

My current view of Man's sinfulness

Michael Cameron 2010

- 1) **All men and women (assuming that they are old enough to know right from wrong) are sinners, from *their own* wilful choice. That is why we are all accountable, and all needing salvation.**

If we say sin is inherited - partly Adam's fault, we hinder the realization that we ourselves are deserving of condemnation, and undo the work of the Spirit to convict sin (John 16:8-11). In context, Jesus' view is that the Jews who rejected him are accountable for sin *because* he came and spoke to them (John 15:22), showed them indisputable evidence that he was from God (John 14:11), but they rejected him without reason (John 15:25). And yet, being so willfully blind, they still claimed to "see" (John 9:41). But if they had not been shown the evidence (i.e, were *truly* blind), they would *not* be guilty of sin. Jesus' view of sin and accountability therefore involves one's opportunity, knowledge and will (Luke 12:47-48). A germinal foetus has none of these.

Regarding Paul's view, he goes to great lengths in Romans to address all people, from all walks of life, to show that they have all had exposure to the truth but have all *willfully* rebelled against God (Romans 1:19-21). Even in Romans 5:12, when talking about Adam's sin and the death that resulted, the point is "...and so death spread to all men because all sinned." It was not therefore because Adam had children per se, but because these children "sinned," that death spread to them. And to those who say "but mortality affects everyone, young and old" I would respond - *spiritual* death is the point of the passage. It is promised regarding the tree of knowledge of good and evil ... "for in the day you eat of it you shall surely die." And yet the *physical* death that Adam and Eve experience does not happen for many years. The type of death that they *do* experience on that day is *spiritual* - separation, and alienation from God. They are cast out of the garden, and are banned from the tree of life, the one that would allow them to live forever, but the point here is again spiritual in my view, because as Christians we now *do* get to eat of the tree of life through Jesus (Rev 22:2), and yet this makes no difference to our mortality in the sense of ageing and physical death. It simply means that we will live forever with God *after* physical death.

Paul evidently sees *no need* to address the sin of babies in the womb as he constructs his comprehensive catalogue of man's sinfulness in Romans 1-3, only of those old enough to see nature, and understand right and wrong. It seems he therefore assumed that unborn babies have not yet had the opportunity to know God's expectations, and fall short of them.

It seems so implausible that unborn babies are "disinclined to obey God" from conception onwards - and very plausible that they have no cognitive inclinations at all, one way or the other. A sperm and an egg become a germinal human being at the moment of conception. There is no other distinct moment that this genesis can be attributed to. And yet can we credibly say that these two freshly combined cells - these early humans - know God's requirements, and are willfully rebelling, when there isn't even a central

nervous system in evidence? No eyes, no ears, no brain, no heart nor conscience, *just* some mitochondria, nuclei and Golgi apparatus scattered around, and lots of microtubules pulling little organelles here and there!

If these germinal cells can be held accountable for sin, why not plants, amoeba, bacteria etc? They do cause some unwelcome trouble at times (poisoning, infection etc :)

2) God, through imposing the design constraint of humans having a genuine choice – therefore making them capable of genuine love, did make the odds of sinning overwhelmingly strong. But he did this knowing that he would offer mercy to all of us in Christ. “For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all (Romans 11:32).” (See also Galatians 3:21-25).

Let’s unpack why God might have done things this way. I believe one reason it is because he wanted it to not be about our comparative degree of sinfulness, but about his unlimited degree of grace – he wanted to save all of us, equally.

If he made it such that some people could avoid sin their whole lives, that the temptation to sin wasn’t all that strong, then the humans who didn’t sin wouldn’t ever need God’s grace, and wouldn’t know his kindness, since he wouldn’t need to send Jesus for them. They also wouldn’t need to love very much themselves, or become like God in this sense, because love involves difficult choices by its very nature.

It was difficult for Jesus to leave heaven and come to Earth, and difficult for Jesus to go to the cross to die in our place. He needed to rely on God in order to be able to do these things. We are called to follow Jesus in the difficult business of loving others, facing down the overwhelming temptation to be selfish, through continually seeking God’s strength. This is how, in turn, we come to really know God, and to understand God’s love for us.

