

## LECTURE III

### THEOLOGY OF GENESIS

In Chapter Two we briefly recounted some of the history of Israel, with a focus on the classical revelatory experience of Moses, which gave birth to the OT people. There we saw that salvation was experienced as a process of unity. A helpless band of oppressed Semites believed that they were formed into a people by the free initiative of a God who came to them through the mediation of Moses. They found salvation in becoming the People of God with the power to escape the slavery of Egypt (later seen as analogous to the slavery of sin). They began to experience a new situation of *peace* - (shalom) having a “right relationship” with self, others and God through participation in the sacrifices that marked their acceptance of the Law and the Covenant.

The Exodus was seen as the decisive event for the beginning of the nation and the interpretative norm for all history before and after it. During the centuries that followed the Exodus, the people began to inquire about many things: Where did they come from? Who were their ancestors? How and why did the world begin? Why was there evil?

The answers to these questions and others were developed, refined and elaborated over hundreds of years and some of these answers took final form in the Book of Genesis, which would later serve as the preface to the story of the OT people. From the vantage point of time and reflection, the Genesis accounts attempt to trace the ancestry of the people prior to the Exodus and to treat of the great questions of the origin and meaning of mankind and the universe.

Looking back on their history since the time of the Exodus, the events which made up their lives as a people were interpreted, especially by the prophets, in the light of their belief that God was acting with power and purpose on their behalf. Through their faith in God’s self-communication to them, they began to understand themselves and the whole of creation in a new way. All history -- past, present and to come -- was now seen and explained through the prism of their faith. In a way, they viewed history as a sacrament. History was a sign or symbol of the real presence of God in their lives. Interpreting history in this way they came to believe in a God Who was with them and for them. As this faith was expressed in oral tradition and later in the written scriptures, the result was not a historical record in the modern sense, but a statement of faith and as such its primary message was theological. This is certainly true of the Book of Genesis, especially Chapters 1-9.

#### Paradise/Paradise Lost

While the Exodus is the fundamental “saving event” in the OT, a powerful picture of what salvation actually “looks like” and how it is experienced in ordinary life, is contained in the first chapters of Genesis. Our brief look at Genesis will concentrate on Chapters 1-11, esp. Ch. 1-3. It is here that we encounter the classic accounts of Creation. *Note:* The creation accounts in the first chapters of Genesis are called “classic” because

they are detailed and unique among other Near East creation myths (e.g. the Babylonian “Epic of Creation”) that emphasize dualistic battles between good and evil. In Genesis God is seen as acting alone with supreme sovereignty. However, Genesis is not the only place where reference is made to creation. In Psalms 74, 89, 93 and 104 creation is depicted as the triumph of God over chaos and/or mythical monsters (Rahab and the Leviathan). These accounts do reflect the stories of other Near East creation accounts. Creation is also treated in Job Ch.38 and throughout Isaiah Chs. 40-55.

So the fundamentalists who want to insert biblical creation accounts into public schools as an alternative to evolutionary accounts (beside the fact that the scriptures are not science books) will have to decide which biblical accounts to include and give some rationale for excluding others. They cannot be simply reconciled.

Before proceeding, it is helpful to understand the type of literature with which we are dealing, lest we misunderstand the message which the biblical writers intended to convey. (see literary forms in the Introduction) Our search is always for the literal meaning of Bible, yet the literal meaning is not always what we might judge it to be at first glance, but rather that which the ancient writers were attempting to communicate. There is a great temptation, not often resisted, to use the Bible as a source for “proof texts” to support unexamined beliefs, rather than approaching the Bible in a scholarly and open manner so that we might hear its *intended* message, even if it conflicts with some of our personal, deep-seated religious convictions based on personal interpretation of the bible.

The creation accounts in Genesis represent two of the four main traditions within the Old Testament people, the Priestly Tradition and the Yahwist Tradition, (P Tradition 1:1-2:4a and J Tradition 2:4b-3:24). In them we find some of the most sophisticated and mature theology of the Old Testament. The theological message is presented in the form of poetic prose, a symbolic story or myth. To say that these accounts are mythic in form is not to say that we are dealing with fantasy or falsehood, but to make clear that we are not dealing with historical or scientific accounts of “how it all got started,” but with a theological message concerning the deepest levels of human life and experience conveyed by using the literary form of myth. *Genesis is theology, not science. The message of theology is salvific, the message of science is not.*

Because human understanding and language is so limited, it is impossible to express once and for all our beliefs about the meaning of God and human existence. Historically, the symbolic story (myth) provides a powerful vehicle to convey beliefs concerning the ultimate meaning of life. It could be argued that “story” is the best tool we humans have for the exploration of life’s meaning and mystery. Perhaps a more familiar example of a type of symbolic story is that of the parable. Jesus used the parable as one of His most effective ways of teaching. Through the symbolic people and the non-historical events of the parable the saving words of Jesus speak in a powerful way to people throughout the ages. It is one thing to say “God loves you”, it is quite another to read and experience the parable of the Prodigal Son.

