doctrine of 'total depravity' is really one of 'total inability'. In an early work, *An Exposition of the Articles*, he differentiates 'original sin' and 'actual sin'. The former is the weakness, defect, or sickness of corrupt nature, and is also called 'the flesh'. He insists that Genesis 8:21 should not be translated that the thoughts of the heart 'tend to' evil (as in the Vulgate) but that they 'are' evil. Our very nature is evil.

In another work, *A Short Christian Introduction*, also sets the matter in the context of salvation. We are all sinners and are all dead, as we are born of Adam. This is both bodily and spiritual death. Adam and his descendants, with their corrupt nature can do nothing good, that is, nothing towards their salvation. Sin is an inborn hereditary sickness, and it comes from Adam's inordinate desire to be like God. In another work, *A Commentary*, Zwingli makes the same distinction between original sin and actual sin and draws as before on Genesis and Romans to root sin in the fall. Now however he stresses the fact that the fall sprang out of self-love, a new emphasis which seems to show the influence of Luther. To this point then, the controversy is against the pre-Reformation Catholic view, arises out of the doctrine of salvation by Christ alone, and opposes the scholastic and Erasmian view of free will and what we must do toward our salvation.

The controversy with the Anabaptists produced some new developments. The appearance of the Anabaptist party in Zürich was a considerable embarrassment for Zwingli. He had argued that the life of the Church should be determined *sola scriptura* and there were the Anabaptists pointing out that there was not one example of infant baptism in the New Testament. He had argued that the sacraments

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<sup>19</sup> For this section on Zwingli, see W P Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 146-153.

were symbolic, and there were the Anabaptists arguing that if that was so, then baptism did not wash away the guilt of original sin, and so there was no reason to baptise infants. Zwingli had to do some quick thinking. In 1525 he published *Baptism, Rebaptism, and Infant Baptism* in which he argued that original sin was:

A defect (*Präst*) which of itself is not sinful in the one who has it. It also cannot damn him, whatever the theologians say, until out of this defect he does something against the law of God. But he does not do anything against the law until he knows the law.

Zwingli distinguishes then between original guilt (the *reatus*) and original sin (the *vitium*), and the latter, the *vitium* is not really sin at all: it is a defect. He defines sin as voluntary. An act of sin, for Zwingli, is a voluntary transgression of a known law, and he supports this with reference to Romans: ‘Knowledge of sin comes through the law’ (3:20), and, ‘Where there is no law, there is no transgression’ (4:15). Therefore he asserts that the children of believers cannot be damned on account of original sin.

That response brought him into a new controversy, this time against Luther, who attacked this position as Pelagian. In a new work, *Original Sin*, published in 1526, Zwingli uses the analogy of slavery. As someone may be born a slave as a consequence of their ancestors’ captivity as prisoners of war, so it was as a result of Adam’s actions that the penalty of death passed to his descendants. We may use the word ‘sin’ for this hereditary defect as long as one understands here by the word ‘sin’:

A condition and penalty, the disaster and misery of corrupted human nature, not a crime or guilt on the part of those who are born in the condition of sin and death.

He qualified his earlier position that original sin damns. Salvation, he argued, depends on election, not on baptism, and the children of Christian parents are (like Abraham’s descendants) among the elect beloved by God. He also argues, on the basis of Romans 5:19-21, that the work of Christ was to reverse the fall of Adam. W P Stephens points out that this could have led Zwingli to say that the whole race was restored, not just the children of believers, but he holds back, not knowing whether this position has ever been held in the church. Stephens also points out correctly that the doctrine that Christ has obtained salvation from original and actual sin for believers and their children implies a doctrine of original guilt. For if the infants of believers are saved through Christ when they have committed no actual sin, then his death must save them from original guilt.

Altogether, Zwingli gives the impression of inconsistencies arising from the necessity of making up his doctrine on the hoof. Most theologians have had to do

that, of course, Augustine and Luther, for example, but Zwingli does not seem to share their intellectual stature.

