

The Formation of the Teaching on Original Sin from the First Through the Fifth Centuries

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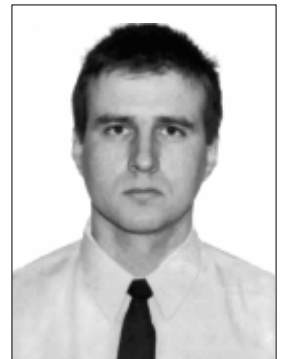
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INTRODUCTION

Christian teaching on original sin is unique in the spiritual life of humankind. Other religions, in one form or another, include much that is similar to the basic teachings of Christianity – monotheism, the spiritual world, rewards after death, hell and paradise, and even the coming Messiah (Judaism, Zoroastrianism, some movements of Shiite Islam). All religious and philosophical worldview systems speak about the flaws and imperfections that exist in the world, and about the world’s transgressions against divine or natural law. All of them also state the truth that the destruction of the world’s harmony has affected humanity.

People find many reasons for the spiritual disorder of humankind. But all of them, as a rule, are seen to be the result of the negative influence of the external world (physical and spiritual) on the human being. The human being, by nature, is considered perfect. In non-Christian religions the human being is pictured as a healthy seed that can develop either positively or negatively. This seed has freedom of choice, reason, and moral power. Furthermore, the development of this seed depends on many external factors: economic, psychological, religious, social. A person becomes either good or bad depending on these factors. This assertion is one of the main pillars of all philosophical teaching and religions (even those that are closest to Christianity, such as Judaism and Islam).

Only Christianity reveals something else; it rejects the idea of the healthy seed. Instead, it speaks of an internal “disease” that has affected the whole human race from the beginning, distorting and weakening all good inten-



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tions, destroying humanity's intrinsic harmony, and finally bringing it to deadly destruction. Christianity teaches that the roots of this illness are not on the surface, but extend deep into the past to a distant event that separated the parents of humankind from their Creator. This disease is called original sin.

1. The Jewish view

Concerning human nature, the rabbis taught that in the beginning Adam was created as a harmonious and morally perfect being with freedom of choice and a conscience. Being in agreement with and obedience to his Creator, Adam had access to the tree of life, which gave him immortality.

As a rule, the rabbis literally interpreted the serpent's suggestion "to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil," but at the same time always emphasised Adam's transgression. The word "to know" in Hebrew means not "to learn," as of learning a science, but has the sense of using or mastering something as, "Now the man *knew* his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain," (Ge 4:1). The expression "good and evil" is a Hebrew idiom that refers not to the quality of a thing or action, but to its fullness: "absolutely everything," "absolutely nothing" (for example, Ge 24:50; 31:24; 31:29; 2Sa 14:17). Therefore, in eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil Jewish teachers saw not just the breaking of a rule, but the attempt of a human being to encroach on something that belonged to God alone, to attain knowledge, power, and ability that belonged exclusively to the

Most High. The words, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil," were understood to mean that human beings now had access to a certain kind of knowledge that brought them close to the Almighty¹.

Concerning moral knowledge, the Jews were convinced that Adam could distinguish truth and falsehood before the Fall; otherwise, in the opinion of the rabbis, the Creator's punishment could not be morally justified. The only thing that Adam lacked, and from which the Almighty set Adam free, was the *experience of the personal knowledge of evil*. Before the Fall, Adam's criteria of truth and falsehood flowed from God. But having taken a step toward personal knowledge, that is, toward the mastery of good and evil, Adam chose a source of knowledge other than the Creator; he relied on his own strength. In explaining this, the Jewish wise ones spoke of the first sin as a crossing over to a different understanding of reality, as moving from the perception of "truth vs. falsehood" to the perception of "good vs. bad," that is, from pure knowledge to knowledge achieved by the trial and error method.

The attempt to achieve knowledge and control independent of God brought Adam to catastrophe. The

¹ This synopsis of the basic concepts was done with reference to the classic commentary *Сончино (Sonchino)*. The text is from the publication *Пятикнижие и Гафтарот, ивритский текст с русским переводом и классического комментария Сончино (Pentateuch and Gaftarot, Hebrew text with Russian text and the classic commentary Sonchino)*, Jerusalem: Gerashim/Мосты культуры (Mosty kul'tury), 2001/5761.

original harmony was destroyed. Internal forces that previously had been in a state of harmonious potential were now distorted and found unnatural expressions. From that moment Adam felt a kind of irrational power that the rabbis called *yetser ha-ra*, which can be translated as “the desire or inclination to evil.” *Yetser ha-ra* draws humans to evil; it asserts selfishness; it manifests one’s animal desires and instincts. Thus, people felt the power of *yetser ha-ra* for the first time when they saw they were naked, and, not previously having any experiential knowledge of the world, were ashamed of their animal desires.

However, much in human history could have gone in a different direction if Adam had shown repentance for sin. Unfortunately, Adam preferred to hide from the Creator and blame “the wife that you gave me.”

God’s answer was perfectly just – an imperfect being, moved by his own contradictions toward evil, cannot inherit eternal life. Physical mortality becomes the result of Adam’s disobedience to God. The Almighty banished the first people from paradise.