To see the Genesis accounts in any other way than symbolic story (myth) is to risk

missing the point of the inspired message and to involve oneself in a pseudo conflict with modern science, as in the famous and tragic case of Galileo. Let us now turn to the inspired message which speaks to us of the human condition in relation to God, self, others and the universe. We shall concentrate on the “Paradise” situation with mankind as the focal point.

In the first Genesis account (Gen. 1-2:4a), we find that God first creates the world and all that is less than human. All that is created is called good. The last of God’s creative activity is man and woman to whom He gives the gift of life in His own image. In the second Genesis account (Gen. 2:b-3:24), the man, identified as Adam (from *adama* - earth in Hebrew), is first on the scene, but he is lonely and only finds a true partner in woman, Eve, who is of his own flesh. Adam and Eve now enjoy a relationship of peace. The biblical notion of peace (*shalom*) is that of a harmonious relationship: Adam and Eve are each at peace with themselves as individuals, symbolized by their unashamed nakedness; at peace with others, Adam is incomplete without Eve, together they are happy and complete; at peace with nature, no work and perfect harmony with the animals; and finally, at peace with God.

What is the theological message contained here? In outline form it is this: God is creator of all things. All that is created is good. God gives the gift of life which is a share in His life. Man and woman are of the same flesh and therefore share the same dignity and find their fulfillment in each other. Made in the image of God, they can know and love. The fruit of this knowledge and love is that deep unity which the Bible calls *peace (shalom)*. This biblical notion of peace implies “right relationships” with self, others, the world and God. This peace exists on a personal level, therefore it is established by love - love of self, love of others, love of the world and love of God. Genesis tells us that this is how God created us to be, this is how we *ought* to live -- in peace.

If Genesis was being written today the form would no doubt be different, but the message would be the same, for the deepest experiences of life are universal. Is it not true that all of us long and desire to be at peace with ourselves, with each other, with nature and with God, however we conceive Him? The more we are at peace, the more human we become. We “know” we ought to be at peace, we need to be at peace, this is our destiny without which we fall short of our human potential. John Macquarrie speaks of a “basic awareness of the disorder of existence” that is shared by all cultures, but is sharpened by Christian revelation. He continues: “But the pursuit of the good, reflects man’s innate quest for the fullness of existence, his ‘original righteousness’”, this is the situation of *peace* expressed in the myths of Genesis”.

The world of the OT people was, however, a world in many ways much like our own, a world characterized more by the absence of peace than its presence. So the questions arose then as now: If God created us to be at peace why is it that we do not possess it? Has God brought this evil into our lives? If so why and if not from whence does it come?

Genesis answers that it is not God who brings about evil and chaos. He is all good and all loving; therefore, if there is evil in the world, its source lies elsewhere. But still the

questions: How can this be so? Why would God even allow evil to take place? Either He is not all powerful or not all loving. For if He is all powerful, He could prevent evil from taking place. If He does indeed have the power, He is not all loving in allowing it to happen -- a classic objection to the existence of a good and all powerful God.

*Note:* There simply is no rational solution to the mystery of evil in the world. The answer that God has “reasons” is blasphemy. And our assertions that God is all good and merciful give no easy answer to Ivan, in the *Brothers Karamazov*, who Dostoevsky uses to confront us with the suffering of children, even of one child, as the greatest objection to the existence of God, at least the traditional God of Christians. Part of the answer lies in the mystery of human freedom, part in the very nature of created existence, and part in our incurable inability to understand and speak clearly about God. Perhaps, we need a new approach to our understanding of God based on an evolutionary rather than a static perspective. Modern science has perhaps given us new information to understand the problem of evil better. (see discussion of original sin below). In the end, perhaps we must simply choose to believe in spite of our inability to understand.

After all the statements of belief and unbelief are noted, the problem of evil will not go away, as Annie Dillard reminds us: “You can live as a particle crashing about and colliding in a welter of materials with God, or you can live as a particle crashing about and colliding in a welter of materials without God. But you cannot live outside the welter of colliding materials.” For the believer and unbeliever alike all that we know for sure is that if evil is to be diminished, we must commit ourselves to become part of the answer, not part of the problem. A commitment which should not be made lightly for it may very well ask of us more than we imagined, it certainly did for Jesus. Perhaps we can examine this great mystery later, but for now let us affirm that God is purely and simply against evil in all forms.