## THE ANABAPTISTS

Having dealt with the development of Zwingli's views in controversy with the Anabaptists, it seems appropriate to turn next to their writings, beginning with their ablest early leader, Balthasar Hubmaier. Hubmaier was a priest who studied with Johannes Eck at the University of Freiburg, later taking a doctorate in theology at Ingolstadt. By 1522, as priest in Waldshut, he had accepted the Zwinglian form of reformation, but by 1525 he had become a leading figure among the Anabaptists.

Hubmaier was a thorough-going trichotomist. He argues from Moses' vocabulary, *aphar* or *eretz* (dust or soil), *neshamah* (breath or spirit), and *nephesh* (soul). Similarly Paul, in I Thessalonians 5:23 distinguishes *pneuma*, *psyche* and *soma*, and the Latin equivalents are *spiritus*, *anima* and *corpus*. These three substances then are united in every person as a likeness to the Holy Trinity. But that implies three corresponding kinds of will in the human being, the will of the flesh, the will of the soul, and the will of the spirit. Before the fall, all three substances were good and wholly free to choose good or evil, heaven or hell. But as a result of the fall, Adam and his descendants lost their freedom. The flesh entirely lost its goodness and can do nothing but sin. The spirit remains good: it was not involved in any way in the eating of the fruit. But it is imprisoned by the flesh and

‘can do nothing other than bear inward witness of purity against what is evil, crying out to God without end as a captive, with unutterable groaning.’

The soul was wounded, and so cannot choose the good on its own. Of itself it can only sin and: ‘the soul that sins, it shall die’. But the soul may be restored through the word of God. Through the Gospel, the soul can be made righteous and healthy again. This implies then that it once again has free will and is responsible for its own sin. Here the Anabaptists part company with the magisterial Reformers in their assertion of free will and their stronger doctrine of regeneration.

Dutch Anabaptism moved nearer to the magisterial Reformers, at least in its formulation by Menno Simons. John Christian Wenger, in his *Glimpses of Mennonite History and Doctrine*,<sup>20</sup> summarises the doctrine of sin in one sentence:

The Anabaptists believed in the sinfulness of human nature (original sin) and in man's total inability to deliver himself from sin.

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<sup>20</sup> Scottdale, Pennsylvania, 1949.

He then quotes from Mennon Simons:

A carnal man cannot apprehend or comprehend divine things, for by nature he has not that discernment: but on the contrary his mind is depraved; God is not in his mind. A carnal man cannot understand spiritual things, for he is by nature a child of the devil, and is not spiritually minded, hence, he comprehends nothing spiritual; for by nature he is a stranger to God; has nothing of a divine nature dwelling in him, nor has communion with God, but is much rather at enmity with him...So are all men by nature according to their birth and origin after the flesh. This is the first, or old adam, and is comprised in the Scriptures in a single word, ungodly, that is, without God, a stranger and destitute of the divine nature.<sup>21</sup>

The Anabaptist and Mennonite leaning was to evangelism rather than theology, to a 'practical' use of the Bible towards the salvation and sanctification of men and women rather than to adopt a theological system. They appear however to be Bible-only people who in fact reflect the broad Augustinian tradition on original sin.

## CALVIN

For Calvin's doctrine of original sin we turn of course to the *Institutes*. Book One, you will remember, is entitled, 'Of the Knowledge of God the Creator'. The opening sentence of Chapter One makes clear the cognitive or epistemic nature of Calvin's whole theology.

Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.

What is immediately clear from this famous sentence is what E.A. Dowey called the 'correlative' nature of our knowledge of God and of ourselves in Calvin's thought. We could also use the word 'relational', and the implication is twofold. First: we cannot know God in a detached way (that is, what is sometimes falsely called an 'objective' way). We can only know him within the relationship we have with him. But conversely, we can only truly know ourselves within the context of that same relationship, our relationship with God. Now it is that second implication which we have a hard time taking on board. We have this impression that we at least know ourselves. But it is a fundamental principle of Reformation theology that we do *not* know ourselves: we do not understand ourselves. Our own pretended knowledge of ourselves is twisted, false and perverted. That is because we can only truly know *who we are* when we see ourselves in relation to our Creator. Only within terms of

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<sup>21</sup> Wenger gives the reference *Works*, I, 232.

that relationship can we know the truth about ourselves. True knowledge of God and ourselves is therefore 'correlative'.