And also, in the scenario of lower temptation, the people who did need grace would find it incredibly demeaning to accept it. It’s hard enough to accept grace as it is, with all of us in the same boat. But in a world where only some need grace, such people would see that they had failed *compared to the others* who didn’t need grace, and so would rightly feel ongoing condemnation, and that admitting their need would make them second class citizens. A church made up of the two groups would be a very segregated affair, with one group *rightly* looking down on the other. Self-righteousness would not be automatically wrong – for some in this case, it would be right, and rational.

But the other thing is that temptation would never, in this case, be evenly spread. A paedophile in such a society, who was horribly abused as a child by one of the few sinners, may have ocean deep psychological wounds that make it incredibly difficult to resist societies’ greatest taboo – that people should not abuse children. Those in society who had not been abused in this way, but who had been brought up in stable, happy, sinless homes, would be very lucky in that sense. A discrepancy is also there in our present society, but even the

supposed “best” can (or at least should, if being honest) say that they are heinous sinners. Maybe they are not sinful in such obvious ways, but still very rebellious in heart. Therefore we have a clear logic to employ, one that at least *can* keep us all on the same level, if we are honest with ourselves. We should help others who are stuck in sin rather than look down on them, because we know our hearts are just as sinful. People couldn’t say this in a society in which some, through the privilege of their lack of serious exposure to sin and its hurts, didn’t ever experience great temptation to sin, and didn’t ever sin. They would never know what intense temptation was, because they would never have experienced it.

One objection to what I have been saying in this point may be that it still seems a bit cruel for God to put us in a no-win situation, to stack the odds against us like this. But I want to soften things a little, by appealing to the designer in all of us.

As we dissect this above “low temptation” scenario, we realize that it is very artificial and unlikely, even in theory. The geometry of the situation is such that once man is given a choice, and intelligence and knowledge, and a feeling of closeness to family etc, in a world with finite resources, the rest of the realities of our present situation actually fall out by necessity. The situation in which sin didn’t spread to all is basically impossible, because free humans interact freely, and no one is that sheltered. And it only takes one sin to start the process off in any locality. Preventing people from being touched by sin is therefore like preventing people from being touched by bacteria. People may be exposed to greater and lesser extents, but everyone is exposed enough for it to be overwhelmingly likely they will become influenced by it.

What I meant by “appealing to the designer in us” is that we all know that design, as opposed to pure Art, is not an entirely ‘free’ process. Even if you make up all the rules yourself, each rule brings with it some constraints that mean other rules then become apparent. If you, being God, decided that wood is going to have certain properties of its own, then you have excluded it from having certain other properties by definition. It can’t also be steel for example. If you decide that gravity will act between two massive bodies, then you also, in that same stroke, create tides, elliptical trajectories and so on. If you decide that man will have the freedom to ignore you and hurt others, (and also the freedom to love you and help others), then you have set up a situation in which hurts and retaliation and sin will spread, and powerfully affect everyone. But then, love and kindness would also be able to spread and affect the world too. It’s not only sin that spreads in the world’s design. Obedience and humility does too, but being harder by its very nature, it spreads less, as less choose it. But we all know that someone being a good example does have an impact.

So being God for a moment, in creating this world, it is not that you wanted everyone to be hurt, but that you wanted to create a world, and you wanted everyone to be free, and you realized ahead of time that hurt would be a necessary aspect of the whole design. But you also knew you would address this by entering into the hurt of the world yourself, experiencing it to the maximum, but being a perfect example in it, so as to save those who turned to

you, thereby also allowing them to know how much you loved them. Through this you could kick start a counter-movement to the vicious cycle of sin and fear, based on the virtuous cycle of forgiveness and love.

Sure - God could have deprived us of any choice, and any love – but would that have been better? How would we ever really know God in that world? How meaningless and shallow would it be? The way things are is much better in the end – the way in which love is by nature difficult, that we are all in the same category, all in equal need of mercy, and all therefore all able to see how merciful God really is, and all able to accept it if we choose.

