

# “Sufficient to Condemn the Human Race ”

## An Exposition of Article Fifteen of the Belgic Confession

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### Article 15 – Original Sin

We believe that by the disobedience of Adam original sin has been spread through the whole human race.<sup>1</sup> It is a corruption of all nature<sup>2</sup>—an inherited depravity which even infects small infants in their mother’s womb,<sup>3</sup> and the root which produces in man every sort of sin. It is therefore so vile and enormous in God’s sight that it is enough to condemn the human race,<sup>4</sup> and it is not abolished or wholly uprooted even by baptism, seeing that sin constantly boils forth as though from a contaminated spring.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, it is not imputed to God’s children for their condemnation but is forgiven by his grace and mercy<sup>6</sup>—not to put them to sleep but so that the awareness of this corruption might often make believers groan as they long to be set free from the “body of this death.”

Therefore we reject the error of the Pelagians who say that this sin is nothing else than a matter of imitation.

<sup>1</sup> Rom 5:12-14, 19 <sup>2</sup> Rom 3:10 <sup>3</sup> Job 14:4; Ps 51:5; Jn 3:6 <sup>4</sup> Eph 2:3 <sup>5</sup> Rom 7:18-19 <sup>6</sup> Eph 2:4-5

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There is nothing worse than standing by a casket containing the earthly remains of someone we love. Death is the ultimate enemy of humanity. Contrary to the sentiments of our culture, death is not natural and all the talk of celebrating the departed’s life does not change the grim reality of death one iota. We all dread that phone call in the middle of the night bringing horrible news. Our hearts skip a beat when a newsflash brings word of a national calamity, such as we experienced on the morning of September 11, 2001. Then there is the end of a marriage, the loss of a job, serious illness, injury or accident, an argument with a friend, a loss of temper, an adulterous thought . . . All of these things—from the most consequential to the least consequential—have something very important in common. They are all consequences of Adam’s act of rebellion against God in the Garden of Eden.

While discussing original sin may sound positively medieval and thought of as so much silliness by our contemporaries, original sin is one of the most important topics we can ever address. In Adam’s fall, sinned we all. We cannot escape the horrible consequences of that first sin. From our own sinful thoughts, to our own sinful actions, from those calamities which impact our families, friends and neighbors, to those events which effect nations and vast numbers of the earth’s inhabitants, all of these things are the result of human sin, the consequence of Adam’s rebellion in Eden. Sin does not stem from human finitude. The world which God made is not defective in any way. Rather, Adam acting on our behalf, plunged the entire human race into sin and death when he broke the commandment of God. It is Adam who introduced the principles of sin and death in the world. This is why Christianity is not a philosophy or system of ethics. Christianity is centered in God’s redemption of his people and the redemption of the world he has made. One day God will indeed make all things new and undo the effects

of human sin. Until then, we live in a fallen world.

We have just concluded that section of our confession dealing with creation and providence (articles Twelve and Thirteen). God not only made all things out of nothing, and gives all things their form and purpose, God also governs and sustains all things that he has made. We are now in that section (articles Fourteen and Fifteen) dealing with God's creation of the first man, Adam, who is both the biological and federal head of the human race, and who sinned against God by breaking the so-called "commandment of life," set forth in Genesis 2:16-17 as follows: "*And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, `You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.'*" In open violation of the commandment of life, Adam sinned against God by eating from the forbidden tree. In doing so, he brought down the curse (sin and death) upon all of us. The consequences of this act is what theologians speak of as original sin, and is addressed in Article Fifteen of our confession.

In the previous article, we dealt with several things which we need to briefly review before we work our way through Article Fifteen of the confession, since much of what is discussed in this article builds directly upon the things that have been said before. Article Fourteen summarizes the biblical data regarding the creation of Adam and his subsequent fall into sin. According to the creation account, God created all things good. But sin was introduced into the world through Adam's act of rebellion. There were no inherent defects or flaws in that which God had made. It was Adam's sin which subjected the creation to futility. This means that death, the principle of decay (everything from rust to cancer), acts of violence and abuse, and sinful human nature all result from Adam's sin—called "original" sin, because all human sin has its origin in Adam's rebellion against God. Adam's sin may have been the first (or "original" sin), but his sin affects each one of us as well.