Book One of the *Institutes* deals with our knowledge of ourselves, first, from creation (Chapters 1-5) and from Scripture (Chapters 11-18) with the intermediate chapters dealing with the doctrine of Scripture. Book Two continues the cognitive or epistemic theme with its title:

Of the Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ, as first Manifested to the Fathers under the Law, and thereafter to us under the Gospel.

Book One then is about creation and the knowledge we have of God as Creator. Book Two is about Redemption and the knowledge we have of God as our Redeemer. Note particularly that is under that heading, 'Redemption', that Calvin proceeds first to talk about the Fall and Original Sin in Chapters 1 to 5. Chapters 6 to 17 then deal with Christology and Soteriology.

The structure of the *Institutes* is always a clue to the structure of Calvin's thought, and the substantive point we have to take on board here from this structure of Book Two is that Calvin sees our fallen sinful condition in the light of redemption. The negative is seen in terms of the positive. Sin is seen in the light of the Gospel.

Chapter One is entitled: 'Through the Fall and the Revolt of Adam, the Whole Human Race made Accursed and Degenerate. Of Original Sin'. In case we have not got the message, the first paragraph re-iterates the point that self-knowledge consists *first* in perceiving 'how great the excellence of our nature would have been had its integrity remained.' Only in the light of the positive, can we go on to the negative, the second point of self-knowledge, namely our miserable condition since Adam's fall. Note that Calvin is not interested in our knowing that as merely an interesting piece of information. Knowledge is never merely abstract and cerebral for Calvin. And this knowledge too must have a spiritual consequence. It is existential (if you like). True theology fosters true piety. For it is when we contrast what we would have been with what we are that:

all confidence and boasting are overthrown, we blush for shame, and feel truly humble.

*That* is why we need to know this. Original sin, for Calvin, is never a speculative doctrine. If we do not understand this doctrine and feel it deeply, we shall in fact be proud and arrogant, whatever we may pretend. Only when we see our truly miserable condition can we approach the Lord with genuine humility and faith. Calvin analyses the original act of sin in Genesis 3. It begins with infidelity (disbelieving the word of God), proceeds through pride and ambition together with ingratitude, and issues in rebellious disobedience giving free rein to lust.

Adam involved his posterity and ‘plunged them into the same wretchedness’:

This is the hereditary corruption to which early Christian writers gave the name of Original Sin, meaning by the term the depravation of a nature formerly good and pure (II,1,5).

The doctrine was not clearly developed, he admits, until Augustine ‘laboured to show that we are not corrupted by acquired wickedness, but bring an innate corruption from the very womb’.

In the next paragraph, however, he once again shows the basis for this doctrine:

To what quibble will the Pelagians here recur? That the sin of Adam was propagated by imitation? Is the righteousness of Christ then available to us only in so far as it is an example held forth for our imitation? Can any man tolerate such blasphemy? But if, out of all controversy, the righteousness of Christ, and thereby life, is ours by communication, it follows [N.B.] that both of these were lost in Adam that they might be recovered in Christ, whereas sin and death were brought in by Adam that they might be abolished in Christ.

I draw you attention to the words, ‘it follows’. Note Calvin’s logic. He is arguing as always from the positive to the negative, from redemption to fall, from righteousness to sin, from Christ to Adam—not *vice versa*. For him, this doctrine of original sin is a corollary and implication of the Gospel.