It should be added that according to the opinion of the Jewish teachers, the features of Adam’s curse, such as God’s wrath on humankind and guilt before the Almighty, were discontinued by God from the time of the Flood: “And the LORD smelled a soothing aroma. Then the LORD said in His heart, ‘I will never again curse the ground for man’s sake, although the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done’” (Ge 8:21 NKJV).

The Almighty here addresses the righteous Noah who brought the pleasing sacrifice, but is not speaking about Adam as a human personality, but about Adam as the human race. This universal Adam, *from his youth* – that is, since the time he was in Eden – is inclined to evil (*yetser ha-ra*).

This understanding is based on the fact that the word “adam” is translated from Hebrew as “human,” or “man.” Only four times in the Hebrew original is Adam used as a name (Ge 4:1; 4:25; 5:1; 5:3). Elsewhere it is a noun meaning “man,” “human race,” or “that ‘something’ that all humans have.” And it is precisely the inclinations of the heart of this Adam-Everyman that are “evil from his youth.”

Thus, as part of “the universal Adam” each of us has an inherited human flaw – *yetser ha-ra*. The physical and moral aspects of *yetser ha-ra* are interconnected. A human, born in an imperfect world and part of that world, must struggle for existence, showing a certain aggression to other humans and to the world (for example, killing animals for food). This inclination to evil, or aggression, is inherent and prevails over each of us. We cannot get rid of it, because it is hidden in human nature. It draws each person, awakening our lowest animal desires; it moves us to evil, selfishness, and finally death. It cannot be cured because its cause is not only physical. Even in ideal circumstances the human heart still inclines toward evil – the common disease of the human race.

Let us make one important detail more precise. A person is not simply a physical being. A human is like a

point, or a vessel, that contains both a physical and a spiritual beginning: “[God] breathed into his nostrils the breath (Hebrew: *ruah*) of life; and the man became a living being (Hebrew: *nefesh*) (Ge 2:7).

The spiritual beginning that was breathed into our bodies was understood by Jewish teachers as coming from God and therefore *absolutely pure*. This is one of the cornerstones of Judaism – and this is where the Christian and Jewish understandings of human nature will eventually divide.

My God! The soul that You gave me is *pure!*

You created it, You formed it, You breathed it into me,

You keep it in me and You will take it from me,

And return it to me in the future...

Blessed are You, the God who returns souls to dead bodies.⁴

The words of this prayer are in the Siddur, the Jewish prayer collection. Every godly Jew must say them each morning.

The human soul is pure and has free will. (The absolute freedom of the will is another cornerstone of the Jewish understanding of human nature.) Therefore, a human being is a unity of a pure spirit with a free will and a vulnerable body. This is the unity burdened by the inclination toward evil since Adam.

However, the Creator also gave the human being another inclination –

yetser ha-tov – the inclination toward good. This inclination, according to the rabbis, is in each person’s heart and is best revealed by fulfilment of the commands of Torah. A human being, having free will, is called to choose between *yetser ha-ra*, which leads to death, and *yetser ha-tov*, which leads to life. He or she must overcome the inclination to evil, nullify it. The way of victory over the evil inclination is found in Torah. That is why the ideal way of life for a human being must consist of three things: knowledge of God through Torah, service to him through fulfilling the commandments, and doing good:

Shimon the Righteous was the last of [the teachers] of the Great Congregation. He often repeated: “The world is based on three foundations: [the study of] Torah, service to God, and good works.”⁵

This is the way of life and nothing is impossible in it! God does not require the impossible from human beings – this is the sincere belief of Judaism. If someone makes a mistake or stumbles, then, according to the rabbis, sincere repentance can erase the sin.

One hour of repentance and good works in this world is better than a whole life in the world to come; and one hour of blessing in the world to come is better than a whole life in this world.⁶

By strictly following the way of life, overcoming as much *yetser ha-*

² Talmud, Bereshit-Raba 19, *Агада. Сказания, притчи, изречения Талмуда и Мидрашей (Haggadah: Legends, proverbs, sayings of the Talmud and Midrash)*, Rostov: Феникс (Feniks), 2000.

³ Ibid., Talmud, tractate Avodah Zarah, 8.

⁴ D. Con-Sherbrook and L. Con-Sherbrook, *Иудаизм и Христианство (Judaism and Christianity)*, Moscow: Гендальф (Gendal’f), 1995.

⁵ Talmud, tractate Avot, ch. 1.2.

⁶ Ibid., 4.17.

ra as possible in oneself, in principle a person can reach righteousness *by his own strength*, and become *tsad-dik*, or one of the righteous. In Christian terminology we could call this person saved (Jews do not use this word). In other words, salvation from sin is the business of each of us, and it is a real and achievable business.

This is a brief summary of the Talmudic teaching on Adam's sin and how to be rid of it. However there is another question. The Mishna, the earliest part of the Talmud, began to be written down at the end of the second century, that is, at the time of early Christianity. What was the view of the Jewish wise, the Pharisees who lived during the time of Christ and the apostles? Apparently they were not much different. The Talmudic teachers did not create anything new. They saw their calling in saving existing tradition, not in creating new truths. Of course in certain ways they deepened and broadened their fathers' traditions, but did not introduce anything new. Nor did post-Talmudic thought bring much to Jewish dogmatics. Most of the creative energy of Israel's later teachers emphasised a different sphere – the mystical. Here the rabbis truly made a "revolution," bringing into the world the teaching of the Cabala.