The second Genesis narrative offers a partial answer. Adam and Eve refuse to live according to the creative call of God -- they sin. As a result the peace in which they were created is shattered. They become ashamed of their nakedness and begin to cover themselves; they hide from God; they accuse each other; and, finally, they are expelled from Paradise.

The theological message reveals that God created mankind in freedom. Unlike the rest of creation we can know and love and this demands a measure of freedom. We are in some way co-creators with God of our own destiny. God has called us to live in the peace and harmony that is possible in the free exchange of love. But while love is a God given ability, it still demands a free response on the part of each person. Love cannot be forced, even by God. In our freedom we must choose to love and thereby accept God’s free gift of authentic human existence.

It is the sad story of Genesis that mankind has chosen not to love. From this refusal to love the peace is broken and chaos, alienation and hatred enter human life. Sin, therefore, is seen as any human act that destroys the unity and peace for which we were created. And since love is the bond of personal unity, all sin is seen as a failure to love

properly. This is the mystery of sin, we choose to destroy ourselves and others and thereby cut ourselves off from God by refusing to respond to God's creative offer of true human life. There is a sense in which God is in some way "responsible" for sin, insofar as God, in creating us in freedom, becomes the author of the possibility of sin, but it is we in our freedom who bear the responsibility for our sin and its consequences.

In stating that Adam and Eve sinned, the inspired authors are saying that it has been the mysterious choice of all people in all ages to sin, to destroy the peace, to refuse God's call to life. Why has this choice been made? The Bible gives no clear answer. Why do we often do evil? Why do we destroy our own lives and the lives of others? Often there is no understandable answer. But of the fact of sin there is no question. War, starvation, fear, injustice, loneliness are part of our daily experience and they are largely the result of our failures to truly love.

In Genesis, sin becomes the theological word for that which mankind does to destroy true human life - to destroy peace. Things are sinful not because God arbitrarily forbids them, but because they are destructive of authentic human existence to which we are called by the creative spirit of God. The older theological expressions that stressed that sin was an act of disobedience to the law of God (with some support from Genesis) and thus offended His divine majesty, implied that the "law of God" was an expression of the will of God that was extrinsic to us, a code to be followed lest we be punished, a test we must pass to receive the reward of heaven. It further implied that God's "attitude" is altered by sin, which of course is theologically indefensible.

*Note:* In the past, our Catholic moral tradition spoke of a person "committing a sin". For example, stealing was considered the breaking of God's law by which we offended God and were thereby deserving of some punishment, even if the sin was forgiven in confession. While the act of stealing is certainly wrong and has objective evil consequences, especially for the victim, from a personal perspective it is of vital importance to understand that it is not just that we have *done* something - stolen -, but that we have *become something*, we have become a thief.

We were not created to be thieves. We do not find our true selves in becoming thieves. We have become something less that we should be, we have attacked our true humanity. We have broken the peace - our right relationship with self, others and thus with the creative movement of God, which sustains us and calls us to the fullness of life. We have also set up a dynamic within ourselves that is self destructive and which dulls our conscience, making life restoring changes in our moral life more difficult. God does not love us less, it is we who have turned away from Him not Him from us.

If we can indeed speak of the "will of God", we must remember that the "will of God" is simply that we have life and have it to the full. There is a single, life giving, "creative movement" that encompasses our entire relationship with God. It was St. Irenaeus who said "the glory of God is man fully alive". When the discernment of the "will of God", which we find for example in the life and teaching of Jesus, is adequately expressed as law, it provides an *intrinsic* guide to living the fullness of human existence. The locus

and rationale for all morality is human nature within the creative purpose of God. This is an extremely important notion if we are to understand the meaning of salvation and the basis of morality.

It is to this world caught up in the destructive power and effects of sin that God reveals Himself as savior, the One who promises final victory over the forces of evil and healing to wounded humanity. In the past, we often had the notion that God created us humans and put our first parents through some kind of test. Because the test was failed, our first parents were punished and all future generations inherited this punishment. Salvation is then a process of appeasing an angry God and in some way making up for an insult to His infinite majesty, ultimately accomplished by the substitutionary, sacrificial death of Jesus. This is a “theory of atonement” made popular by St. Anselm. Such a theory is abhorrent to our sensibilities and certainly has no place in the OT or in the NT message of Jesus, a point to which we shall return later.

