

LESSON 8

Belgic Confession Article 15 Original Sin

General:

In this lesson we examine the further implications of the Fall (original sin) and the manner in which sin is passed on through the generations.

1. Original Sin

Various terms have been used to describe the origin and character of the total depravity of man:

- a) original sin: pointing to the origin of all sin: the fall and disobedience of Adam and Eve in Paradise
- b) hereditary sin: putting more emphasis on the manner in which this sin progresses from one to all through conception and birth (Psalm 51:5).

Original sin is that sin whereby *the entire nature* of man is corrupted so that he is fully inclined to all evil and unable to do any good. The source of this sin lies in the fall; in its extent it covers all mankind.

Romans 5:12, "Therefore as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all men sinned."

Since mankind is seen as a corporate *unity* ("He made from one = from one blood – every nation of man," Acts 17:26, 27), we are all naturally included and implicated in the fall. Adam and Eve are not mere persons, but our "first parents" (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 3), while Adam is "head in the Covenant" (federal head of the human race, as some say) whose deeds have consequences for all his posterity.

2. The Consequences of Original Sin

With respect to original sin, the following distinctions are usually made:

- a) original *guilt*: a personal sharing in the guilt of Adam's transgression, which is "so vile and abominable in the sight of God that it is sufficient to condemn the human race;" shows the need for *justification*
- b) original *pollution*: an inward disposition to do that which is evil, a "root" or "source" which produces in man all sorts of sin (Article 15); stresses the need for *sanctification*.

3. Original Sin and the Work of Christ

While all men are included and implicated in the sin of Adam, the children of God receive the forgiveness of sins (removal of guilt, justification) and the renewal of life (sanctification) in Jesus Christ, the "last Adam," the Mediator of the Covenant.

1 Corinthians 15:45: "Thus it is written, 'the first man, Adam, became a living being,' the last Adam became a life-giving spirit." See also: Romans 5:15-17.

Even though there is justification and sanctification in Christ, this does not mean that sin is now fully "abolished or eradicated" in the believers. See also: Romans 7:18. Even the sacraments (Holy Baptism specifically mentioned) do not fully remove the effects of original sin in this life, for "we have to strive daily with the weakness of our faith and the evil lusts of our flesh" (Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper). When our mind and will is renewed by the Spirit and Word of Christ, we still daily fall into sins; yet original sin is "not imputed to the children of God to their condemnation but by His grace and mercy is forgiven them;" see also: Romans 8:1.

The full effects of original sin will only be removed through death, on the day of resurrection, Romans 7:24,25; 1 Corinthians 15:53-57.

4. Original Sin and Grace

Our sin is not removed by an act of ours, but only by God's *grace* in Jesus Christ. Yet this will not cause the believers to "sleep peacefully in their sin" (the usual objection against this doctrine), for "the awareness of this corruption may make them often groan" and they will desire to be delivered from "this body of death." God's grace never renders the believer "careless and wicked" (see: Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 24), for it is impossible that whoever is grafted into Christ by true faith "should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness."

The Confession rejects the error of the *Pelagians*, who state that:

- a) man is not implicated in the fall of Adam, is not depraved but is born with a free will and the inherent possibility to do good out of himself
- b) sin results only from "imitation," from following a bad example.

In a weakened form of this "Pelagianism," the Roman Catholic Church among others teaches that although man is born "corrupt" (= weakened, a minimalization of total depravity), God's grace (administered by the Church through the sacraments) removes this original sin and strengthens the natural ability to do good (Neo- or Semi-Pelagianism).

5. Original and Actual Sin

The Heidelberg Catechism, in Lord's Day 4, distinguishes between our "actual" and "original" sin. *Actual*: those sins which we *do*, which flow forth out of our corrupt nature. Various distinctions have been made with

respect to these "actual sins," but we must remember that the Law of God is an unbreakable *unity*, and sin against one commandment is sin against the *whole* Law (James 2:10).

The Scriptures speak of:

- a) transgressions: actual sin against the particular commandments or the "spirit" of the Law.
- b) shortcomings: failure to meet the high standard of God's Law, either in entirety or in specific matters.

In any case, sin is always measured by and known through the Law of God. (See Heidelberg Catechism, Question 3, "From where do you know your sins and misery?")

The Scriptures also speak of an "unpardonable sin," Matthew 12:31, 32. This is often referred to as "the sin against the Holy Spirit." This sin is simply a *hardening* in sin and a refusal to repent upon the clear indications of Scripture. All sin is pardonable, but refusal to repent constitutes a forfeiting of the promises of the Covenant and leads to final condemnation.

QUESTIONS (Lesson 8):

1. Which main terms have been used to describe the origin and character of sin?
2. What is original sin?
3. How are we included and implicated in the sin of Adam and Eve?
4. What are the (two) consequences of original sin?
5. What is the significance of Christ's work with respect to original sin?
6. Are the effects of this sin now altogether removed by the sacrifice of Christ? If not, when will this come to pass?
7. Does the confession concerning God's *grace* make people careless with respect to their sins?
8. What is the error of the Pelagians?
9. In what manner has e.g. the Roman Catholic Church maintained the Pelagian error?
10. What is the difference between "original" and "actual" sin?
11. What distinction can be made with respect to our actual sins?
12. What is the "sin against the Holy Spirit?"

ASSIGNMENT:

Memorize: Heidelberg Catechism, Questions and Answers 9, 10, and 20.

ARTICLE 16

DIVINE ELECTION

We believe that, when the entire offspring of Adam plunged into perdition and ruin by the transgression of the first man, God manifested Himself to be as He is: merciful and just. *Merciful*, in rescuing and saving from this perdition those whom in His eternal and unchangeable counsel He has elected in Jesus Christ our Lord by His pure goodness, without any consideration of their works. *Just*, in leaving the others in the fall and perdition into which they have plunged themselves.

ARTICLE 17

THE RESCUE OF FALLEN MAN

We believe that, when He saw that man had thus plunged himself into physical and spiritual death and made himself completely miserable, our gracious God in His marvellous wisdom and goodness set out to seek man when he trembling fled from Him. He comforted him with the promise that He would give him His Son, born of woman, *to bruise the head of the serpent* and to make man blessed.