2. New Testament sources of teaching on original sin

Christian teaching on original sin grew out of the Jewish understanding of *yetser ha-ra* – the post-Adamic inclination to evil, the corrupt human nature. However, in the course of its development it gradually not

only outgrew its earlier form, but also partly rejected its Jewish heritage.

The founder of the Christian teaching on original sin is considered to be the apostle Paul who expressed several thoughts about the heritage of sin and death in Ro 5:

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned – (For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. But the free gift is not like the offence. For, if by the one man's offence many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many. And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned. For the judgement which came from one offence *resulted* in condemnation, but the free gift which came from many offences resulted in justification. For if by the one man's offence death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.)

Therefore, as through one man's offence judgement came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For, as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous (Ro 5:12-19).

It is very easy to see in Paul's words the "juridical" sequence: The *transgression of one brought condem-*

nation of all the people, a multitude of offspring: adults and children, men and women; *the condemnation of all*, regardless of their moral condition, godly or criminal. Absolutely everybody, from the oldest to the youngest, is condemned already because of the *transgression of one*, their distant ancestor. And the measure of condemnation is the same for everybody – death. The justification of the One brought the justification of all.

This juridical sequence is logical in some ways, but it casts doubt on the central revelation of Christianity. Can we proclaim that *God is love* if he takes revenge on countless offspring for the transgression of their distant ancestor? It may be just, not by human understanding (because even blood revenge winds down in the course of several generations), but by juridical standards (when even a minor transgression directed against the Great Eternal brings endless heavy punishment).

In thinking about Paul's epistles we must not forget that the apostle was not a Roman lawyer, but a Jew who had fed on the spirit of the fathers' teaching since the beginning. Even though his thoughts and images underwent a strong Christian reformation, they could not help but flow from his Jewish heritage. The former student of rabbi Gamaliel did not contrast Christ's teaching to Judaism, but rather saw in it the logical conclusion of Judaism, its full revelation and the fulfilment of all Old Testament expectations. Therefore it is impossible to understand correctly what the apostle said if we totally ignore the Jewish view of the situation.

What, then, is the reason for death overtaking all humankind? It was not juridical guilt inherited from Adam that led to the Flood. It was the inclination to evil – *yetser ha-ra* – revealed and triumphant among the pre-Flood generation that destroyed the ancient world. According to Paul, “until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law” (Ro 5:13).

It was not the juridical guilt of their ancestors that brought about the death of the Old Testament righteous like Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and others, but the incorrigible flaw in human nature that they inherited from Adam. It was not juridical condemnation for their ancestor's sin, but the inherited corruption – mortality – that became the tragedy of the human race.

On the other hand, death for Paul obviously has a “juridical” shading. Mortality for the apostle was not simply a “sickness,” an organic inherited flaw, but a moral category, the spiritual summary of human life. The result is unavoidable for all humankind. The apostle literally connects death and condemnation.

- Because of the one man's offence, death reigned through that one...
- One man's offence led to judgement for all...
- By one man's disobedience, many were made sinners... (Ro 5:17-19).

But what is the reason for the death of the offspring? Why is it unavoidable and why is death so closely connected with condemnation in the apostle's thoughts?

We can understand it only by returning to the Jewish view of original sin, the distortion of Adam's

nature, which was expressed by the appearance of the inherited inclination to evil. Nobody who was born from Adam is free from it. And its *implementation* – seen in those things that each of us does – *leads to death*. Not only to death as a physical act, as a sickness of the body, but to death as the final end of our spiritual way, the condemnation of a human life before the righteousness of the Most High. This understanding of original sin explains the reason why, for Paul, the concepts of death and condemnation became almost synonymous.

Yet not everything in the words of the apostle sounds like the Jewish understanding of human depravity. However close these concepts, there was something else in Paul's thinking that the old wineskins of Judaism could not contain. The difference between them had to do, first of all, with the degree to which humanity was harmed by sin:

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then a law that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good (Ro 7:18-21).

It is precisely in revealing the power of sin that the apostle reaches the dividing line between the Jewish *yetser ha-ra* and the Christian understanding of original sin. The inherited inclination to sin did not at all mean catastrophe to the Jewish teachers. It was seen more as an ordinary sickness that a person must work to

overcome. To accomplish that he was given everything necessary: free will, Torah, and the indefatigable voice of conscience. Although victory over the inclination to evil required the straining of all one's spiritual forces, the rabbis did not have any doubts about it being possible.

For Paul, however, the power of sin is revealed as something entirely different. Yes, a person is capable of certain spiritual accomplishments, and may overcome his storming passions for a day, two days, or a week. But he cannot live his whole life in holiness. We can take a step on the road of holiness, but we cannot walk the whole way without sullyng ourselves. Moreover, we are not dirtied only by mud from the outside, but also from the inside, from what we inherited through Adam's act of eating the forbidden fruit.

