§ 10. Doctrine of Man
Lecture 23
Original Sin: Semi-Pelagianism, Reformation, Enlightenment, Modern Era

Welcome to Defenders! We're glad that you could join us again this week.

We've been talking about the doctrine of original sin. Last time we examined the views of Augustine and his opponent, Pelagius, concerning this doctrine.

Today we want to turn to a third view called Semi-Pelagianism. Semi-Pelagianism attempts to come closer to the classic Augustinian doctrine of original sin than Pelagius himself did. Recall that Pelagius thought that we already have, as created human beings, all the grace we need in order to live sinless lives before God. This seems wrong. It seems that surely we need to call upon God to assist us in order to live holy lives, to give us more grace and more strength in order to live a sinless life. So Semi-Pelagians attempted to accommodate themselves to the doctrine of original sin by saying that man's will is, indeed, weakened by the Fall. As a result of Adam's sin, there is a kind of weakness of will that we are heir to. But they said that the basic tendency to good still lies within man. So grace is indeed necessary – that is to say, additional grace, not just the grace given you as a created being – , and additional grace is available in order to deal with this weakness of will. But this grace is given only in response to your free will. You go to God and say, "God, I can't live a sinless life without you. I need your help. I come to you poor, destitute, naked. Give me the grace to live a holy life that is pleasing to you." Grace then will be given to you by God in response to your free petition.

By your own free decision, therefore, you receive salvation or damnation. It is not as though God is the one who takes the initiative in bestowing grace upon those whom he wills while passing over others. It is not as though God has predestined some to one end and some to the other. Rather, we may all come to God and ask for his grace. On that basis, God will give us the grace for salvation. Otherwise, we will not receive his grace. If we do not seek his grace but neglect it, we condemn ourselves to perdition.

By the time of the Middle Ages, Semi-Pelagianism had become very widespread in the church. The doctrine of original sin had come to mean simply an inherited inclination to sin. But the idea of Augustine that we actually bear the culpability of Adam's sin and that we therefore stand condemned in virtue of Adam's sin had been largely eclipsed. Original sin was to be interpreted as a weakness of will and an inclination to sinning but we are all born with this as a result of the corruption that Adam introduced into human nature.

With the Reformation came a reclamation of Augustine's doctrine of original sin. The principal Reformers like Luther and Calvin took over the main elements of Augustine's doctrine of original sin. Indeed, they stressed even more strongly the guilt inherited from Adam – that we are guilty for Adam's sin and therefore under the condemnation and

wrath of God by nature. Even though the Reformers had a strong emphasis upon personal faith in Christ as the means by which we receive God's grace, they still held to the doctrine of infant baptism. They agreed with Augustine's doctrine of infant baptism as a means of dealing with the guilt of origin sin imputed to us from Adam. The doctrine of imputation avoided the need to see original sin as something transmitted biologically from parents to children. Rather, Adam was conceived to be the federal head of the human race. He represented us before God. Therefore what our representative did, we did. Adam did not act for himself alone; rather he acted on behalf of all humanity. Therefore his guilt is imputed to us as well. The doctrine of imputation connects very closely with the Reformers' view of justification as a legal or forensic declaration of God. When we are redeemed, it is not as though we suddenly become virtuous people, selfless, loving, without fault. Rather God declares us to be righteous. It is a legal declaration, like an executive pardon, which cancels the guilt of the condemned criminal. Similarly, Adam's sin is legally imputed to us in virtue of his federal headship; we are, as it were, found guilty of being vicariously liable for his crime.

Finally, let me say something about post-Enlightenment views of original sin. As you can imagine, in the modern period the doctrine of original sin fell into disfavor. The Enlightenment thinkers – people like Voltaire and other rationalists – argued that it is impossible that we could be held guilty or punished for another person's sin. The argument is very similar to Faustus Socinus' earlier criticism of the doctrine of substitutionary atonement, which we examined in our discussion of the doctrine of Christ.

If some other person committed a sin, then he alone is the one that is guilty and bears the responsibility. It would be manifestly unjust of God to hold you responsible – to punish you – for a sin that somebody else committed. Indeed, how *could* you be guilty of his sin? You didn't do it! So how in the world could you be guilty for something that you didn't do? Therefore, the doctrine of original sin was thought to be simply an incoherence, a moral impossibility.

The father of modern theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher also reinterpreted the doctrine of original sin in line with his theology. You will recall that for Schleiermacher the essence of the Christian religion is a sense of absolute dependence upon God, a strong God consciousness. As you live, day by day you are aware at every moment of your dependence on God. So original sin is reinterpreted to mean simply that we have a weakening of this God consciousness. It is the overpowering of the spiritual by the material aspects of life. The things of this world seem so much more real and pressing upon us, and therefore our awareness of spiritual things tends to be eclipsed and our consciousness of God is accordingly weakened. As a result we find ourselves incapable of really doing the good that we know we should, and that just is original sin.

In classical liberal theology of the late 19th century, represented by someone like the theologian Albrecht Ritschl, sin is closely connected with social injustice. It is not so much an individual affair anymore. Rather, the emphasis is that the institutions of society are infected with sin. All of our societal structures like government, the economic and business world, the entertainment industry, are infected with sin, which therefore affect everything we do. Ritschl called this systemic sin the Kingdom of Evil. He thought that this systemic evil is much worse than your own individual sins. Obviously, this conviction would then lead to classical liberal theology's reconstrual of Christianity as a movement of social reform. You need to reform the institutions of society in order to bring about the Kingdom of God through social action. I think you can see how relevant this classical liberal theological view is to our current situation in Western society today. Political liberals likewise emphasize systemic racism, anti-feminist attitudes, anti-LGBT bias, and other perceived forms of social injustice, and the need for reforms of society's institutions, far more than individual sins.

That is just a bird's eye view of some of the history of thinking about the doctrine of original sin. Next time we'll come to some evaluation of this doctrine.[1]

[1] ?Total Running Time: 12:37