



# Calvin's modification of Augustine's doctrine of original sin

N. Vorster

School of Ecclesiastical Studies

Potchefstroom Campus

North-West University

E-mail: nvorster@telkomsa.net

## Abstract

### Calvin's modification of Augustine's doctrine of original sin

*Augustine was Calvin's main source of reference in the "Institutes". However, his treatment of Augustine's views was not uncritical. This article discusses the way in which Calvin modified Augustine's doctrine of original sin. The main differences can be attributed to different theological aims. Augustine developed his doctrine of original sin against the teachings of the Manicheans and Pelagians, whereas Calvin shifted the focus to knowledge of God and the self. Calvin understood original sin noetically as religious and moral blindness – whereas Augustine viewed sexual concupiscence as the main principle of original sin. Augustine made a considerable effort to explain that sin does not find its origin in God. God foresaw the fall, but did not compel it. Calvin located sin in God's eternal decree and permission. Augustine, furthermore, understood the transmission of original sin biologically, whereas Calvin ascribed it to God's eternal permissive will. These differences culminated in a different understanding of the meaning of Jesus' virgin birth. The article concludes by discussing the relevance of Calvin's noetic approach to original sin.*

## Opsomming

### Calvyn se modifikasie van Augustinus se erfsondeleer

*Calvyn het in sy "Institusie" Augustinus gebruik as sy vernaamste Christelike verwysingsbron. Dit beteken egter nie dat Calvyn Augustinus kritiekloos nagevolg het nie. Hierdie artikel fokus op die wyse waarop Calvyn Augustinus se leerstelling van die erfsonde gewysig het. Die vernaamste verskille is te wyte aan verskillende teologiese uitgangspunte. Augustinus het die leer*

*oor die erfsonde ontwikkel in reaksie op die Manicheanisme en die Pelagianisme, terwyl Calvyn die fokus verskuif het na kennis van God en die self. Vir Calvyn is die erfsonde hoofsaak noëties van aard – dit dui op 'n godsdienstige en morele verblinding. Augustinus, daarenteen, het seksuele begeerte as die kernbeginsel van erfsonde gesien. Augustinus het die oordrag van die erfsonde biologies verstaan, terwyl Calvyn dit in God se toelatende wil begrond het. Die verskillende sienings het gekulmineer in verskillende verklarings van die betekenis van Jesus se maagdelike geboorte. Die artikel eindig deur die belang van Calvyn se noëtiese benadering tot die erfsonde te bespreek.*

## 1. Introduction

The term *original sin* is not found in Scripture, but was developed by Augustine to articulate the biblical doctrine of the total depravity of man. He used the Latin term *peccatum originale* to explain that the whole of humankind partake in the original sin of Adam, and consequently share a common state of guilt before God.

Augustine's doctrine was accepted by the Council of Trent and the Reformation, though not in all its dimensions, in order to defend the doctrine of the total depravity of humankind and the undeserved nature of the grace of God against the teachings of the Pelagians.

Recent studies of Calvin's use of Augustine established that Augustine was Calvin's main source of inspiration and reference within the Christian tradition (cf. Pitkin, 1999:347). Calvin's discussions of sin indeed reflect and appeal directly to key positions advanced by Augustine, particularly in his anti-Pelagian writings (Pitkin, 1999: 348). He followed Augustine in viewing sin as more than a mere negativity, but as a depravity that contaminates all dimensions of human existence. Yet it would be a mistake to equate Augustine's view with that of Calvin. Though Calvin accepted Augustine's doctrine of original sin and the bondage of the human will, he also attempted to modify it in such a way that it would be logically more comprehensible. This article discusses Calvin's attempt to modify Augustine's doctrine on original sin. In the first section, Augustine's concept of original sin is analysed. The second section discusses Calvin's attempt to modify Augustine's doctrine, while the third section reflects on the significance of Calvin's noetic approach to original sin.

## 2. Augustine's understanding of original sin

Augustine's classical doctrine of original sin was the result of his negation of both Manicheanism and Pelagianism. Against the Manicheans he maintained that evil is not identifiable with human finitude nor an ontological necessity, but it erupts freely and contingently. Against the Pelagians he stated that sin is not merely accidental or contingent, but is a corruption of human nature because of the positive propensity of the will towards evil (cf. Duffy, 1988:600; Augustine, 1955:xii).

The Manicheans offered a deterministic account of sin that exempted the self from moral agency (Babcock, 1988:30). According to the Manicheans God is in no way, whether directly or indirectly, the source of evil. Evil is rather an ontological force that stems from matter that opposes the divine and compels the innately good souls of human beings to sin (cf. Bonner, 1963:317; Babcock, 1988:31). The Manicheans thereby eliminated the moral dimension of evil and the personal accountability of the human being. Augustine insisted against the Manicheans that evil is not an independent force or structural reality, but the corruption of being and moral goodness. It is committed by moral agents who are responsible for their own actions. God is therefore not unjust when he holds humanity to account for their sins. On the other hand he argued that, even though humans are capable of moral evil, they were created good by God. God is in no way the source of evil or the creator of human sin (Augustine, 1955:xii). Augustine was able to reconcile his position that man is accountable for his sins with the view that God is not the source of evil, through the concept of the free will of man. It provided him with a mechanism through which something that comes forth good from God could, at the same time, be capable of evil (Babcock, 1988:33).