The absolute helplessness of human beings in the face of the law of opposition that infected our entire race literally cries out from the apostle's words. Human strength and righteousness are conditional and limited. Let the rabbis assert that *yetser hatov*, the human inclination to good, can stand up to the sickness of sin. Let Saul's teacher, Rabbi Gamaliel, insist that a human being can become righteous by following the way of Torah. Nevertheless, Paul admits his helplessness:

For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from this body of death? (Ro 7:22-24)

This was written by a person who cannot be decried as weak or lacking a strong will. The apostle was both meek and full of energetic life. But Paul understood his own nature better than his teachers did. Not spiritual indifference, but a total understanding of himself made the apostle admit his helplessness. That is why he chose a different way to salvation than the one his teachers offered; he was not trying to make himself perfect by fulfilling Torah, but by putting all the burden of salvation on Another's shoulders:

For if by the one man's offence death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. Therefore, as through one man's offence judgement came to all men, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life (Ro 5:17-18).

This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief (1Ti 1:15).

Thus writes a great Christian saint who understood the true depth of his fall. Judaism could not accept such a salvation and this became the stumbling block that set a barrier between the old and the new.

3. The development of teaching on original sin in the second and third centuries

It must be said that Paul did not leave behind a detailed dogma on original sin. As a result, many theologians have had to search out the dogmatic essence in his words, explain and deep-

en the thoughts the apostle expressed. To a great extent, then, Christian teaching on original sin is not the fruit of Paul's work, but of his followers'. Many years would pass before the church recognized this teaching in its fullness.

Christian writers of the first through the third centuries very seldom (if compared with the fourth century) speak of original sin. Doubtless they are aware of it, but at the same time do not stress the fatal inheritance of Adam. Not only that, but their understanding of the essence of original sin is somewhat different from the modern (Western) understanding. For early Christian teachers, original sin is not a matter of guilt before God transmitted from Adam to all of humankind, but the inherited flaw in human nature that made it impossible for humans to remain in Eden in unity and communion with God the Creator. That is why we see so often in early Christian literature that baptism is talked about as the bath of *regeneration* – the restoration of the first man. The crown of human salvation is not a bodiless existence in a heavenly paradise, but resurrection in renewed flesh for eternal life in a transformed world.

“In this way the *damage to human nature* that was done in paradise through the eating of both [parents] was destroyed through [the Lord's] suffering in this world,”⁷ says Irenaeus and he continues:

For the Word of God that created everything, that also in the beginning created man, seeing creation *harmed by evil*, ministered to him in every possible way. Therefore, concerning each separate member that exists in his creation, he immediately restored

the person to health and wholeness, preparing him to be perfect unto resurrection...For through this healing we attain life, and through life we attain the imperishable. The one who heals [gives] life, and the one who gives life gives his creation imperishability.⁸

The author of the *Letter to Diognetus* writes:

Through whom could we, the unrighteous and disloyal, be justified except through the Son of God?... O sweetest change! Oh incomprehensible structure! Oh unexpected blessing! The lawlessness of many is covered by the only Righteous One and the righteousness of one justifies the many lawless. Thus, having discovered the *inability of your nature to receive life*, and now having revealed to us the Saviour who is powerful to save even that which could not be saved – by this and the other God wanted to help us to come to faith in his goodness, to respect him as the Provider, Father, Teacher, Counsellor, Doctor, Wisdom, Light, Honour, Glory, Life, never worrying ourselves about clothing and food.⁹

Even Tertullian, a lawyer by education, in thinking about the relationship between the soul and body of a human being, speaks of the results of Adam's sin in a juridical sense as punishment, and also in an organic way as injury or damage to the whole person, both soul and flesh:

Let us start from the place where He said that He "came to save what was lost" (Lk 19:10). What do you think was lost? Of course, the human being was lost. The whole human being, or

just part of one? The whole, of course. Because the transgression, the reason for human destruction, was accomplished as much by the desire and motivation of the soul as it was by the action of the flesh, that is, the act of eating. Since that time the human being was *under blame* and deservedly was *filled with death*. It follows that only the human who will be completely saved is the one who completely died, having sinned.¹⁰

The understanding of original sin in the second century does not dominate Christianity; it does not suspend over it the inevitability of death like the Sword of Damocles, as it will in the Middle Ages beginning with Augustine. Yes, the human being is marred by mortality, but at the same time he has free will and God's grace for salvation in the person of Jesus Christ. It depends on the person to accept or reject salvation. God is always near, calling to his creatures every day through other people, thoughts, circumstances, and dreams. He brings a person to the right choice. Nevertheless, the choice is for people to make themselves. Many speak about this: Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement, Origen, and others. The sovereignty of God is seen by Christian teachers of the second and third centuries in foreknowledge, not predestination. A similar emphasis on human freedom is a general feature of early Christian teaching on salvation. Only since the time of the Pelagian disputes (fourth and fifth centuries) when freedom was elevated to the rank of the absolute, making it al-

⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.21.2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.12.6.

⁹ *Letter to Diognetus*, ch. 9.