### Sin As Social

The Genesis story continues with an important insight, the social effects of sin. Sin is always social, it affects others. Once sin enters the world it infects the lives of all. Thus Genesis relates that the sons of Adam and Eve, Cain and Able, do not live in brotherly harmony and in the end brother kills brother (Gen. 4:1-16). The power of evil is firmly entrenched in the world and no one escapes its deadly power. The demonic enters human life (a strange story of giants and sons of gods mating with humans, Gen. 6:1-4) and the days allotted to human life are shortened. The rampant spread of sin is causing a deterioration of all creation and threatens to destroy all humanity as is forcefully narrated in the story of the Flood where only Noah and his family escape through the power of God. (Gen. 6:5-8:22).

The theological message is the same, i.e., sin destroys the peace and once the forces of sin are set into motion mankind become powerless to resist their life destroying effects. Sin may originate with an individual, but its effects are also social. Reflecting on this point, Martin Buber in his book *Two Types of Faith*, says: “Sin is not an undertaking which man can break off when the situation becomes critical, but a process started by him, the control of which is withdrawn from him at a fixed moment”. And again to this hopeless situation God is revealed as savior. As St. Paul will later assert: where sin abounds, so too God’s healing grace abounds.

After the Flood, sin again troubles the world. In a final story, the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9), the warning is again given. When people turn from God to idols, peace is destroyed and confusion and disunity, symbolized by the multiplicity of languages, are the bitter fruits. There is no hope for salvation, but to turn from the ways of sin to answer the call of God.

*Note:* For those with an interest in the history of religions, most scholars agree that while the theological message of the creation stories or myths in Genesis are in most respects unique (see above for other OT references to creation), elements of the mythic form of

other stories, especially the story of the Flood and the ark, are found in the Sumerian work, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* written nearly 2,500 years before the final redaction of Genesis. Certainly the Tower of Babel takes its form as a critique of the worship of pagan gods practiced by the Babylonians atop the great towers called ziggurats of which Etemenanki in Babylon was the most famous. What is *completely unique* about the OT stories, relative to those of their pagan ancestors, is not their form, but their theology, their monotheism and their view of history as a linear process as opposed to the then common cyclical view.

### Creation and Salvation

Let us not forget that the Genesis accounts are an extension into the past of the understanding of a God who was experienced as savior in the Exodus and in the subsequent history of the nation. God is first experienced as a savior who creates and sustains the OT people and is now portrayed as the creator and sustainer of the cosmos and all human history from the first couple, Adam and Eve, through the ancient “ancestors” of the nation, Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

As noted above, the Genesis accounts portray mankind as both the initiator and the helpless victim of the forces of sin. There is no escape. Unaided by God, human beings are powerless to overcome the forces of evil which they have generated and which now enslave them. So, throughout history, the great cry goes up -- SAVE US. It is the joyful testimony of the Bible that this cry has been heard and the Lord in His goodness promises His salvation. God so loves His creatures that He will save them from their sinful situation. It is the biblical faith that God’s saving power is experienced in all of human life (Rom 1:19-20), but that this process is revealed now in a special way within the history of the OT people, with the promise of the fullness of salvation in the future.

This revelation is only dimly perceived at first, (revelation is progressive), but it is *the* message of the Bible from the story of Abraham to Jesus and it is Jesus who describes and promises the final Kingdom of God. He proclaims that the day will come when all who yearn and strive for unity and peace will indeed have it. Paradise is now perceived not as some historical situation from which two people, Adam and Eve, “fell”, but that condition toward which we are all moving by the creative power and grace of God (Chardin). The promise of the Kingdom is the promise of that peace for which we were created, offered as a totally free gift of God requiring only our acceptance in that grace-filled act called living faith.

So, again, it might well be noted that the Bible reveals that there is only one “movement” of God to mankind -- the “creative movement”. This “creative movement” is not something that simply happened long ago at creation, but is the constant sustaining power of all that exists. In other words, creation is a continuing process. For mankind the “creative movement” includes God’s call to us to exercise our freedom in the promotion of true human life. Sin is the refusal to answer this call and results in disunity and disharmony. Hopelessly caught in the destructive power of sin, the “creative movement” is now experienced by us as salvation. It is not that at some point in time God becomes

savior, either at the Exodus or in Jesus. *God is always savior.* We simply experience God's "creative movement" as salvation when viewed from our sinful condition. For God is always and everywhere offering life, the possibility of victory over sin and the peace we all yearn for and need to fulfill our humanity. Salvation, therefore, becomes a *process of unity* made possible by the power of God, which establishes the biblical notion of peace and defines Kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus.