We also discussed the fact that Adam is not only the biological head of the human race, he is also the federal head of the human race. When God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden for a time of probation—during which time Adam was to keep the commandment of life and not eat from the tree—Adam did so as the representative of each one of us. Whether Adam sinned or whether he obeyed God, it were as though each one of us had been there in Eden, acting personally. Adam not only decided for himself when he ate from the tree, as our federal head, Adam also decided for us. Given the grim reality of sin and death, we all know how the story came out—in Adam, we all sinned. In Adam we all die. In Adam, we are born as slaves to sin, condemned by its guilt, and controlled by its power.

Our confession also dealt with the fact that Adam was placed under a covenant of works and was required to obey the commandment of life—"do this and live," to restate the principle in the positive—lest he come under the covenant curse (which is death). Under the terms of this covenant, Adam stood in a natural relationship to God simply because a creature owes obedience to his creator. It is important that we are clear about the fact that Adam was not under the terms of a gracious covenant with God in Eden, since Adam was not yet a sinner in need of saving grace. As our confession puts it, "God created man from the dust of the earth and made and formed him in his image and likeness—good, just, and holy; able by his own will to conform in all things to the will of God." It is not until Article Seventeen—which deals with God's gracious rescue of Adam's sinful race—that the idea of a gracious relationship between God and Adam's fallen children is introduced. Created as the divine image-bearer, unlike all other creatures, Adam was created with the power to obey the commandments of God. This is why we must understand Adam's fall as a willful act of rebellion and treason against God and his covenant, and not in any sense as the result of a deficiency of God's grace which supposedly enabled Adam to obey the commandment of life.

We also saw that Adam was created in God's image, possessing true righteousness, holiness and knowledge (Ephesians 4:24, Colossians 3:10), enabling him to rule over the earth as God's vice-regent, so that he might subdue the earth and create a godly culture. This explains both human dignity as well as why marriage and family are so essential to human existence. But once Adam sinned and came under the curse, the image of God was so badly defaced that only traces of it remain in us after the fall. Adam lost his dominion over the world and its creatures, having subjected himself (and all of us) to sin and death. As the biological father of the human race, what Adam did to himself, he did to all of us.

This is why we are born with what the apostle Paul calls a darkened understanding (Ephesians 4:18), unable to obey God's law because we are born hostile to God (Romans 8:6-7) with our wills enslaved to sin, so that not one of us seeks God, unless he seeks us first (Romans 3:11). Every choice we make is made from self-interest because our first father sinned and we inherit our sinful natures from him. As sinners, the last thing we want to do is acknowledge our sin and admit that apart from Christ we can do nothing to save ourselves (John 15:5). But this is what the Scriptures clearly teach and this explains why we either fear or hate the Holy God, until he sovereignly changes our hearts.

Presupposing all of these things to be the clear teaching of Scripture, Article Fifteen deals with three related subjects, all of which are implications or inferences which must be drawn from the fact of Adam's sin as set forth in the previous article. The first thing our confession does is describe the nature of sin as well as explain how human sinfulness is transmitted from Adam to all of his descendants. Second, our confession deals with the error of the Roman church regarding the belief that the baptism of infants remits the guilt of original sin and washes away human corruption. Finally, our confession rejects the heresy of the Pelagians, who think that Adam's act merely introduces the principle of sin into the world, under which we, as Adam's children, attempt to imitate our first father when we sin.

As to the first point made by our confession, Article Fifteen describes the nature of sin and then details its spread, further elaborating upon some of things we discussed last time.

Our confession puts the matter as follows: "We believe that by the disobedience of Adam original sin has been spread through the whole human race. It is a corruption of all nature—an inherited depravity which even infects small infants in their mother's womb, and the root which produces in man every sort of sin. It is therefore so vile and enormous in God's sight that it is enough to condemn the human race." Given the fact of Adam's sin, the fact that Adam is the biological father of the human race, and the fact that Adam is the federal head of the human race, it is inescapable that the consequences of Adam's sinful act effects the entire human race, which (to use a biblical phrase) springs from his loins.

There are two main elements in view when our confession discusses original sin: The first is the sinful nature (corruption) we all inherit from Adam and the second is the imputed guilt of Adam's sin to all those whom he represents—namely the entire human race. As far as inherited corruption goes, since Adam is the biological head of the human race and we are all his descendants, whatever physical consequences Adam brought down upon himself as a result of the fall, will necessarily be passed on to all of his children by means of ordinary procreation. Spiritual and physical death have already been mentioned in Article Fourteen. We will not only die because of Adam's sin, but we are also born with the poison of Adam's corrupt human nature running through our blood. It is this corrupt nature which lies at the root of all of the sins we commit, and for which we will be punished if we are not justified through faith in Jesus Christ. Why do we sin so freely and easily? Why does sin seem to be with us every moment of our lives? Because we all inherited a sinful nature from Adam.