¹⁰ Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Body*, ch. 34.

most tantamount to independence from God, did the emphasis start to move in the direction of the predestination of salvation. Justin Martyr taught about AD 160:

And our Lord by the will of the Father who sent Him and Lord of all, did He not say: "Many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Mt. 8:11-12). But as I have already proved, those who were *foreknown* as evil will be such – both angels and humans may be evil, not because God is at fault, but *because of their own fault* each is as he turns out to be. God, who desires humans and angels to follow His will, was pleased to create them *free to do righteousness*, and possessing reason so that they may know by Whom they are created and through Whom they, who did not exist formerly, do now exist; and with a law so that they should be judged by Him, if they do anything contrary to right thinking. And of ourselves we, humans and angels, shall be convicted of having acted sinfully unless we speedily repent. If the word of God foretells that some angels and humans certainly shall be punished, it is because God *foreknew* that they would indeed be wicked, *not because God created them so*.¹¹

Tatian (*Against the Greeks*, AD 180) teaches:

That heavenly Word, the Spirit that received being from the Father and the Word begotten of the Logos of power, according to the example of the Father who begat Him, created man in the image of immortality, so that, as God is immortal, so in like manner man, having been given to

partake of the divine, might have immortality also. The Word, too, before the creation of man, created angels. And each of these two orders of creature was made free; not inherently good, which quality belongs to God alone, but humans may be brought goodness *through their freedom of choice*, in order that the wicked may be justly punished, having become depraved through their own fault, while the righteous may be deservedly praised for their virtuous deeds, since in the exercise of free choice they did not transgress the will of God. Such is the constitution of things in reference to angels and men. The Word by its power, having *foreknowledge* of future events not according to fate, but according to the arbitrary choice of free agents, foretold the outcome of future events, restrained evil by means of prohibitions, and by means of praise encouraged those who remained in righteousness.¹²

Irenaeus wrote at the end of the second century:

The words [of our Lord], "How often would I have gathered thy children together, and thou would not," set forth the ancient law of human liberty, because God made man [a] free [agent] from the beginning, having his own power even as he has his own soul, in order voluntarily to fulfil the will of God, not by God's compulsion. For there is no coercion with God, but a good will [towards us] is present with Him continually. Therefore He gives wholesome advice to all, *but has given human beings freedom of choice*.¹³

Theophilus, bishop of Antioch, wrote at the end of the second century:

¹¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, chs. 140-141.

¹² Tatian, *Oration Against the Greeks*, ch. 7.

¹³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.37.1.

He created him neither mortal nor immortal, but, as we have said above, capable of both, so that if he should incline to the things of immortality, keeping the commandment of God, he should receive immortality from Him as a reward and should become as God; but if, on the other hand, he should turn to the things of death, disobeying God, he will himself be guilty of his own death. *For God made man free, with power over himself.*¹⁴

4. The theology of Origen and his teaching on original sin

The first to attach great importance to original sin, making it one of the cornerstones of his teaching was Origen. His view on original sin, incidentally, was as unique as his whole theological system. We can briefly describe it as follows: In the beginning, having created the world, God created numerous disembodied souls – angels and humans. These souls were created without flaw, having both intellect and free will. However, the seductiveness of personal freedom led to a cooling of their love and to the rule of evil:

The Creator offered arbitrary and free action to the minds He created in order, of course, that the good would become their own good if it was preserved by their own will. But laziness and lack of desire to work at the matter of maintaining good, as well as scorn of what is best, led to a retreat from good. To depart from good means nothing else than to do evil, for it is well known that evil is the lack of good. From this it follows that some fell away from good to the same extent that they gave themselves to evil.¹⁵

Losing its original holiness “the race of Adam” fell from the spiritual sphere to the material sphere, where they were enfolded in physical bodies that condemned them to feel the heaviness and guilt of their fall.

The extent of *love’s cooling*, the falling away from their original holiness, was different for each soul. Origen explained much by the extent of the first fall: the spiritual and physical condition of a person at birth, his social status, his deprivations in life. There is nothing accidental in one’s earthly life. The differences in human existence are conditioned by the varying extents of the fall, and, as a result, different conditions are required to correct the soul:

There is no small difference, for some of them are barbarians, others Greeks; and of the barbarians some are savage and fierce and others are of a milder disposition. Certain of them, as is well known, live under praiseworthy laws, and others under laws of a lower or more severe kind, while still others possess customs of an inhuman and savage character rather than laws. Certain of them, from the hour of their birth are found in humiliation and subjection and brought up as slaves, being under the dominion either of masters, or princes, or tyrants. Others, yet again, are brought up more freely and reasonably; some have sound bodies, others have bodies diseased from their early years; some have defective vision, others defective hearing and speech; some were born in that condition, others were deprived of the use of their senses immediately after birth, or underwent misfortune in adulthood.¹⁶

¹⁴ Theophilus of Antioch, *Letter to Autolich*, 2.27.

¹⁵ Origen, *On First Principles*, 2.9.2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.9.3.

Thus, there are no people without sin. Even a newborn baby is unclean and personally guilty before God. In Origen's opinion the baby already bears the stamp of spiritual depravity – *the cooling of love*, as well as the weight of *personal guilt* before the Creator because of *laziness* and *indifference*. The injured soul can only be rebuilt and its guilt redeemed by God's grace given through Christ.