However, after 392 Augustine began to modify his original position regarding the free will as the possession of all human beings, first in his polemic with the Manichean Fortunatus, and thereafter in his polemic against the Pelagians. In his polemic against Fortunatus he shifted the free exercise of will from all human beings to only the first human being, thereby abandoning a crucial element in his earlier argument for human agency in moral evil (cf. Augustine, 1974; Babcock, 1988:40). As a consequence of the first man's voluntary sin the whole of humankind descended into the necessity of habit and bondage to sin and death. Man's compulsion to sin is thus caused by an initial sin. After the first sin, man sin involuntarily. Yet Augustine maintained that if there is complicity at the start, a

subsequent set of forced actions can still be interpreted as the agents own. God's penalty on man's sin is therefore justly imposed (cf. Augustine, 1974; Babcock, 1988:38).

Augustine developed his argument on the nature of man's free will and original sin further in his polemic writings against the Pelagians. Pelagius understood grace to be either a natural faculty or a form of illumination after baptism has cleansed sin. Man's natural faculties are good because they are created by the good Creator, therefore man could, if he chose, be without sin. Though man's will is sound, his mind is clouded and he therefore needs the illumination of the law and gospel to lead a Christian life after the remission of sins through baptism (cf. Bonner, 1963:362). Closely connected with Pelagius's view on grace, went a particular doctrine of the fall which denied that Adam's sin injured his descendants or can be transmitted to subsequent generations. Adam's sin only injured himself, and though he set an evil example for his descendants, he did not corrupt their nature also. Human nature cannot be corrupted by sin, because sin is an action, not a substance, and therefore cannot change our nature (Augustine, s.a.a:19). Every descendant of Adam possesses Adam's original innocence and thus there is no such thing as original sin (cf. Bonner, 1963:318-319).

Augustine found Pelagius's reduction of sin to a conscious free choice simplistic. He held that sin not only amount to an option for another mode of being, but to the disintegration of that nature (cf. Duffy, 1988:602). In *De natura et gratia* Augustine (s.a.a:3) states that man originally had a free will, but that original sin darkened and flawed man's will so that human nature itself is corrupted:

Man's nature, indeed, was created at first faultless and without any sin; but that nature of man in which everyone is born from Adam, now wants the Physician because it is not sound. All good qualities, no doubt, which it still possesses in its make, life, senses, intellect it has of the Most High God, its creator and Maker. But the flaw which darkens and weakens all those natural goods, so that it has need of illumination and healing, it has not contracted from its blameless Creator – but from original sin, which is committed by free will.<sup>1</sup>

---

1 In the original Latin:

Natura quipped hominis primitus inculpate et sine ullo vitio create est, naturo vero ista hominis, qua unusquisque ex Adam nascitur, jam medico indigent, qui sana non est. Omnia quidem bona, quae habet informatione, vita sensibus, mente a summon Deo habet creatore et

For his position to be intelligible, he had to give some indication how the sin of the first human beings are continuous with the character of subsequent generations. Otherwise he could not maintain the position that sin is genuinely the moral agent's own. In *De civitate Dei* (Augustine, 1955:14.13) he argues that the fall differs from the ordinary daily sin of man in that it leads to a shift in the orientation of the will, that is, a turn from a higher state of being to a lower state of being, from God to the self, thereby making itself, rather than God, the principle of its existence:

Augustine regards pride, which is a longing for a perverse kind of exaltation, as the start of every kind of sin. As a result of his pride man decided to desert God, who is the changeless Good, to follow his own desire. In doing so, man abandons the light and love of God. This, in turn, causes a darkening of the human will and a taking of itself rather than God as the principle of existence. (Augustine, 1955:14.3.)

The fall leads, according to Augustine, to the weakening of all man's faculties so that he becomes liable to disease, impotent to rule the desires of the body and subject to death (Augustine, s.a.b:2).

However, two questions needed to be answered, namely how the first evil act arised, and how the sin of the first human beings is transmitted to the subsequent generations.

In *De civitate Dei* Augustine (1955:12.6) attempts to answer the first question by stating that whereas the first evil deed had an efficient cause, evil will had no efficient cause, because nothing causes an evil will, since it is the evil will itself which causes the evil act. Anything that one might suppose to cause an evil will must have a will of itself. That will must be either good or bad. If it is good it would be absurd to think that a good will can cause evil, if it is evil the question remains what caused that evil will. An evil will that is caused by an evil will cannot be the first act of evil. If it is replied that it had no cause and had always existed, the question is whether it existed in nature. If it was not in nature, then it did not exist at all. If it existed in some nature, it vitiated that nature and corrupted it. A bad will cannot exist in a bad nature, but only in a good but mutable nature that can be corrupted. Therefore, an evil will could not be

---

artifice suo. Vitium vero, quod ista naturalia bona contenebrat et infirmat, ut illuminatione et curatione opus habeat, non ab inculpabili artifice contractum est, sed ex originali peccato, quod commissum est libero arbitrio.