In the biblical sense salvation is very concrete. It is what happens in the events of daily life of individuals or the nation as seen through the eyes of faith, opened, as it were, by revelation. It may be experienced by the nation in a dramatic way, as in the Exodus, or in quiet ways by individuals where friendship is shared or forgiveness is experienced. For most of their history the OT people had no clear notion of life after death. They did not look for ultimate salvation beyond the grave. They understood God's saving acts as something that happened now in their national and individual history. For them salvation could only take place in their individual and national history.

Jesus will speak of an ultimate victory of the Kingdom of God beyond history, but He will also make clear that the Kingdom is now. And St. Paul will speak of the believer becoming a "new creation". The locus of salvation is in ordinary lives. It takes place whenever we love ourselves, love each other and love the world. It is in and through these daily activities that we, in fact, love God and become one with Him and His creative movement in the world, which calls us to be co-creators of ourselves and the Kingdom. The God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and Jesus is not far away, God is present and active in ordinary life.

How often in the past when we thought of salvation, we perhaps thought of something that happened on the Cross or between Jesus and the Father. In days past, we were told that Jesus went to Calvary because his Father in heaven demanded His death in payment for our sins or to satisfy God's justice (Anselm). Or that salvation was something that we would experience only after death. So let me repeat the good news of the Scriptures: *salvation is now.*

Salvation can and does happen anywhere, to anyone, at any time. Salvation is giving ourselves over to the creative movement of God. It happens when two people become friends. It happens in the sharing of joy and suffering. It happens in the struggle for justice. It happens when we go to work to support our families. It happens whenever anyone gives of their life to the task of building up the world. It happens even when people are not aware of it. Remember the parable of the sheep and goats where people are depicted as unaware of when they gave or failed to give food to the hungry, or visit the imprisoned or clothe the naked. For the response of love that is the condition for all of these things has only one source, the creative spirit of God.

Salvation, then, is a process of unity. If sin is defined as that which destroys peace -- that unity of self, others and the world as depicted in the creation myth -- then salvation is the process of establishing that peace for which we were created. It is a process of overcoming sin and thereby opening up mankind to the possibility of authentic human

existence. Salvation is possible only by the power of God and comes to us as gift freely offered, but one which must be accepted by us to be effective.

The Church, then, are those people who have been made aware *explicitly* of the call that God is making to all human life implicitly and have been elected, as the Jews of old, to give themselves over the service of God by lives of loving service dedicated to unity and peace, to the building up of the Kingdom. It is the mission of the Church to spread the joyful message of what God has been doing throughout human history - offering mankind salvation, i.e., the power to love themselves, others and the world.

### Original Sin

In popular understanding, the Catholic doctrine of “original sin” is usually related to the story of Adam and Eve and so some comments seem appropriate here. Based in part on an analysis of the custom of infant baptism, some of the early Fathers of the Church proposed that all are born in some way into a state of sin. However, the term “original sin” was coined and finally became a permanent part of the Christian vocabulary through the writings of St. Augustine (354-430 AD). While it may be granted that there is an important insight contained in this doctrine, Augustine’s formulation left much to be desired, to say the least.

Augustine defined original sin within the context of his confrontation with the Pelagian heresy. Pelagius had denied that grace (the enabling power of God) was necessary for the observance of the moral law and that individuals could sanctify themselves by the exercise of the God given gift of free will. Furthermore, infants were born sinless and they could not be guilty for sins they did not commit. Augustine disagreed stating that all were born into a state of sin from which there was no escape, except through baptism. He called this state “original sin”. He held that original sin was a dogma of faith and appealed to Scripture and the practice of infant baptism to verify his position.

Based on a literal interpretation of Genesis, with Adam and Eve as historical people, Augustine’s position went something like this: Adam was first in a state of perfection (Paradise). He sinned and thereby lost his original state of perfection. Adam passed on his sin, within the reproductive act, to the rest of his descendents, who received it not as a personal sin, but real sin, although in an “analogous sense”. As a result, all descendents of Adam were cut off from God. On reaching the age of reason, individuals could respond in faith to God in Jesus and be baptized and thus free themselves from original sin. He conceded that infants could be baptized and freed from original sin, *however those infants dying before baptism and all adults who were not baptized were condemned to Hell, albeit a Hell of diminished punishment.*

When the logic of this position was played out, most of humanity was condemned to hell. Later, in the 12th century St. Anselm and others could not reconcile this position with their concept of an all-merciful God. They agreed that unbaptized infants could not enter heaven, but denied that they would be condemned to hell, even a modified hell. So they created a place called Limbo. Limbo was a place of natural happiness “on the border of

heaven”. Those in Limbo could not enjoy the Beatific Vision of heaven, but neither did they suffer the torments of hell.