God's sovereignty brings people to accept Christ in different ways. Some have a difficult way, some an easy one, depending on the original sin. Whatever the plan of God, the main step, whether to accept or reject Christ, must be taken by a human being's own free will. This is one of the cornerstones of Origen's teaching. (Origen dedicated the greater part of his third book, *On First Principles*, to proving the freedom of will and rejecting predestination.)

God will not permit the ruin of any of his creation. The soul that rejected Christ in this earthly life will be corrected in a different life. But this is achieved "...only by means of the greatest and heaviest of punishments lasting, so to speak, for many centuries of the severest corrections."¹⁷

God is love. Love is absolute, so no one, believes Origen, will be destroyed. The world itself at the end of the ages will be brought back to its original blameless condition:

Then, after every evil impulse has been destroyed, and after the perfect and complete cleansing of this nature, God alone, the sole good, will become everything to [the soul]...When there will be no death anywhere, nor the sting of death, then truly God will be all in all.¹⁸

Later Origen's system was rejected by the church, and he was condemned after his death at the Fifth Ecumenical Council. In spite of that, Origen was the first Christian theologian who saw the basis of earthly sufferings in original sin. The suffering of the righteous occurs not simply as a result of flawed human nature (organic, inherited), but because of the individual's *personal guilt*. This is the guilt that everybody has, even a baby. This is why Origen was a fierce defender of infant baptism.

Here Origen was ahead of his time. The idea of the personal guilt of a person newly arrived in the world could be understood by fifth-century Christians, but it was foreign to those of Origen's time. Infants were baptized at that time not because they were guilty, but because they were *infected by the ancient mortality*. This is the way Cyprian of Carthage, a younger contemporary of Origen, expressed his thoughts:

...the infant scarcely born has not committed any sin, but only being descended from Adam according to the flesh was infected with the ancient mortality through birth itself, and comes easily to accept forgiveness of sins, not his own, but those of others (the sins of the ancestors).¹⁹

However for Origen, the infant's own sins are forgiven, the ones committed in the past existence. However strange as his philosophical system may seem, the fact is that Origen is the first to speak of original sin as *personal human guilt*. In Origen's system the first sin hangs like the

¹⁷ Ibid., 1.6.3.

¹⁸ Ibid., 3.6.3.

¹⁹ Cyprian, *On the Baptism of Infants*.

Sword of Damocles over the whole of humanity. Getting rid of it is one of the main earthly steps that have to be taken to return human beings to heaven; it is the beginning of salvation.

As the great Alexandrian taught, salvation is available either through confessing Christ at the baptismal font, or by means of *the greatest and heaviest punishments*. When Origen speaks of redemption outside of accepting Christ's salvation, he sees it as someone passing through the torments of hell. The fire of torment has special qualities; it does not merely punish, but also, more importantly, corrects:

Every sinner kindles for himself the flame of his own fire and is not plunged into a fire kindled by another, or one that existed before. The fuel and food of this fire are our sins, which the Apostle Paul calls "wood, hay, and stubble" (1Co 3:12). Just as overabundance of food and an unhealthy amount and quality of it breed fevers in the body (and fevers, too, of different sorts and duration, depending on the proportion of the lack of self-restraint that permitted the accumulation of material and fuel for the fever), so the quantity of this material, gathered together as the result of various kinds of intemperance, causes either a more or less severe disease. Thus, I think, the soul gathers together in itself a multitude of evil works and an abundance of sins; at a certain time that whole assembly of evils flames up for punishment and catches fire for chastisement. Then the mind or the conscience, by divine power, will receive everything into the memory, all the signs or forms that the mind stamped

on itself when it committed sins; it will reproduce everything foul and shameful or wicked that it did, and in this way will see before its eyes a kind of history, as it were, of its crimes. Then the conscience will be harassed, and beat itself with its own goads and will become an accuser and a witness against itself.²⁰

Origen taught about the universal and final restoration of everyone and everything in God. Turning to God, whether in this world through faith and baptism or in the after-life through sufferings, there is an inevitable operation through which God will bring all people. Faith and baptism in this earthly life is the shortest and most direct way to God's salvation. Here is a curious paradox: The shortest and the least painful way to heavenly blessings is through infant baptism (the forgiveness of original sin) and death in infancy (before a person has begun to sin for himself). Therefore, it may not be accidental that chronologically one of the first (that has come down to us) positive statements concerning infant baptism belongs to Origen (Cf. Origen's *Commentary on Romans*, book 5, chapter 6).

What was Origen's influence on the development of the dogma on original sin and the practice of infant baptism? It was not foundational. Although Christian thought in the late third and early fourth centuries was strongly influenced by Origen's theology, it would be a mistake to ascribe the decisive influence in the development of original sin theology to the Alexandrian theologian. The dogmatic development of this teaching would have gone the same way without his influence. However, without doubt,

²⁰ Origen, *On First Principles*, 2.10.3.

Origen's ideas were a powerful catalyst in the process of the development of teaching on original sin.