eternal in anything, because an evil will needs the goodness of nature to destroy it. If the evil will was not eternally there, who created it? The only possible answer is that it had to be something that had no will. However, this answer is unsatisfactory, because if such a being is equal or superior to angelic nature, it must have a will, and that will must be good. A nature without a will or with an evil will cannot be regarded as equal to a nature endowed with a good will. Augustine's conclusion is that evil resides not in anything else than in the will's own turn that desires the inferior thing in a perverted and inordinate manner. This turning of the will is not a matter of efficiency, but of deficiency, because the evil will is not effective, but defective (Augustine, 1955:12.7). To defect from Him who is the Supreme Existence, to something of less reality, is to begin to have an evil will. To try to discover the causes of defection is like trying to see darkness or hear silence. As darkness is the absence of light and silence the absence of sound, deficient causality is the absence of cause. Whereas good will is specifically effected by God, evil will is uncaused (Augustine, 1955:12.7). Evil is a corruption of good and can only be as long as there is something good to be corrupted. By definition it cannot exist on its own. The introduction of evil into a wholly good creation is thus, according to Augustine, fundamentally a negative act that is not intellectually comprehensible. Sin is the perverse manifestation of our godlike faculty of freedom (cf. Mathewes, 1999:205).

In *De civitate Dei* Augustine (1955:12.9) states that the angelic fall, which preceded the human fall, was a defection whose cause were lacking. Since the angels were created, it follows that their wills also had to be created. The good angels received their wills from God. The evil angels were created good, but have become evil through their own bad will. It came through a voluntary falling away from the good, so that their evil nature is not caused by the good, but by falling away from good. The reason why some angels fell away and others not lies therein that those who fell away received less grace of the divine love than others who continued in that grace, or if both groups of angels were created equal, the one group fell through their evil will, while the others had greater help to enable them to attain the fullness of bliss. Augustine thus attributes the first cause of evil not only to an absence of cause, but also to the absence of divine grace.

Babcock (1988:46) rightly observes that Augustine's explanation does not solve the problem. If the first evil will is simply uncaused, it will have the status of an entirely accidental happening and will no

more count as the agent's own than it would be if it could be ascribed to an efficient cause. Secondly, it is difficult to see how a defection can be described as a defect if it is not an act at all.

With regard to the question on the transmission of the original sin to subsequent generations, Augustine held that original sin is both an inherited guilt (*reatum*) and inherited disease (*vitium*). The *reatus* of sin denotes its juridical aspect whereby it is a violation of God's law and therefore punishable, while the *vitium* is the corruption and crippling effect of sin on human nature (cf. Duffy, 1988:603). He grounded his view on the Latin translation of Romans 5:12 which says:

Therefore, just as sin entered this world by one man and through sin death; so death passed into all men, in whom all sinned.<sup>2</sup>

On the basis of this translation of Romans 5:12 Augustine posits the seminal identity of the human race with Adam. In *De Peccatorum meritis et remissione* Augustine (s.a.d:1.13) correspondingly states that the condemnation of Adam's progeny was constituted in Adam. From one, all men were born to a condemnation from which there is no deliverance, but in the Saviour's grace.

According to Bonner (1963:372) Augustine clearly asserts that all future generations were in some sense present in their progenitor's loins at the time of the fall, and therefore, all humankind participated, in some mysterious fashion, in the original sin of Adam.

However, Augustine made a serious mistake in his exegesis of Romans 5:12 by using a wrong Latin translation of Romans 5:12. The Greek formulation reads: *eph' hoi pantes hemarton not en hoi*. In other words, humankind does not sin *in Adam*, but *because of Adam*. This mistake casts serious doubts upon Augustine's doctrine on the transmission of sin.

Augustine locates the transmission of sin from the first human beings to subsequent generations in concupiscence. Adam's disobedience to God caused him to lose power to control his body. This loss of power over the body becomes particularly evident in man's sexual desire. In *De civitate Dei* Augustine (1955:14.17) states that

---

2 "Per unum hominem peccatum intravit in mundum et per peccatum mors, et ita in omnes homines pertransiit, in quo omnes peccaverunt."

man possessed no shame over his nakedness before the fall, because lust did not yet arise in those members independently of their decision. After the fall, man became ashamed of his nakedness, because he lost control over his members and sexual desires so that lust – that is concupiscence – arose (Augustine, 1955:14.16).

For Augustine, concupiscence is that element of lust which is inseparable from fallen sexuality (cf. Bonner, 1963:377). Though Augustine does not disparage matrimony and respects it as an institution of God, even Christian marriage contains the sickness of concupiscence, because generation cannot be effected without the ardour of lust (Augustine, s.a.c:1.29). Through marriage two things are propagated, namely nature that is good, and the vice of nature that is evil. It is through and from concupiscence that the guilt (*reatum*) and disease (*vitium*) of original sin is conveyed from the parents to the children (Augustine, s.a.c:1.24).