While few reputable theologians would accept either of these formulations today, Augustine’s view, modified by Anselm, persisted with only slight modification well into the 20th century and is still held by many fundamentalist Churches. Certainly we can no longer believe the Augustinian scenario, but can we still speak of original sin and, if so, what possible insight could the notion of original sin contain for us today? Is there any kind of a salvational, life transforming message embedded in this doctrine?

First let us examine the biblical sources. The actual term “original sin” does not occur in the Bible. Furthermore, except for the Genesis story, Adam and Eve are hardly mentioned in the OT and there is certainly no such thing as a tradition in either the OT or the NT which indicates that human kind needs redemption specifically from the effects of Adam’s sin.

While the OT is not aware of original sin in the strict sense, as we noted above, the stories of Creation and the Flood do point out the social nature of sin and describe a sinful situation, evident from the dawn of human history, from which no one is saved, except by the power of God. The myth of the Flood relates that human sinfulness can take on a power of its own, becoming larger and more powerful than the individual or the entire community of mankind.

But anything close to the theory of St. Augustine is certainly foreign to the OT. In fact, Genesis does not depict God as alienated from mankind by the sin of Adam. In Chapter 4, God protects Cain, the first murderer, from reprisals by putting a mark on his forehead. In Chapter 9 God is seen as making a covenant with Noah and blessing him and his descendents. In Chapter 12 God is seen as bestowing blessings on Abraham and his posterity and making a covenant with him. Thus the sin of Adam and Eve is never depicted as a barrier to the love and care of God for his people.

It is also significant that the Gospels contain no reference to a “fall” which produces a sinful human condition. Jesus makes no such reference to “fallen human nature” in His teachings, nor does He ever mention Adam and Eve. Jesus never states in any way whatsoever that His purpose is to rectify the “sin of Adam and Eve”. And the early rituals of baptism never mention any relationship with the “sin of Adam and Eve”.

However, it is in St. Paul, (1Cor. 15:21 and especially Rom 5:12-21), that Augustine thought he found his greatest ally. Even a survey of the many and varied interpretations of Paul’s comparison of Adam and Christ, is beyond the scope of this Chapter, but some observations may help.

In Romans, Paul assumes the OT view that sin brings death and since all die, all are in the state or condition of sin, even if they have not sinned personally. There is a valid insight here because sin, by our definition, is that which destroys authentic human life, it leads to death rather than to life. However, we must keep in mind that physical death is implied

in the fact that we are finite creatures, physical death is not the result of sin. In his notion of “Adam”, Paul does not imply that all share in some way in the personal, sinful act of a single ancestor. They do, however, share in the condition of estrangement from God which sin, including the first sin created.

In proposing a parallel between Adam and Christ, Paul is expressing, without explaining, the biblical belief of solidarity and representative personality (e.g. the suffering servant). From his point of view, St. Paul asserts that Jesus must play this role as the representative personality in solidarity with the society He represents in order that His deliverance (salvation for all) may be as total as the curse (Adam’s sin). As Paul states in I Cor 15:21ff :

For since it was a man who brought death into the world, a man also brought resurrection of the dead. As in Adam all men die, so in Christ all will be brought to life...

It seems fair to say that in these passages from Romans and I Corinthians, Paul uses the Adam / Jesus parallel as a literary device to stress the fact and meaning of salvation, rather than to define what we have come to call “original sin” in Augustine’s sense. In other words, sinful humanity (Adam) is on its way to death, because sin destroys authentic human existence for which we were created, but Jesus will bring us new life and victory over death. Most scholars doubt that St. Paul would have agreed with St. Augustine’s later interpretation of this passage.

### Toward an Understanding of Original Sin

In my view, any formulation of the idea of “original sin” must be based on the universal human experience that the world we live in is broken. Not that it is simply, “not perfect”, because it is created and therefore finite and limited, but because throughout all human history there have been decisions made - conscious destructive decisions - that are contrary to the “creative movement” of God (again Rom. 1:19-20). These sinful decisions have left the human family broken and in need of salvation. Evil forces have been unleashed in the world that are now beyond our limited human power to control - social injustice, economic injustice, people without conscience, racial conflict, atrocities beyond human understanding, greed translated into inordinate wealth for individuals, countries and organizations and on and on. These are the Principalities and Powers personified in the NT, they may be mythological, but the evil forces they represent are all too real.