The biblical evidence for this inherited corruption is clear and unambiguous. We start with the declarations of the Psalmist. In Psalm 58:3, “*the wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth, speaking lies.*” This same sentiment set forth in the familiar words of Psalm 51:5, “*behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.*” While some, mistakenly, have taken this to mean that the marital act which leads to conception is somehow sinful, the point the Psalmist is making is that from the moment we are conceived, we are born with the same corrupt nature our first father had.

As everyone who is a parent knows, our children do not learn to sin merely as a matter of imitation. Augustine was following the Apostle Paul when he wrote that “the only innocent feature in babies is the weakness of their frames; the minds of infants are far from innocent.”<sup>1</sup> Infants may appear innocent, but only because they are not yet physically able to sin. But they sin just as soon as they are physically able to do so because they have been born with a sinful nature. That corrupt nature has inordinate affections, it is utterly self-centered, and it loves to sin. Just as the son of a slave is born a slave, so too, as sons and daughters of Adam, we are all born as slaves to sin and are not set free from sin’s guilt and power until Jesus Christ calls us to himself and sets us free through the preaching of the gospel.

While society advances and we learn new and more enjoyable ways to sin, the historical record tells us this human propensity toward evil is nothing new. In Genesis 6:5 we read of the human race in the days before the flood, “*the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.*” Indeed, it was the gravity of human sin which brought about God’s judgment in the form of a great flood. In the Book of Job (14:4), perhaps the oldest book in the Bible, the author laments, “*who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?*” The answer— “*No one!*” In fact, the apostle Paul citing from Psalm 14, can say in Romans 3:10: “*as it is written: `None is righteous, no, not one.*” The apostle John tells us that men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil (John 3:19).

This inherited corruption effects us in many ways. The fact that our wills are in bondage to sin has already been mentioned in Article Fourteen. In the first five verses of Ephesians 2:1-4, Paul tells us that we are by nature “children of wrath,” and the consequences of this are significant and profound for all of us.

*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us . . .*

All of this comes upon us because Adam was our first father and we have inherited corrupt human nature from him. It is as John says, “*that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit*” (John 3:6). It will take the new birth to transform us into what Jesus calls good trees which bear the fruit of faith. But in the meantime, we remain sinful trees which produce the rotten fruit of fallen human nature, including those things mentioned by the apostle Paul in Galatians 5:19-21:

*Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery,*

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, The Confessions, trans., Maria Boulding (San Francisco: Ignatius Critical Editions, 1997), 1.7.11.

*enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

The power of sin is so great and holds us so fast, that it takes God himself to redeem us. Martin Luther speaks of the power of sin like a man's beard. Shave it off and it immediately grows back. The same is true of sin.

Not only is human nature corrupt because Adam's fallen nature is passed down to each one of us through natural generation, but since Adam was the federal or representative head of the human race, we are every bit as guilty as Adam for his act of rebellion in Eden. In Romans 5:12-19, Paul makes this very point.

*Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come. But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.*

According to Paul, it is because of Adam's sin that we are all reckoned or credited as sinners even before we are born. Since, under the terms of the covenant of works, Adam acted on our behalf as our representative, we are as guilty as he is. In fact, God sees each one of us as if we had been in Eden ourselves, shaking our fist in God's face, declaring our independence with the words, "so what if I die, I will eat from the tree anyway and you can't stop me!"

While our contemporaries loudly protest that such a thing is not fair, this is the clear teaching of Scripture. In fact, if you deny the principle of imputation (wherein God can and does hold me responsible for the act of another through the federal or representative principle), you not only deny what Paul teaches in Romans 5:12-19, you must deny the gospel! Deny it all you want. The fact is, it is already a done deal. God does hold you responsible for what Adam did, despite your protests.