Christ alone, who was born from the virgin Mary through the operation of the Holy Spirit, is free from original sin, because concupiscence was not involved in His conception and birth. He can, therefore, offer a sacrifice for the sins of humankind.<sup>3</sup>

Because of their inherited guilt, all men who are born by human generation form a lump of sin (*massa peccati, luti, perditionis*), justly deserving damnation, even if they commit no sins to add to the guilt they inherited, unless they are cleansed by baptism. Though baptism remits the guilt of concupiscence, concupiscence remains in the regenerate, because semination takes place through concupiscence. Yet baptism remits carnal concupiscence in the regenerate, not so that it is put out of existence, but so that it is not imputed for sin.<sup>4</sup>

In summary, Augustine's doctrine on original sin is as follows: man was created with a free will which means that human nature was created with the possibility, but not the necessity to sin. The fall of man leads to a redirection of man's will away from God to the world

---

3 Augustine (s.a.c:1.24) poses:

[E]x hac, inquam, concupiscentia carnis, tanquam filia peccati, et quando illi ad turpia consentitur, etiam peccatorum matre multorum, quacumque nascitur proles, originali est obligata peccato nisi in illo renascatur, quem sine ista concupiscentia Virgo concepit: propterea quando nasci est in carne dignatus, sine peccato solus est natus.

4 "Dimitti concupiscentiam carnis in baptismo, non ut non sit, sed ut in peccatum non imputetur." (Augustine, s.a.c:1.25.)



and its changeable, finite goods – causing man to lose his original free will and to become enslaved to sin. This fall-away of man's will was an unexplainable act whose cause is deficient – for there is no cause. Desire, a natural tendency, becomes after the fall and enslaving concupiscence. The original sin of Adam is transmitted to subsequent generations through sexual concupiscence, since procreation cannot take place without lust.

Clearly the Manicheans pushed Augustine to historicise evil, while the Pelagians led him to amplify the consequences of Adam's historical act to the point of making the present chain of freedom into a fatality (Duquoc, 1978:193). In his effort to counter the views of both the Manicheans and Pelagians, Augustine mixed juridical and biological categories in his perspective on original sin. This made his doctrine to appear incoherent and caused an epistemological question that subsequent theologians in the Augustinian tradition had to address, namely how man can be held responsible for his sins, if sin is an inevitable inherited condition. This question has far-reaching implications, because it pertains to the relationship between human moral agency and God's sovereignty, namely how human freedom and divine sovereignty can be affirmed at the same time.

### **3. Calvin's perspective on original sin**

Calvin's central interest which strongly organised his theological work was to demonstrate and maintain the glory of God. In order to display this vision of the glory of God Calvin used the human race as a foil. All human faculties are vitiated and corrupted and human works are, therefore, useless for salvation. The insignificance of the human being is the exaltation of God (Miles, 1981:304). Knowledge of God and of the self is therefore of utmost importance for achieving a consciousness of the glory of God. This theological premise provides the impetus for Calvin's doctrine on original sin. Pitkin (1999:349) rightly notes that Calvin shifts the focus of the debate on original sin to his own chief concern: knowledge of God and the self.

The first difference between Calvin and Augustine concerns Calvin's noetic approach to original sin. Whereas Augustine located the first sin in pride, Calvin ascribes it to man's longing for illicit knowledge. Original sin denotes a change of the mind. The sin of the first couple is best understood not as pride, but as an unbelief that both man and woman shared (Calvin, s.a.a:152-153). Calvin's difference with Augustine on the nature of the first sin is important. By underscoring the essentially noetic character of the first sin he shifts the focus away from the role of the will in the fall. Though the will was involved

in the fall and defected with the mind, Calvin stresses the role of the mind. Original sin is, along with a misdirected will, a failure to know God and self. The mind's corruption is not only moral in nature, but it is a fundamental religious blindness. Although true knowledge of God is revealed through nature, the conscience and the sense of the divinity, the fallen mind fails to receive this knowledge and is with respect to God filled with boundless confusion (cf. Pitkin, 1999:360, 365).

Calvin's emphasis on original sin as a corruption of the mind and the will is not in the same intellectual tradition as the Augustinian one (Pitkin, 1999:360). Augustine understands sin as concupiscence. The fallen will lacks the power to achieve the good that the intellect knows. Calvin, however, intensifies the problem of sin by stating that the mind itself no longer knows the good to be done. This dissimilar understanding of sin is largely due to a different understanding of the essence of human nature.

According to Calvin (*Inst.* 1.15.2) the human being consists of a body and a soul. The soul is the nobler part and the primary seat of the divine image, while the body is simply the habitation of the soul. The image of God is manifested in the soul by the light of the intellect, while the body is a reflection of the dynamics of the soul.