This current situation was therefore effected, I suppose, by the inherent metrics of the decision to give us freedom, and also, on another level, by allowing Satan to have great power and authority through this. He can use every sinful example, and every selfish choice as his razor sharp tool.

3) We therefore don't have the realistic ability to not sin at all (1 John 1:8, Romans 3:23) – over any length of time, nor to be saved by our own actions of obedience (Gal 2:15-16.) But temptation, and therefore sin is passed on externally from one generation to the next, via overwhelming negative influence and example, and one's personal choice to be influenced.

The enticement of Satan – that ancient serpent – is everywhere we turn, every waking minute, brought to us via the sins of other humans in the world. We may well be able to choose to do the right thing according to our conscience and God's will *on a given occasion*. Many good decisions by humans are recorded in Scripture, in both Old and New Testaments (e.g. king Josiah in the OT in 2Kings 23:25, and the faithful centurion in the NT in Matthew 8:5ff). Some people even make good decisions often enough to be characterized as “good people,” and are documented in various places (e.g. Acts 11:24). The Bible writers understood that they were not *perfectly* good compared to God, just *relatively* good compared to others. Compared to God, no one is good – we are all sinners. The odds against choosing the right and godly option, perfectly and consistently, for any length of time, are infinite. Such powerful temptations are at work within us, that while we do sometimes have the desire to act rationally against them and obey God, we also find doing this incredibly difficult. (Romans 7:7-25).

Within this paradigm of our sinfulness, there is also a certain inscrutability of our motives, which means that - while we may be largely well motivated on occasion, there will usually be a partial selfish motive deceitfully lurking somewhere under our radar (Jeremiah 17:9). We have all sinned already - who knows when it started exactly, but clearly from very early on - and so the vicious cycle of sin has already begun in each one of us by the time that we can even discuss these things. Each sinful choice makes that sin more habitual and harder to resist next time, and this makes us feel more distant from God's love and help, and therefore creates a downward spiral.

We can't undo history - a soiled sheet cannot become clean by adding more soil – more (at least partially) impure acts. And obedience is what is expected of us anyway, so it can't make up for disobedience. So we are therefore all stuck in our state, all slaves to sin, and needing God to intervene.

And all of this is self evident, without even hearing the gospel, or anything about Christianity. “To err is human” is a sentiment that is understood *everywhere* in the world, by everyone; and belief in a divine creator with holy moral standards for human behavior is also *so* widespread as to be essentially universal. Anyone *can* figure out that we need forgiveness from our creator for our immoral behavior – need our creator to intervene to save us full stop, but most act in pride to try to salvage dignity and a sense of control, and so react to this in a works-based paradigm.

But as indicated already, this sin is not transferred to us, and to our generation genetically – and therefore without personal responsibility. God is in control of how a person turns out genetically, but God is not responsible for our sinful thoughts or actions. We *can* resist any particular sinful desire, and avoid committing any particular sin if we really decide to, so it is not fair to say that God, or the Devil made us sinners, even if we are placed in a difficult and severely testing situation. If we were born sinners, made to be sinful before we could even think or choose, then we would not be cognitively responsible for becoming sinful, and so someone else must be – either God or the Devil. And neither is the case.

But saying Adam is responsible instead, makes Adam a more important player in the world, and more responsible for this mess than God, the Devil and all of the rest of humanity combined, and frankly, I feel sorry for the poor guy, being lumbered with all of that. And it was actually Eve who committed the first sin anyway! This 100% dumping on Adam is quite possibly the greatest act of blame shifting ever. He may have committed a sin, one that in turn contributed to sin becoming prevalent around him, and then through many other individual choices, many others were affected. But actually, we are all equally responsible for our own choices, and for the spread of sin in our own local world.

So sin and temptation are transferred socially, via overwhelming enticement and temptation, and corresponding strong personal desire. But giving in to this enticement is ultimately our choice and responsibility – as James says in chapter 1:13-15 of his letter.