5. The changing role of original sin in the fourth-century church

During the fourth century teaching on original sin did not change significantly. It was understood as the inherited flaw that distorted both the physical and spiritual aspects humanity. However, the degree of awareness of original sin increased sharply.

The Egyptian monk Macarius taught:

Human nature that was under the sentence of God's wrath because of the transgression of the first Adam and that fell from its previous pure and detached condition and became entangled with evil desires and was forcibly subdued by them to live under the deceit of the evil one, is powerless to escape from the kingdom of darkness. That is why God's power had to join with it and interconnect with it to achieve its redemption from passions and help it in good works.²¹

What was the purpose of Christ's coming to earth? The first and the greatest is to restore the pure nature of the human being and the gift. That is why he restored in people the nature of the first Adam and gave them the heavenly heritage of the Holy Spirit.²²

When we pray the Lord's Prayer shall we say *and forgive us our sins*

if we live a righteous life? Of course, answers Gregory of Nyssa. Even if there are no personal transgressions we have to pray thus because Adam's sin is present in every person:

The Word of the Lord commands us not to look at our success, but to recall to memory the general debts of human nature in which everyone participates. Everyone who partakes of that nature, be he Moses or Samuel or any of the others praised for his goodness, nevertheless, inasmuch as he is human, he takes part in Adam's nature and in his fall, and therefore must consider that these words relate to him.²³

Methodius of Patar wrote:

Since the time that man, being deceived, broke the commandment, sin, which began from that disobedience, has made its dwelling in him. In this way there was rebellion, and we were filled with desires and strange thoughts, having lost the Spirit of God, and being filled with fleshly desires that the most crafty serpent put into us when we left the circle of God's commands...by means of desires sin dwells within us and from it voluptuous thoughts are continually growing like a young tree.²⁴

From a rather abstract dogma, original sin became one of the basic truths of the fourth century. It may be said that from this time the understanding of the results of Adam's fall began to dominate Christian consciousness. Unobserved, it placed its invisible stamp on many aspects of

²¹ Macarius of Egypt, *Collected Manuscripts*, Word 50.

²² *Ibid.*, Word 61.

²³ Gregory of Nyssa, *De orat. domin. orat. V.*, vol. I, col. 1184, AB.D. (Kazan: 1887), 423; quoted in Viktor Nesmelov, *Догматическая система святого Григория Нисского (Dogmatic system*

of Saint Gregory of Nyssa), (St. Petersburg: Центра изучения, охраны и реставрации наследия священника Павла Флоренского [Tsentr izucheniia, okhrany i restavratsii nasledia sviashchennika Pavla Florenskogo], 2000).

²⁴ Methodius of Patar (Olympus), *On the Resurrection*, ch. 49.

Christian teaching, influencing, first of all, the understanding of a person's spiritual condition and deepening the sense of human corruption. As a result, the strengthened sense of the disaster of original sin could not help but influence the way church sacraments were understood, especially the sacrament of baptism.

To illustrate what was just said, we may compare views on Christian teaching and the place of catechumens in the life of the church at the time of Tertullian (second and third centuries), and at the time of the Cappadocians (Basil the Great, Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa) who lived 150 years later.

The early church identified people as catechumens who had repented and confessed their faith before witnesses but had not yet been baptized. The time of preparation before baptism varied and depended, as a rule, on the zeal of the people themselves. For some of them this period was short, for some of them it was several years, sometimes lasting even until they were on their deathbeds. The point of catechesis was to teach these people the basics of the faith and prepare them for baptism.

It is difficult to determine when catechumens first appeared in the church. The Book of Acts mentions only immediate baptism. However, the *Didache*, written at the end of the first century, tells us about preparation for baptism, which means there were catechumens at that time.

Around 200 AD Tertullian wrote about the status of catechumens in the church:

What is the difference between you and the perfected servant of God? Do

baptised people have one Christ and the catechumens another? Is there a different hope and reward for them, a different fear before the judge, and a different need for repentance? This washing (baptism) is the seal of faith, and faith begins and is witnessed to by repentance.²⁵

We cannot say that Tertullian did not distinguish between baptised and catechumens, nor that he neglected the sacrament of baptism. No, the elder of Carthage was thinking wisely. He simply believed that there was no point in the church's sacrament if it was performed without faith or for an unworthy person:

It is easy to deceive the people who baptise you concerning your faith. But God cares about His treasure and will not allow the unworthy to approach Him.²⁶

That is why the landmark of salvation is not the sacrament of baptism, but repentance and confession of faith. Of course, the formal statement, "whoever is not born of water and the Spirit cannot enter into the kingdom of God," is true. However, it was the repentance and faith of the thief who confessed Christ just before his death, not his baptism (which never took place), that opened the way of eternal life to him. That is why Tertullian vigorously insists that baptism is the seal of faith that already exists, and faith begins and is testified to by repentance. The moral change in a person, the consciousness of his own life, the fear of God in his soul, repentance – all of these are, in fact, the birth by the Spirit

²⁵ Tertullian, *On Repentance*, ch. 6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

that Christ spoke about. Water is only the seal of this birth. That is why Tertullian calls moral transformation the *first baptism*, distinguishing it from the “second,” which is by water:

We do not baptise in order to stop sinning, but because we have already stopped; our heart is already washed. This is the *first baptism* of the one who listens in fear... I do not know whether a baptised person is happier that he stopped sinning, or happier that he has avoided sinning.²⁷

It is appropriate to ask where the catechumens are in Tertullian’s opinion: In the church or outside it? Formally and canonically, of course, they are outside the church. But if we are talking not from the letter of Holy Scripture but from the Spirit, then they are probably inside.