Hence although the soul is not the man, there is no absurdity in holding that he is called image of God in respect of the soul ... By the term image of God is denoted the integrity with which Adam was endued when his intellect was clear, his affections subordinated to reason, all his senses duly regulated, and when he truly ascribed all his excellence to the admirable gifts of the maker. And though the primary seat of the divine image was in the mind and the heart, or in the soul and its powers, there was no part even of the body in which some rays of glory did not shine ... at the beginning the image of God was manifested by light of intellect, rectitude of heart, and soundness of every part. (*Inst.* 1.15.3).<sup>5</sup>

---

5 Calvin (*Inst.* 1.15.3) says:

Quamvis ergo anima non sit homo, absurdum tamen non est, eum animae respectu vocari Dei imaginem: etsi principium quod nuper posui retineo, patere Dei effigiem ad totam prestantiam, qua eminet hominis natura inter omnes animantium species. Proinde hac voce notatur integritas, qua preaditus fuit Adam quum recta intelligentia polleret, affectus haberet compositos ad rationem sensus omnes recto ordine temperatos, vereque eximiis dotibus opificis sui excellentiam referret. Ac quamvis primaria sedes divinae imaginis fuerit in mente et

The fall, however, lead to a weakening of the soul's capacity to maintain the integrity of body and soul (*Inst.* 1.15.6). Thus, in contrast to Augustine that locates the effects of sin in man's loss of control of his physical desires, Calvin locates the crippling effects of the corruption of the image in the soul. According to Calvin the taint of sin resides in the flesh and the spirit. The flesh – which must not be equated with the human body – designates in Calvin's thought the whole human being in the condition of sinfulness. It is the governing aspect of human nature (*Inst.* 2.3.1). "Flesh" is an attitude of mind in alienation from God which uses and abuses the body and the soul (cf. Miles, 1981:312). The soul participates in the flesh more than the body does, because when Scripture says that man must be born again, it refers to the soul not the body. The body cannot be reborn (*Inst.* 2.3.1). In Calvin's thought the body plays no role either in the corruption of the soul or in its own corruption, but it is the helpless victim of the destructive hegemony of the flesh. It is the mind and its potential consciousness of the glory of God that interests Calvin. The body has no potential for consciousness – it is motion devoid of essence – in contrast to the soul which is endowed with essence and can be quickened (Miles, 1981:314, 317).

These different understandings of the essential nature of the human being lead to different understandings of the mode of the transmission of original sin. Augustine's view on human nature lead him to believe that all human beings are in a physical solidarity with Adam and hence when he sinned, all sinned and were guilty. Though Calvin defines sin as a hereditary corruption in all parts of the human, he does not use Augustine's biological categories to explain original sin and the transmission thereof. In his commentary on Psalm 51 Calvin (1846:291) states that the question on the transmission of sins from Adam to subsequent generations is not important and that it is not sensible to enter in such mysterious discussions (*labyrinthos*).

In his comments on Genesis 3:7 Calvin (s.a.a:158-159) subtly rejects the Augustinian view that ashamedness and the stirrings of sexual concupiscence were the first effects of the fall. Instead he emphasises the noetic effects of the fall. By eating the fruit Adam and Eve's eyes were opened and they experienced a confused sense of evil. It is thus not sexual concupiscence, but rather the

---

corde, vel in animae eiusque potentiis: nulla tamen pars fuit etiam usque ad corpus in qua non scintillae aliquae micarent.

---

damage done to the human mind and will that are the first effects of the fall.

In the *Institutes* (2.1.7) Calvin dispenses with Augustine's views on the role of sexual desire in the transmission of sins and locates the reason for humankind's guilt in God's ordination.

The cause of the contagion is neither in the substance of the flesh nor the soul, but God was pleased to ordain that those gifts which he had bestowed on the first man, that man should lose as well for his descendants as for himself.<sup>6</sup>

Calvin's position on the transmission of sin – that it is not the mode of conception, but the divine decree that accounts for the propagation of sin – necessarily lead him to reject Augustine's view on the meaning of Christ's virgin birth. Whereas Augustine located Christ's sinlessness in his conception without sexual desire, Jesus was, according to Calvin, free of sin not because of the virginal conception, but because he was sanctified by the Spirit. According to Calvin it is a childish trifling to maintain that if Christ is free from all taint, and was begotten to the seed of Mary, by the secret operation of the Spirit, it is therefore not the seed of the woman that is impure, but only that of the man. Christ was not free of all taint, merely because he was born of a woman unconnected with a man, but because he was sanctified by the Spirit, so that the generation was pure and spotless, such as it would have been before Adam's fall (*Inst.* 2.13.4).<sup>7</sup>

The second important difference between Calvin and Augustine lies in Calvin's approach to God's role in the fall. In his commentary on Genesis, he does not attempt to provide a precise description of the fall, but rather explains how it was possible that the original human nature could fall. He states that God not only permitted, but indeed

---

6 "Neque enim in substantia carnis aut animae causam habet contagio: sed quia a Deo ita fuit ordinatum, ut quae primo homini dona contulerat, ille tam sibi quam suis haberet simul ac perderet."