4) Regarding when sin starts in an individual's life, we all choose to sin at some very early point – basically as soon as we are cognitively able to understand law (right and wrong.)

How do we know (theologically) that there is a point at which we come to understand right from wrong? How do we know roughly when this point occurs?

In Isaiah 7:14-16 we see a reference to a child to be born who would become a sign for king Ahaz. Initially the sign is regarding the timing of the coming *judgment* of Israel and Syria (who had just invaded Judah and king Ahaz) – a judgment delivered by the invasion of the Assyrians. The timing of this prophesied invasion referred to the maturing of a child that Ahaz could witness himself, perhaps one of Isaiah’s own children.¹ So what?

The interesting thing for us in the verse is the time at which the child in question was seen (by God) to be able to “refuse the evil and choose the good.” This is some point after weaning occurs, when the child will eat “curds and honey.”² Historically, it was about 2 years after this prophecy that Assyria invaded and conquered Damascus and Ahaz’s current enemies. They also razed Judah, and besieged, but did not conquer Jerusalem, and so the sign was fulfilled. So although this verse is perhaps not setting out to teach us about this topic, we can deduce from it that there is a point at which we know right from wrong, and that it occurs pretty early on, after weaning, as a young child. I think most parents can relate to this change – the phrase “the terrible two’s” was coined for a reason.

As soon as we become aware of God’s law (first, via limits imposed by parents, and then in a deeper sense, as we grow to understand spiritual things and God’s personal will for us), we rebel against it – just like Adam and Eve did in Genesis 3.

Paul refers to a time in his past before he knew the law, when he was alive and free from its power in Romans 7:9-11. But Romans, and the Bible as a whole argues that law is not just the Ten Commandments, nor is it even restricted to the Bible’s teaching – it is also our conscience, and our sense of requiring consistency with our own standards, whatever they may be (Romans 2:12, James 4:17). Hypocrisy is an inherent law that catches everyone. There is a time before we are aware of it – a time before children know the difference between right and wrong, and also a time before we are truly aware of our obligations towards God. But I would say that a young child becomes aware and accountable at an early age, and that this accountability grows progressively with maturity and further awareness.

5) We are saved as we look away from man, away from the accusations of law, and look to the work of God (through Jesus. Romans 8:1-4)

Looking away from man and his ability, to God and his ability is the singular choice we can make – and this is the choice of faith. Will we believe, or will we rebel? If we are trying to live up to law – even our conscience – for

¹ Later it also referred to the coming kingdom of God and his judgment of the whole world, and the related sign of the birth of Jesus.

² This was probably said to be the diet because there were no crops available inside besieged city walls, just animal-based ones etc. Honey could also perhaps be cultivated in apiaries inside city walls, as the bees can fly outside to pollinate etc. (NIV Archaeological Study Bible, the Zondervan Corporation 2005, p1066)

acceptance by God, then we are pursuing a doomed course of action that will lead to enslavement to sin, and to our condemnation. The power of sin is the law. (1Cor 15:56.)

- 6) **A fundamental (prior) aspect of repentance is therefore to come to the admission that we are chronic sinners who deserve condemnation because of our own sinful actions, which *taken individually*, we did have the real ability to resist and reject, but which now have legal consequences that we have no ability to nullify or undo.**

Admission of where we are at, personal responsibility for this, and yet personal powerlessness to change it, therefore looking to divine power to be delivered, are the key first steps towards change in all of the "...Anonymous" addiction programs. In other words, this process of admission, and looking for help outside of us, and in God, does really work in practice. Its not just a nice theological idea or theory, it's actually the only thing that works on the street. This, I believe, is the reason why Paul structures the book of Romans the way he does. This is the first truth he wants us to understand in chapters 1-3 – that we are sinners, and that we ourselves are *fully* responsible for being sinners, and yet we are in no position to undo the situation. We need help from outside of ourselves, from *God*.