There is no human history without these evils. They are part of the matrix of human existence and it is within this matrix that we are born and exercise our freedom. We only have to read the newspaper or turn on the nightly news to be forcefully reminded of the unbelievable magnitude of evil in the world. This is not to imply that we are totally determined by our broken circumstances, but they are a real factor in our becoming and have real power to seduce us.

And so we are all born into this world and we experience the “sin of the world” (Jn 1:29),

unfortunately in our freedom we become part of it, we become in some degree part of the problem. And with only our own resources, there is no ultimate solution. We cannot build Paradise on earth - we can and must strive for it, but it eludes our grasp. Like Humpty Dumpty we cannot put all the pieces back together. As it was with our ancestors in Egypt, we are helpless and in desperate need of salvation.

What then is the salvational insight, what is the Good News in all this bad news? Interestingly enough it comes from Paul in Romans. If we in our human solidarity (Adam) are responsible not just for individual sins, but in some way for the “sin of the world” and this condition leads to death (the lack of authentic human existence) and, furthermore, is beyond our power to rectify in any way, then the Good News is that in Paul’s view we have a new solidarity in Jesus the Christ. Jesus has overcome sin and death in His life, death and resurrection. He has overcome the Principalities and the Powers and now incorporates us into His victorious, risen life so that we become the Body of Christ and truly share His life. Like our ancestors in Egypt we are saved, saved from sin and death through the power and unmerited love of God.

What does it mean to say that we are “incorporated” into the life of Jesus? What does this salvation look like? Can I get out of bed tomorrow and see it, touch it, experience it? I believe the answer is yes. Every time we love ourselves, others and the world this salvation is being actualized in us and the power of sin is destroyed. When we go to work to make a living for our families, when we play with our children, when we visit someone in the nursing home, when we take care of our own health, when we resist the temptation to do evil, when we forgive one who has offended us, these are all moments of salvation. These are moments when we strengthen or restore “right relationships” with self and others. These are moments of peace, moments of salvation. These are moments when the power of sin (alienation) is overcome.

We are “hip deep” in the creative presence of God. We must stop thinking of God as an entity somewhere else (above us) watching us “from a distance” with interest and sometimes intervening in our lives. If Paul’s notion of “incorporation” and “body of Christ” has any meaning at all it means that we somehow really share the life of God. We are in the *corpus*, in the living body of Christ. This sharing of life is something we can experience in the moments of ordinary life. When we say that the Church can be seen as the Body of Christ, we mean that its members live or strive to live a certain kind of life. The life of Jesus.

We experience this “sharing of life” everyday. When we share the life of a family we tend to become like them. When we join a group -- the Lions Club, a group of medical missionary sisters or the Sierra Club -- the sharing of the life of that group changes our life in a fundamental way. When we decide to share our life with another in marriage it is because we want to become one with another and live a common life together. The principle of the life of the Church, the Body of Christ, is the Risen Lord. As we open ourselves to the power of this life, we become transformed we experience salvation and become instruments of salvation in our corner of the world.

And so we believe that we can, *with God's grace-God's gift of life*, realize in a partial, but real way our own transformation from sinner to saint. We are always in the process of becoming, becoming someone. When we respond to life like Jesus did, we actually "live like Jesus". Think of the people whose lives were literally transformed by the example of Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King. There is a power (grace) in those lives that we can share and which in that sharing can transform us. So we can truly say we share not just Jesus' way of life by way of imitation, but we actually share in His divine life itself. Thus Paul's metaphor that we become life living "parts" of the Body of Christ can be very apt.

This is the insight which Augustine had and Pelagius did not. We are indeed born into and participate in a broken world, a world broken by sin. We need salvation. And we do not simply "save ourselves" by good works in the imitation of Christ. The ultimate source of our ability to overcome evil and do good is the creative presence of God within us. We do not have the power in and of ourselves to save ourselves from the powers of evil or save our world. When we go to work to feed our family, when we study to improve our understanding, when we forgive an old wrong, when we call on a sick friend, when we choose truth instead of lies, when we have friends over to share a meal, when we care for, instead of use others, when we bury the dead and comfort the living we are indeed experiencing salvation, *but our very ability to participate in this process is made possible by the unmerited gift (grace) of God's creative presence in us.*

This is what Luther sensed. However, he failed to believe that this unmerited gift (grace) could actually transform us when we opened ourselves in faith to its powerful presence. To paraphrase Sam Keen (Hymns to an Unknown God) - "(The power of grace), like wind, is visible only in the movement that results from its presence." Living faith results in acts of love as we are reminded in I John 4:19 "But if a man says, 'I love God', while hating his brother, he is a liar" and James 2: "So it is with faith; if it does not lead to action, it is in itself a lifeless thing."