7 Calvin (*Inst.* 2.13.4) states:

Quod etiam pro absurdo nobis obtrudunt, si Sermo Dei carnem induit, fuisse igitur angusto terreni corporis ergastulo inclusum, mera est procacitas: quia etsi in unam personam coaluit immense Verbi essential cum natura hominis, nullam tamen inclusionem fingimus. Mirabiliter enim e coelo descendit Filius Dei, ut coelum tamen non relinqueret: mirabiliter in utero Virginis gestari, in terries versari, et in cruce pendere voluit, ut semper mundum impleteret, sicut ab initio.

ordained the fall. First he states that evil is not from nature, but from defection, and that Adam fell into sin through his own fault (Calvin, s.a.a:142). Yet Adam did not fall without the will and ordination of God since the created character of the first human being's will makes such a defection possible (Calvin, s.a.a:144). In his comments on Genesis 3:7 Calvin (s.a.a:158) states it even more clearly that God created man flexible, and not only permitted, but willed that he should be tempted.

Calvin, therefore, differs fundamentally with Augustine on the origin of evil. Whereas Augustine went to great lengths to explain that God was not the origin of evil, and that evil is an unexplainable phenomenon that has no cause, Calvin attributes evil and sin to God's permission (cf. Calvin, s.a.a:158). According to Calvin God's decrees of election and reprobation are not due to the fall, but were made before it, and without regard to it, while Augustine is of the opinion that we are condemned, because we fell in Adam, who sinned by the abuse of the free will. God foresaw the fall, but did not compel it (cf. Bonner, 1963:387).

In summary, Calvin shares Augustine's view that original sin is an inheritance and that the whole of human nature are contaminated by it. Yet there are also substantial differences between Augustine's and Calvin's views. Augustine made considerable effort to explain that sin does not find its origin in God. God foresaw the fall, but did not compel it. Calvin located sin in God's eternal decree and permission. Whereas Augustine formulated his view to counter the Manicheans and Pelagians, Calvin shifted the focus in his doctrine on original sin to knowledge of God and the self. The result was that he emphasised the noetic character of sin as moral and religious blindness. His view of the body as motion devoid of essence, caused him to depart from Augustine's view that the original sin is transmitted biologically to subsequent generations through sexual desire. According to Calvin, sin is not transmitted through conception, but because of God's divine decree. These different positions on the transmission of original sin culminated in different understandings of the meaning of Christ's virgin birth. Augustine believed that Jesus was born free of sin, because of a conception without sexual desire, whereas Calvin believed that Jesus was born free of sin, because he was sanctified by the Spirit.

#### **4. Problems emanating from the classical position on original sin**

The classical doctrine of original sin remains one of the most controversial doctrines in theology. The main critique against it pertains to its understanding of the personal accountability of the human being. It is often described as a fatalistic dogma that ascribes guilt to one person because of the sin of another individual. If sin is inherited and therefore an involuntarily act, humankind cannot be held responsible for their sins and God would, therefore, be unjust to punish humankind for their sins. Punishment because of an inherited guilt is not reconcilable with God's righteousness. To ascribe guilt to one person because of the guilt of another defies the essence of justice (cf. Berkouwer, 1971:426; Rees, 2003:77). The doctrine thus seems to be logically inconsistent. On the one hand original sin is by definition an inherited corruption, or at least an inevitable one, yet it is also regarded as not belonging to man's essential nature and, therefore, is not outside the realm of his responsibility (cf. Niebuhr, 1941:257).

The problem with Augustine's classical doctrine on original sin is that it is based upon a literal interpretation of Genesis 1-3, which causes a set of related problems. These chapters were thought to yield divinely inspired and infallible historical data about creation, the state of innocence and the fall (cf. Duffy, 1988:207). The result of this literal approach was that the origin of evil was attributed to a literal first couple, the universality of sin was grounded in the monogenistic<sup>8</sup> unity of all humankind and biological terms was used to explain original sin. The majority of biblical scholarship in the last half century, which includes conservative biblical scholarship (cf. for instance Kidner, 1967:31; Du Toit, 1964; and Vriezen, 1977:439 who interprets Gen. 1-3 as prophetic in nature), is of the opinion that it is not the purpose of Genesis 1-3 to present us with history in the scientific sense of the word. Genesis 1 contains a mixture of prosaic and poetic material. Though Genesis 1 is characterised by the absence of synonomous and antithetical parallelisms, it contains patterned repetitions, rhythm, symmetric structures and prolonged sinthetical parallel sentence constructions. Days 1 and 4, 2 and 5, 3 and 6 are brought into relation with each other in a very skilled, artistic manner.

---

8 Monogenism is the view that all people descent from one human being.

Besides the above mentioned, the Genesis narratives also have a distinctly theological and polemic purpose. They use symbols and metaphors to explain the relationship between God, the cosmos, humans and evil. It emphasises over and against Canaanite and Babylonian creation myths that God is the only God, that nothing in creation itself is divine, that humankind does not find its origin from the gods, that nature is the creation of God and are not ruled by chaotic powers. Questions on whether Adam is the physical father of all people, and whether this deprivation were transmitted by physical generation, move far beyond the data and original intention of the creation narratives. The intention rather is to indicate that God created his creation good, that sin does not find its origin in God, but in the human being, and that the sinfulness of humankind is systemic in nature.