- 7) **Deciding to stop sinning and to do good deeds 'for God's acceptance', is however, the most common human response to our situation. This is futile, and won't save us, trapped as we are in this downward spiral of insecurity and enslavement to law. It will just bring more failure and more condemnation, until we eventually harden our hearts to sin and accept it as being OK. Therefore this decision would be self-reliant, works-based and not repentant at all – a continued rebellion and defiance, leading to yet more rebellion.**

This was the attitude of the Pharisees, and of all the Jews who rejected Jesus - measuring up to law for approval. It didn't impress God, and didn't save them, nor serve them well (Romans 9:30-10:4). It led directly to their eventual physical judgment as a nation and their obliteration by the Romans at the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. They were still trying to impress God with their zeal right up to their dying gasps amid the arrows, flames and general slaughter.

Deciding not to do particular sins, and then to cognitively work through the details towards this goal is indeed a part of repentance – the part in sequence *after* acknowledging our sinfulness, deciding to stop relying on self-action and to start relying on God's action.

His help to save us, and overcome our sin, is ours by faith as we ask for it. (Actual change may be a process, but we know we have the end result by faith as we ask, and this faith motivates us too). So deciding not to sin anymore *must* be bound up with our faith in salvation, and in God's help generally. This is the point that Paul makes in Romans 6.

- 8) **But one must be *willing in the heart* to let go of sin / idol reliance in the process of turning to God. This willingness will come from seeing the futility of one's idols, that they can't save, and actually destroy – finally realizing that they are not the key to life; as one also grasps the good news of God's salvation, which can deliver, and is the key to life.**

This process is indeed the crucial part of repentance. God saves us “just as we are” in terms of our actions, but frankly, we will never turn to God while we think that our idols are truly “God”, and will tend to *avoid* God for fear of losing our idols, whether they be our pride and vanity, the desire to be rich, alcohol abuse, drugs, casual sex, a romantic infatuation or whatever. The active ability to implement this change in life is empowered through believing the promise of salvation, however. And the changes themselves are not repentance, but the *fruit* of repentance. This relationship between giving up reliance on idols and sin, and taking up reliance on God and Jesus, is why preaching the gospel must include both things - exposing and condemning sin, and the futility of idolatry, along with promoting the reliability and grace of God, and our salvation in Jesus Christ. Repentance is a “pushmepullyou” effect – of being disheartened by idolatry, while also being inspired by the good news of salvation.

- 9) **This whole flow of logic so far – the early awareness of right and wrong, and the personal choices and accountability involved in sin and faith, therefore leads to the position of saying that quite young children can become Christians. This perspective is also a key characteristic of Jesus' teaching (Mat 11:25, 18:3, 19:13-15, 21:16.)**

I'm not referring to suckling or unborn babies, who don't understand anything, and neither was Jesus, but rather to young children who are old enough to understand that they are disobedient. If one is old enough to understand that one is rebellious, one is also old enough to understand forgiveness and reconciliation. Children seem to believe in God almost by default from a young age, so this seems to mean that they can understand disobedience towards God from an equally young age, and reconciliation to God also. They may not understand the atonement in great theological depth, but they can understand that God forgives them because of Jesus – or even more simply, because he found a way to take away their sin that was all about the actions that *he* did, rather than about the actions *they* do. I would say that this is the irreducible core message of the gospel. This represents a similar degree of understanding (or lack of it) to what the Old Testament patriarchs and heroes had in their faith, regarding Jesus' atonement and God's forgiveness. In Hebrews chapter 11 we see that they will clearly be saved, and were somehow looking forward to heaven in what they did. As far as they understood at the time, I'd say they were simply looking to God's action, to God's salvation rather than to fleshly reliance, but this orientation inherently looks towards God's *ultimate* action in Jesus, and *ultimate* salvation in heaven, even if it doesn't understand the full extents of *how* God would ultimately save at *that* time. Even the disciples didn't fully understand spiritual salvation until after

the resurrection (Luke 24:13-27), and yet were relying on Jesus as they followed him, and were saved before this point (Luke 13:10). Therefore I can't see why little children (and the mentally disabled etc) can't be saved via such a basic level of understanding as this.