Do not forget that this same principle is in view when it comes to Christ's saving work. God imputes or credits our sins to Christ when he makes payment for them when he suffers upon the cross. If there is no imputation because such is not fair, then there is no substitutionary atonement either. If the principle of imputation is not valid, then Christ's perfect obedience to the commandments of God (under both the covenant of works, which remains in force, and under the Mosaic covenant, in which the commandments God gave to Adam and Eve in Eden are republished and codified in the Ten Commandments), cannot be imputed to sinners through the means of faith. If there is no imputation, there is no original sin, nor is there a doctrine of justification through an imputed righteousness. These things stand or fall together,

and this is why we must carefully articulate the biblical teaching regarding a covenant of works, as well as understand all of the consequences of Adam's violation of the covenant of works, including the imputation of the guilt of his sins to all humanity. After all, we will never understand, much less appreciate, the cure for human sin—the perfect righteousness and sacrificial death of Jesus Christ—if we don't understand the problem, original sin, including both corruption and guilt.

Next, our confession takes up the subject of the erroneous view of the Roman Catholic church that baptism remits the guilt of original sin.

According to our confession, “[original sin] is not abolished or wholly uprooted even by baptism, seeing that sin constantly boils forth as though from a contaminated spring. Nevertheless, it is not imputed to God's children for their condemnation but is forgiven by his grace and mercy—not to put them to sleep but so that the awareness of this corruption might often make believers groan as they long to be set free from the `body of this death.’”

There are a number of important things here for us to consider, but before we do so, we need to consider some historical context. Since our confession was written by Guido De Bres in 1561 in response to the pressing theological issues of his day, it is important that we briefly recall those circumstances so that we understand that point that De Bres is trying to make. For one thing, it is important that De Bres effectively set forth what the Bible actually teaches regarding original sin as a means of refuting the Roman Catholic notion that Adam's sin did not completely corrupt human nature, but merely resulted in the removal of the so-called *donum superadditum* (the gift of supernatural righteousness) which supposedly enabled Adam to keep his lower passions in check.<sup>2</sup> Those lower attributes are, of course, bodily urges and appetites, while the higher attributes are love and reason. On the other hand, De Bres must also be careful when he refutes Rome, not to fall into the error of the Anabaptists (given their scandalous behavior at the time), and who taught that baptism was to be denied to children of believers, since baptism was seen to be the public confirmation of one's confession of faith in Jesus Christ.

According to Roman Catholic theology, when Adam sinned, God removed the gift of an external and supernatural righteousness. Thus Adam was back to where he was before God gave him this gift. Furthermore, Adam was now subject to death and the unchecked desire of his lower attributes toward sin (what is known as concupiscence). According to Rome, this means that human nature remains largely unchanged even after the fall. And so what is necessary to reverse the effects of the fall is an infusion of grace (ideally at the time of birth through baptism), so that sinners can be started on the road to being transformed from sinners into saints.<sup>3</sup> Rome's view, then, is that baptism not only remits the guilt of original sin but that it also washes away the pollution of Adam's sin from us, as grace is infused into us at the time of baptism so that sinners who have been baptized actually begin to seek more grace and over time so as to be transformed into truly righteous individuals, capable of genuine good works, which God, in his justice, must reward.

The Biblical evidence we have already considered makes it very plain that such is not the case. The sinful nature remains in us after baptism. In fact, in Romans 7:18-19, the apostle Paul points out the stark reality of what Adam's sin has done to us, so that even as an apostle, and even after his baptism, Paul can

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<sup>2</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 208.

<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, section 405.

say, “*for I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.*” As we will see when we get to Article Thirty-Four of the confession, which deals with the doctrine of baptism in some detail, the sacrament of baptism is the visible sign of the invisible blessings which are ours in Christ.

While on the Reformed understanding, baptism is God’s covenantal promise that sins have been forgiven (including the guilt of original sin—hence the language in our confession about the non-imputation of sin to God’s children), the act of baptism does not itself remit the guilt of original sin—something only Christ’s blood and righteousness can do. Nor does baptism wash all of Adam’s corruption from human nature.<sup>4</sup> As our own baptismal form puts it, at its core, “baptism is a seal and totally reliable witness that we have an eternal covenant with God.”<sup>5</sup> Through baptism God promises to be our God and we become his people. And even though we can be assured of God’s favor to us through this sacrament, the sinful nature remains, hence the on-going struggle with sin until we die, even though sin’s power over us has been broken through our union with Jesus Christ.

But our confession is careful to point out that even though all of our sins are forgiven (including the guilt of Adam’s sin imputed to us), this does not give us permission to sleep in our sin (to continue on in our sin), but to long to be with the Lord, when we will finally stop sinning and when the corruption from Adam’s sin no longer clings to the very fiber of our being. This is why baptism must be seen as the sign of the covenant of grace in which we ratify God’s covenant oath—“I will be your God and you will be my people”—and not as a magic rite which automatically remits original sin and washes away Adam’s corruption.