Though Calvin's approach to the creation narratives were also strictly literal and his understanding of particularly the origin of evil not without problems, his noetic approach to original sin might be helpful in solving the tension – inherent in Augustine doctrine on original sin – between the inevitability of sin and man's responsibility for sin. The usefulness of a noetic approach lies therein that it enables us to stress both the historical and natural dimension of original sin. Original sin denotes a condition of religious and moral blindness. This condition originated in the alienation that occurred between God and humankind, because of humankind's disobedience to the covenant of God. Where God is absent, sin enters in the same way that darkness enters where light is absent. A condition of perfectness can, after all, only exist where humankind stands in full communion with God. The disobedience of humankind has brought alienation and separation and with it depravity. God is not the source of sin, but humankind is, because humankind separated itself from God Who is the source of all goodness. The resulting condition of blindness affects all dimensions of human existence, also the human's material and biological existence. Yet, the biological nature is not per se the locus of sin, as Augustine tends to believe. With regard to sin and generation, Bavinck (1929:96) states the following:

De erfzonde is nog iets anders, wat heden ten dage onder heriditeit wordt verstaan. Immers is zij geen soorteienschap, die tot het wezen des menschen behoort, want zij is door overtreding van Gods gebod in de menschelijke natuur ingekomen en kan er door wedergeboorte en heiligmaking weder uit weggenomen wordt; en zij is ter andere zijde ook geen individuele verworvene eigenschap, want zij is alle menschen zonder uitzondering eigen.

Bavinck (1929:78, 80) then proceeds to define sin ethically:

De erfzonde is toch geen substantie, die zetelt in het liggaam en door generatie kan worden overgeplant; zij is een zedelijke qualiteit van de mens, die de gemeenschap met God mist, welke hij naar zijn oorspronkelijke natuur bezitten moest en bezeten heft.

The alienation between man and God caused a condition of human and natural depravity wherein everything is lead astray and therefore being threatened by a return to chaos. The flood narrative explain the consequences of the fall as a return to chaos – creation returns to its original watery chaos. Only through the redemptive works of God can humankind make a new beginning. Because the human is morally and religiously blind he is unable to enter freely into a relationship with God and to love God by his own natural powers. This natural inability is prior to the choice of a given individual.

Despite God's redemptive work, the effects of the fall remain. Man's natural depravity is transmitted through procreation in the sense that it is through procreation alone that man enters into the human history that is bound in solidarity with evil. To be in the world is to be in the condition of original sin – that is a condition of moral and religious blindness – since the communication of ethical and religious values are interrupted through the sins of previous generations. Original sin is not mere imitation, but is part of human nature, since we are born in a state of religious blindness.

Duffy's (1988:615-616) description of original sin, that underscores the above-mentioned perspective, is in my view the most adequate.

Being situated in and participating in the sin of the world is not a conscious decision. It is not *imitatione*. For sin works its shaping influence before one is capable of moral decisions. Inserted into a race and environment contaminated by corporate evil, each person is affected by the contagion before being able to offer the least resistance.

The universal nature of sin implies that man's guilt is both collective and personal in nature. Collective in the sense that humankind's history of sin constitutes a collectivity of sin that has a historic dimension. Because of man's moral blindness, sin entered into the world and inhabits the world, it intervenes, it abounds, and it reigns (cf. Duffy, 1988:616). Humankind is thus bound in historical solidarity with evil and accountable to God for its disobedience to the



covenant of God. The guilt of original sin is not passed down to subsequent generations through natural descent, but is attributed to subsequent generations by God, because original sin is not merely a sin of one forefather, but it is a collective sin continuously committed by the whole of humanity. Sin is not a physical inheritance, but it is inevitable because the human being lives outside of true communion with God and, therefore, in a state of religious and moral blindness. Though Christ came to restore the relationship between God and humankind, we still live in the tension between the *yet* and *not yet* of the kingdom of God. The reconciliation that Christ brought has restored the relationship between God and man in part, but not completely. Full communion between God and man will only be realised at the *parousia*.

The unity of humankind in sin is not a physical unity, but a theological unity. God takes all man as the sinner, that is Adam. Humankind's sin is not the act of Adam, but the sin of Adam is the act of humankind. God is not unfair in imputing guilt upon the whole of humankind, because the condition of original sin is a condition of the generic human nature (cf. Ps. 51). Though humankind cannot be held responsible for something he inherited – because inheritance designates that which precedes the individual and for which he cannot account – he can be held responsible for actions that he freely chooses even if it is inevitable that he would make the wrong choice (cf. Niebuhr, 1941:66). Because man lives outside of true communion with God and therefore in a state of religious blindness, he inevitably asserts his freedom in a wrong way. Since human actions can be both inevitable as well as freely chosen, man is really and truly guilty of the sin of Adam (cf. Rees, 2003:81). The relationship between inevitability and responsibility is thus not contradictory, but rather dialectical in nature.

Romans 5 provides an important perspective in this regard. Adam and Christ are seen as representatives of different *aeons*. Paul, thereby, emphasises that God's grace in Adam reigns over the power of sin in Adam. Paul explains the universal culpability of humanity in Romans 5 christologically and corporatively (Ridderbos, 1966:60). Paul's didactic purpose in Romans 5 is not to affirm the existence of a unique sinner, but to emphasise the universal reach – though not universal efficiency – of redemption in Jesus Christ (cf. Ridderbos, 1966:60). Paul does not see the sin of one man as the sin of all, but all as acting in the single individual who is representative of the group (cf. Berkouwer, 1971:323).