We do not exist on our own. Our being is ultimately grounded in God, Who alone is our life and our salvation. We are intimately involved in something, or better Someone, larger than ourselves. This is the creative presence of God which we have come to know by His gracious self-revelation. This is not meant to be some theological jargon, but it is a fact of life, our lives seen and experienced in depth.

Maybe going back to our "radio" example will help. In this modern culture of ours at every moment of our lives we are surrounded by the radio waves or signals from a number of commercial broadcast stations. We are generally not aware of them, we cannot see, feel, hear or smell them, but there are there. Of course, it is possible for us to receive their message, maybe a life giving message of an approaching storm, but only if we have the ability and make the effort to tune into them. Perhaps saying that we are surrounded by the creative movement of God calling us to a way of life, means that by the grace of God we are able to look at life "in depth", analogous to tuning into the ever-present, invisible world of radio, and hear and respond to the call of God which has the power to save our lives.

We believe the risen Lord is present at every moment of our lives whether we “tune in” to it or not. We believe that this presence is a real power, available to us that can change our lives and help us actualize our true humanity. It is a personal presence sustaining us in our existence and calling us to become like Him, to live the life of a servant as He did. The life giving message is that we cannot make self, power, money, country or even church our ultimate concern. For they will become idols with the power to destroy us. We are to give ourselves over to the creative power that surrounds us, which we glimpse in a special way in the life of Jesus. We are to follow the way of peace, established by love, no matter what the cost. It is here in the act of living faith, that Jesus is the Way, that we find our salvation. The power that makes it possible for us to do this is what we call grace, the unconditional graciousness of Being in and through which we have our existence.

Without our awareness of original sin we could be tempted to blame God for evil in the world, or we could feel neurotically guilty, or simply despise others for their faults, or lose sight of the fact that “we are in this together”. Without our awareness of the salvation offered us in Jesus, we could be tempted to despair in the face of our individual and corporate evil, to lose our faith in the presence of God in our lives, to fail to open ourselves to the power available to us in following Jesus in faith.

Today, of course, we reject any notion that either infants or adults dying without baptism are *by that single fact* condemned to eternal separation from God. Theories abound on exactly how the undoubted salvation of adults outside of Christianity is accomplished, but the fate of unbaptized infants we confidently leave in the “good hands” of God. We no longer view original sin as an invisible spot on an invisible soul removed in some automatic or “magical” way in the act of baptism, but we do appreciate that the “sin of the world” is very real.

Some modern theologians hold that the meaning of original sin is that we are born into “egocentricity” and with the grace of God spend the rest of our lives emerging from self-centeredness into a life for others as exemplified in the life of Jesus. But perhaps an ancient theologian, St. Irenaeus (130-200 AD), said it best: “The history of man is not that of a laborious ascent after a vertical fall, but a providential progress towards a future that is full of promise”. So how can we today understand the concept of original sin as part of our world of experience? One thing is sure, we all experience alienation in one form or another. Perhaps a simple statement will suffice: *original sin is that state of alienation from God, each other and the world into which we have all been born and from which we need to be saved.*

### Modern Science, Evil and Original Sin

The actual historical origins of this state of alienation remain a mystery within the mystery of the origins of the universe and the advent of life, but it is the universal experience of all people that we are born into a broken world. William O’Malley (Pursuit of Happiness) made this observation:

“Now I have strong doubts that this proclivity (the effects of original sin) is traceable back to a not-overly-bright pair of nudists who fell prey to a slick-talking snake. But I haven’t the slightest doubt about its effects. One has only to check the daily newspapers for evidence beyond rebuttal.”

The presence of unthinkable evils bombards us daily through our news media. Ours is a world crying out for salvation and Christians believe that it is a world that can be saved from these evils only by the power of God revealed to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This power of God (grace), working in and through us, will enable us to take on the task of building up the Kingdom of God if we open up ourselves in loving service to self, others and the world.

### Conclusion

If the reader is not weary of hearing it by now, my thesis is: salvation as presented in the Genesis accounts is a process of unity, a process of establishing peace. It is the opposite of sin. Sin is whatever destroys the peace, that right relationship which we are destined to have with ourselves, others, the world and God, and without which we are diminished as human beings. The concrete realization of this peace is experienced in ordinary life and is made possible only through the power of grace -- that unmerited and unconditional love of God which we have referred to as the “creative movement” of God in the world.