10) This may also be an alternative explanation for why whole households, perhaps including young children, believed and were baptized in the New Testament. The children were becoming Christians too!

Without this understanding we are led to false teachings such as infant baptism for salvation, in which newborn babies are saved by performing a human ceremony (a work), irrespective of their choice or faith, and before they even can sin – or need salvation from the consequences of their sins – a few days or weeks after birth.

The only other alternative I can see to this dilemma is the option implied under Calvinism, when combined with Baptist beliefs. This option is to admit that a whole class of humanity – namely the age group of children too young to have faith or become Christians, but still old enough to have judgment hanging over them *purely* because of Adam's sin – are destined to eternal torture in hell, with not one single, solitary promise, nor way of redemption offered to them in Scripture. Excluded from faith, and excluded from the promises that we can have faith in, they are excluded from Jesus and *all* of God's blessings if they die. But they are supposedly *not* excluded from the problem of sin and judgment and hell.

It would seem very untidy, not to mention unfair of God to set things up in such a way, especially considering the massive number of naturally-failed pregnancies, and human-induced abortions that happen – probably *at least* 3 for every human who is born normally. So this “aborted” segment is actually the *biggest* class of humanity by a ratio of at least 3 to 1. It's a problem very easily fixed however, if the capability to sin comes into to existence at the same time as the capability to have faith in Jesus – namely at the time one has human cognition and the awareness of good and evil.

It also adds up with Genesis 3 if we see that Adam and Eve only ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil after they were made aware of its presence. By the way, in spite of all the Christian artistic representations of them, there is nothing in the Bible to say how old Adam and Eve were when God made them☺. Nor do we know how long it was before they sinned. All we know is that at the beginning, they were naked, and yet were not ashamed, like all very young children to this day.

This interpretation also harmonizes Genesis 1:1-14 with the account in chapter 2-3, if we see that Adam (which means ‘man’ anyway) was a real person, created along with all the other animals and so on, while also being a spiritual ‘type’ for all men, and his spiritual story – *our* spiritual story in that sense. This seems to be the main focus of the second account.

11) This model of understanding sin and faith may also open the door to understand how some people in remote places who “have never heard” about Jesus may still end up in heaven. If they have understood from God that they are sinners, that they are helpless to be saved by their own actions, and are therefore looking in faith to be saved by God’s action – but don’t know quite what that is yet, then they are at the same place as Abraham and the other OT patriarchs, prophets and heroes.

They will be saved through Jesus as Abraham was, even without knowing exactly how this salvation would be accomplished, something Abraham also didn’t know. They are looking *forward* to Jesus in the same sense Abraham was, even though the event of Jesus death is already *past*. Clearly however, they would be desperate to know how their salvation will be accomplished, and clearly many others in these places (by far the majority of people actually) - who currently are not looking to God but to self-reliant works or idols, also need to hear what God’s way of salvation actually is. So there is no disincentive here for preaching the good news. Perhaps there is a greater incentive actually – if we can think that such people are out there right now, waiting to be told about how this last piece of their salvation puzzle really fits.

12) God is not passive in all of this – merely waiting for people to figure everything out for themselves, and therefore seek his forgiveness. God is actively calling *all* people to faith and forgiveness, and revealing himself to them in various ways, just as he has been doing throughout history, in both the New and the Old Testament periods. He desires that *all* people be saved. (Deut 30:19, Luke 19:10, 1 Tim 2:3-4, 2 Peter 3:9)

But we can refuse him, just as so many in both Testaments also did (Isaiah 1:20, Acts 7:51). And repeated sinful choices do compound upon themselves – they dull our senses, harden our hearts, and close our ears to God. But God still desires salvation even for hardened sinners. He holds out his hand to them till their last breath, and his grace can still pierce through the fog of their sin, particularly at their more vulnerable moments (Luke 15:11-32). Therefore, God’s mercy is the first domino in series, but we can resist its fall on us, by standing proud, and firmly glued to our futile ways.