This collective guilt, would not have been, if sin had not a personal dimension and if every human being was not an actual sinner. Sin is personal and actual in every human being in the sense that every man lives outside of a true personal relationship with God and therefore in a moral condition of sin. Sin is not only potentially part of the human, but actually, since man lives in the old aeon that is characterised by religious and moral blindness and a disturbed relationship with God.

## **5. Conclusion**

The Christian doctrines of sin and grace were mostly developed in their decisive aspects from the perspective of Christology and not from the perspective of Genesis 1-3. Though the Old Testament says a great deal about sin and grace, both of these were revealed in their deepest sense in Jesus Christ (cf. Lohse, 1978:101). Knowledge of sin is produced by the gospel, because it shows us how much it costed God to redeem us. In the act by which the gospel announces salvation in Jesus Christ to us, it reveals to us that sin is committed by human beings (cf. Berkouwer, 1971:156).

The universal nature of Christ's redemptive work can only be attributed to the universal nature of sin. The sacrificial atonement of Christ was necessary only because man is guilty before God for his sins. That man can be saved through grace alone can only be because man is a slave of sin and incapable to salvage himself. In essence original sin denotes humankind's break with God which makes reconciliation in and through Christ necessary.

## **List of references**

- AUGUSTINE. s.a.a. De natura et gratia. (*In Migne, J.P., ed. Patrologiae cursus completus. Turnholt: Brepols. p. 247-291.*)
- AUGUSTINE. s.a.b. De perfectione iustitiae hominis liber. (*In Migne, J.P., ed. Patrologiae cursus completus. Turnholt: Brepols. p. 291-319.*)
- AUGUSTINE. s.a.c. De nuptiis et concupiscentia. (*In Migne, J.P., ed. Patrologiae cursus completus. Turnholt: Brepols. p. 359-415.*)
- AUGUSTINE. s.a.d. De peccatorum meritis et remissione. (*In Migne, J.P., ed. Patrologiae cursus completus. Turnholt: Brepols. p. 109-199.*)
- AUGUSTINE. 1955. De civitate Dei. (*In Dombart, B. & Kalb, A., eds. Corpus Christianorum. Turnholt: Brepols.*) (Series Latina, 48.)
- AUGUSTINE. 1974. Acta seu disputatio contra Fortunatum Manicheum 392 AD. Translated by Albert H. Newman. (*In Schaff, P., ed. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. p. 113-124.*) (Series 1, vol. 4.)
- BABCOCK, W.S. 1988. Augustine on sin and moral agency. *Journal of religious ethics*, 16(1):28-55, Spring.
- BAVINCK, H. 1929. Gereformeerde dogmatiek. Dl. 3. Kampen: Kok.

- BERKOUWER, G.C. 1971. Sin. Trans. by P.C. Holtrop. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- BONNER, G. 1963. St. Augustine of Hippo: life and controversies. Philadelphia: Westminster.
- CALVIN, J. s.a.a. Commentary on Genesis. Vol. 1. Trans. by J. King. Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society.
- CALVIN, J. s.a.b. Institutio Christianae religionis. London: Berolini.
- CALVIN, J. 1846. Commentary on the book of Psalms. Trans. by J. Anderson. Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society.
- DU TOIT, S. 1964. Bybel, skepping en evolusie. Johannesburg: Voortrekkerpers.
- DUFFY, S.J. 1988. Our hearts of darkness: original sin revisited. *Theological studies*, 49(4):597-622.
- DUQUOC, C. 1978. New approaches to original sin. *Cross currents*: 189-200, Summer.
- KIDNER, D. 1967. Genesis: an introduction and commentary. London: Tyndale. (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries.)
- LOHSE, B. 1978. A short history of Christian doctrine. Trans. by F.E Stoeffler. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- MATHEWES, C.T. 1999. Augustinian anthropology: interior intimo meo. *Journal of religious ethics*, 27(2):195-222.
- MILES, M. 1981. Theology, anthropology, and the human body in Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian religion*. *Harvard theological review*, 74(3):303-323.
- NIEBUHR, R. 1941. The nature and destiny of man: a Christian interpretation. Vol. 1. London: Nisbet.
- PITKIN, B. 1999. Nothing but concupiscence: Calvin's understanding of sin and the Via Augustini. *Calvin theological journal*, 34:347-369.
- REES, G. 2003. The anxiety of inheritance: Reinhold Niebuhr and the literal truth of original sin. *Journal of religious ethics*, 31(1):75-99.
- RIDDERBOS, H. 1966. Paulus: ontwerp van zijn theologie. Kampen: Kok.
- VRIEZEN, T.H.C. 1977. Hoofddlijnen der theologie van het Oude Testament. Wageningen: Veenmanen.

### **Kernbegrippe:**

Augustinus  
Calvyn  
erfsonde  
noëties

### **Key concepts:**

Augustine  
Calvyn  
noetic  
original sin