In the next paragraph (II,1,7), he dismisses the debate about traducianism as irrelevant, and in paragraph 8 comes to his definition of original sin:

Original Sin, then, may be defined as a hereditary corruption and depravity of our nature, extending to all parts of the soul, which first makes us obnoxious to the wrath of God, and then produces in us works which in Scripture are termed works of the flesh. This corruption is repeatedly designated by Paul by the term sin (Gal. 5:19); while the works which proceed from it, such as adultery, fornication, theft, hatred, murder, revellings he terms, in the same way, fruits of sin, though in various passages of scripture, they are also termed sins.

Calvin does not argue for original guilt in Augustine’s sense, that we share in the guilt of Adam because we were in his loins. ‘This is not liability for another’s fault,’ he writes. It is rather that,

Through him...not only has punishment been derived, but pollution instilled, for which punishment is justly due.

Later, in paragraph 9, the structure of his argument from grace to sin is again underlined:

The third chapter of the Epistle to the Romans is nothing but a description of original sin. The same thing appears more clearly from the mode of renovation. For the spirit, which is contrasted with the old man, and the flesh, denotes not only the grace by which the sensual or inferior part of the soul is corrected, but includes a complete reformation of all its parts (Eph.4:23).

The argument is that since we are saved wholly by grace, then there is nothing in us that merits salvation. This is an holistic approach. The whole person is affected. It follows, he writes:

...that that part in which the dignity and excellence of the soul are most conspicuous, has not only been wounded, but so corrupted, that mere cure is not sufficient. There must be a new nature...The whole man, from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot, is so deluged, as it were, that no part remains exempt from sin, and therefore, everything that proceeds from him is imputed as sin.

It is not just that the inferior appetites entice: it is a matter of impiety in the mind and pride in the heart. It is not just sensuality (and he blames Peter Lombard from restricting the meaning of 'flesh' in that way): the corruption is not in one part only. In other words, he is thinking holistically. The doctrine of total depravity is a corollary and implication of grace.

He goes on to amplify this point in Chapters 2 and 3. It is not that total depravity implies that there is no moral good in man or no intelligence or not ability. He still has his intellect, his abilities, he still shows something of the image of God. He is not a total brute. But it is a matter of seeing him not divided into parts, but holistically, and seeing in the light of grace, that if all is due to grace, nothing in us merits or earns salvation: it is the sheer grace of God. And it is the existential consequence that matters, that is, the implication for our relationship with God. If we are not convinced of this, we will still attribute some of the credit, some of the merit, to ourselves. Only a profound grasp of our sinfulness before God can lead us to a true attitude before God, an attitude of gratitude, an attitude characterised by true piety which has three parts: first, humility, second, humility, and third, humility.

The three outstanding features of Calvin's doctrine of original sin are thus:

- (1) that he argues for it from salvation: it is an implication of salvation by grace
- (2) that it is a holistic anthropology: although there is much that is good ethically in us, nonetheless, we are fallen as a whole
- (3) that the doctrine is not speculative, but rather one which is essential to true Christian piety, true humility.

Perhaps that third point is most clearly seen later in the *Institutes*. Book Three is entitled: 'The Mode of Obtaining the Grace of Christ. The Benefit it Confers, and the Effects Resulting from It.' Here he is concerned with the work of the Holy Spirit in us and the doctrine of the Christian Life, that practical piety which was his main concern in writing his first edition of the *Institutes*. He deals with Christian sanctification particularly in Chapter 3 and 7. Chapter Three is entitled 'Regeneration by Faith. Of Repentance.' For him regeneration and repentance are synonyms and this one reality consists of two parts: mortification and vivification. Mortification demands the destruction of the whole flesh which is full of evil and perversity. All the emotions of the flesh are enmity against God and must die. Vivification is the work of the Holy Spirit imbuing our souls. Both of these happen by participation in Christ. He writes:

This restoration does not take place in one moment or one day or one year; but through continual and sometimes even slow advances God wipes out in his elect the corruptions of the flesh, cleanses them of guilt, consecrates them to himself as temples renewing all their minds to true purity that they may practice repentance throughout all their lives and know that this warfare will end only at death.<sup>22</sup>

The corruption remains in the saints:

There still remains in the regenerate a smoldering cinder of evil, from which desires continually leap forth to allure and spur him to commit sin...The saints are as yet so bound by the disease of concupiscence that they cannot withstand being at times tickled and incited either to lust or to avarice or to ambition, or to other vices.<sup>23</sup>

He goes beyond Augustine:

Augustine calls this weakness and teaches that it only becomes sin when the will yields to the first strong inclination. We label 'sin' that very depravity which begets in us desires of this sort. In the saints, until they are divested of mortal bodies, there is always sin: for in their flesh there resides that depravity of inordinate desiring which contends against righteousness.

His interpretation of Romans 7 as referring to the Christian is crucial here. He denies that it is possible for anyone to love God with all his heart while in the flesh, asserting that 'all desires of the flesh are sins.'

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<sup>22</sup> *Institutes*, III,3,9.

<sup>23</sup> III,3,10

At that point he seems to draw back a little:

We do not condemn those inclinations which God so engraved upon the character of man at his first creation, that they were eradicable only with humanity itself, but only those bold and unbridled impulses which contend against God's control.<sup>24</sup>

But what he gives with one hand he takes away with the other:

We teach that all human desires are evil, not because they are natural, but because they are inordinate. Nothing pure or sincere can come from a corrupt and polluted nature.

Deep humility and life-long repentance are therefore the appropriate posture of the Christian. This is developed then in Book III, Chapter 7, which he entitles: 'The Sum of the Christian Life. The Denial of Ourselves.'

It is in this chapter that we perhaps come to the heart of Calvin's doctrine. For it is when he deals with self-denial (showing, like Wesley, the influence of Thomas à Kempis) that he comes to his existential understanding of original sin. And here, his understanding is precisely the same as Luther's. Once we strip away the metaphors and the questions about Adam and heredity and all the rest of it, the heart of the doctrine of original sin for Calvin is that essentially it is egocentricity—self-centredness. Therefore its only remedy is in denying ourselves and taking up the cross.

We are not our own masters, he insists, but belong to God. In the light of Romans 12:1, we must present our bodies as a sacrifice. Consulting our own self-interest is the pestilence that most effectively leads to our destruction. Self-denial can only come through devotion to God. When Scripture bids us leave off self-concern, it not only erases from our minds the yearning to possess, the desire for power, and the favour of men, but it also uproots ambition and all craving for human glory and other more secret plagues...pride, arrogance, ostentation, avarice, desire, lasciviousness, effeminacy, or other evils that our self-love spawns.

According to Titus 2:11-14, self-renunciation is renouncing worldly lusts, which Calvin takes to mean the passions of the flesh. We are to put off our own nature and put on soberness (that is chastity and temperance), righteousness, godliness. When these things are joined together by an inseparable bond, they bring about complete perfection...but nothing is more difficult.

Self-denial will give us the right attitude to our fellow men. We are incapable of loving them above ourselves because of our natural self-love. We are puffed up, we

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<sup>24</sup> III,3,12

burst with pride and self-flattery. We minimise our own vices and exaggerate the faults of others. And listen to this sentence: ‘There is no one who does not cherish within himself some opinion of his own pre-eminence.’ So there is no other remedy than to tear out from our inward parts this most deadly pestilence of love of strife and love of self.

Once all the speculative questions about Adam and heredity and original guilt and all the rest of them have been debated and debated, what concerns Calvin is the state of our souls. And like Luther, he essentially follows Augustine’s polarity of *concupiscentia* or *caritas*. Only the all-consuming love of God can expel that dominating self-centredness which is the very nature of our sinfulness. This Calvin calls ‘evangelical perfection’, but he sees it as a goal at which we ought to aim, but can never attain.<sup>25</sup> John Wesley followed exactly the same model. The only difference was that in contrast to Augustine, Luther and Calvin, Wesley dared to believe in ‘the optimism of grace’ that we can be delivered from this inner sin in this life and so love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

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<sup>25</sup> III,7,5.