Finally then, our confession rejects the error of the Pelagians.

Pelagianism was not only a serious error in the fifth-century, it is the essence of virtually every American-born religion, including Mormonism, Campbellism, and Revivalism in all its forms. Pelagius was a British monk who challenged Augustine regarding original sin about 410 AD.. While Augustine followed Paul in his belief that the fallen human will is in bondage to sin, so that it takes a prior act of grace to be saved, Pelagius believed that there is no such thing as original sin. He argued that there is no biological transmission of corruption from Adam to us, and infants are born today in the same condition as Adam prior to the fall. According to Pelagius, when Adam sinned, the “principle of sin” was introduced into the world, so that all of us born subsequent to Adam, follow his bad example and imitate Adam’s sin through our own sinful acts. In all forms of Pelagianism, there is no original sin, no original guilt and no inherited corruption. And this is why our confession so emphatically states, “Therefore we reject the error of the Pelagians who say that this sin is nothing else than a matter of imitation.”

Although Pelagianism has been universally condemned by the Christian church, it’s most noted adherents in the modern age have been American theologians, such as Charles Finney. Pelagianism is found in virtually every American religious “sect” and “ism” since the time of the nation’s founding because Pelagianism fits perfectly into American experience and culture. If Americans are “rugged” individuals who see people as basically good, then Americans will naturally gravitate toward a theology which

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<sup>4</sup> Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 128.

<sup>5</sup> Form for “The Baptism of Infants,” in Liturgical Forms and Prayers of the URCNA (2018), 10.

teaches the same thing. Let me put it this way: Pelagianism is the American religion. Just as Pelagianism was antithetical to Christianity in Augustine's day, and during the Reformation, so too, it is the case today. Reformed theology faces a tough sell in a culture which is intrinsically Pelagian. If you want to understand why more Americans do not embrace Reformed theology, this is why.

As we conclude, what then should we take with us by way of application?

There are several points we need to make in this regard. One of the great myths of evangelical theology is the so-called doctrine of the "age of accountability," wherein children are viewed as innocent until such time as they are able to make a free-will decision to accept or reject Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. The Bible clearly teaches that all of us are born guilty for Adam's sin and we are born with his corrupt nature, both of which are sufficient to condemn the human race. We are born as sinners and not as "innocent" until we are old enough to decide for ourselves whether or not to follow Jesus. The fact of the matter is, Adam has already made the choice for us. He chose to sin and so the words of the Psalmist are true: "In sin did my mother conceive me." Babies are not born innocent, they are sinners in training, because they are born with Adam's fallen nature. But there is also imputed guilt for Adam's sin, which is sufficient to condemn the human race. The reason this is so tough for people to accept is that Americans are intrinsically Pelagians. The notion of original sin does not make sense in the American experience although it is clearly taught in Holy Scripture.

The most obvious point of application, however, is the one with which we began. We all know that something has gone terribly wrong in the world. From our own sinful thoughts, to our own sinful actions, to sickness, disease, suffering, wars, injustice, death . . . all of these things are the proof that all is not right in the world. The Christian explanation for this horrible state of affairs is that Adam sinned and plunged all of us into sin and misery, so that we are certain to face death and to stand before God on the day of judgment to give an account of our lives and actions. But even as articles Fourteen and Fifteen of our confession are followed by a whole series of articles explaining how God will save us from our sins, so, too, the biblical account of the fall of Adam is not the end of the story, it is only the beginning. Indeed from Genesis 3 to Revelation 22, the Bible gives us the record of what God has already done and will yet do in the person of his son (whom Paul calls the second Adam) to save us from our sins.

This is why Christianity is not at its core a system of ethics or a philosophy. Christianity is a religion of rescue in which God speaks and acts to save us from our sin. For as surely as Adam plunged us all into this mess, so too, Jesus Christ has undone sin's guilt and its power when he died on the cross and was raised for our justification. And as he has already broken sin's power and removed our guilt, one day, every hint and trace and stain of sin, will be removed when Jesus comes again.

As Christians we are realists as to the gravity of our predicament and the reality of sin and death. This sad state of affairs comes as no surprise. But at the same time, we are optimists about the grace of God in Jesus Christ. For while Adam's sin is sufficient to condemn the human race, the blood of Jesus Christ will save his people and redeem the whole of creation. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ, all shall be made alive.