With time the attitude toward catechumens gradually altered. After 150 years, at the end of the fourth century, we encounter a different view of the place of catechumens and their participation in salvation:

“You, the catechumen, are outside of paradise, sharing the exile of Adam, our parent,” asserted Gregory of Nyssa. And a bit later, to edify listeners, he introduces a heart-rending story that was intended to instruct those who delayed in receiving the saving sacrament:

I want to tell you the story of an unfortunate man who was deprived of a great hope, who searched for water in a time of drought. Just recently, when the nomadic Scythians destroyed many lands together with their inhabitants, in a neighbouring city... while the barbarians were ransacking the buildings, a noble youth by the name of Archius, whom I knew very well, grieving for his own and

for his homeland’s suffering, left the city and its fortress in order to see how many robbers and barbarians there actually were and how much evil they had done, but falling into the hands of the enemy he was killed by one of their arrows. Fallen and close to death, with as much strength as he had he cried (because he was not baptised): “Mountains and forests baptise [me], trees, stones and springs, give [me] grace!!!” And with these piteous cries, he died. When the city found out about it, everyone sorrowed more than for all the suffering caused by the war.²⁸

The idea of this story is simple: A person may be “called,” may have confessed Christ, repented, and be leading a godly life, but if he has not received the saving grace given only in the sacrament of baptism, he will perish all the same.

It is a mistake to think that by using this example the bishop of Nyssa was expressing his own personal opinion that differed from the opinion of others. On the contrary, such ideas were characteristic of the second half of the fourth century.

What is the reason for this curious alteration in Christian consciousness? Why, in the second century, could a person who believed but had not yet been baptised be considered not far from the Kingdom of Heaven, while in the fourth century the same person was considered to have perished? It is thought that the main role here was played by the development of the teaching on original sin, which did not have the same significance in the early church that it had in the fourth and fifth centuries.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Delaying Baptism*.

Christians of the second century, aware of the original human flaw, speak quite “freely” about salvation. Justin Martyr, in the middle of the second century, could say that:

We have been taught that Christ is the first-born of God, and we have declared above that He is the Word of whom every race of men partakes. *Those who live in accordance with the Word are Christians*, even though they have been considered atheists; such there were among the Greeks, Socrates and Heracleitus, and others like them.²⁹

Justin was not only not excommunicated from the church for heresy, but was considered a saint. The same is true of Tertullian who, between the second and third centuries, was still freely considering whether the soul (of any person) is Christian by its nature.³⁰

But by the end of the fourth century such freedom was no longer allowed. By this time the issue had been settled: Human nature was so injured by original sin that personal human conversion alone was not sufficient for salvation. Let a sinner repent, let him leave his evil deeds, but the injury traced back to Adam could not be healed independently by anyone. That is why, when moving on to the next world without having washed away the curse of Adam’s sin in baptism, a person cannot be joined to the holy, pure, and absolute God. The destiny of this soul is dreadful; in the opinion of Christian teachers at the end of the fourth century, that soul will either go to hell or will wander be-

tween angels and demons, unable to find rest.³¹

6. Augustine’s teaching on original sin and its consequences for the church

What does the fatal destruction of Adam’s sin consist of; how is it revealed in human life? The one who could answer these questions most fully and reveal the nature of original sin was Augustine, the bishop of Hippo in North Africa.

Augustine was born in 354 in North Africa in the small city of Tagaste, about 220 kilometres from Carthage. Augustine’s father Patricius, a minor municipal official, was a pagan although he was favourably inclined to Christianity (he was baptised at the end of his life). Augustine’s mother Monica, a warm and zealous Christian, tried to make her son a member of the church from the time he was born. To do this it would have been logical for her to baptise her son in childhood. However, Augustine’s mother, in spite of the practice of child baptism that existed at that time in North African churches, for some reason decided to wait. Instead of baptism she had a ritual blessing done over the child, which was still a popular practice in North African churches at the time. Augustine mentioned this briefly in his *Confessions*: “I was signed with the sign of the cross, and was seasoned with His salt even from the womb of my mother.”³²

²⁹ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, ch. 46.

³⁰ Tertullian, *On the Soul, On the Witness of the Soul*.

³¹ Gregory Nazianzen, *Sermon on Holy Baptism*.

³² Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.11.

Later this tradition was forgotten by the church and supplanted by universal infant baptism. However, its sources are very clear, stemming from the time when Christ blessed the children who were brought to him (Mk 10:13-16).

Augustine also remembered a childhood sickness when he was on the border between life and death. At that time catechumens facing death were baptised without much hesitation in order to make them church members before they died.

Augustine, who had "heard about the eternal life promised to us through our Lord's sufferings while still a boy," also asked the adults to baptise him. His relatives hastened to baptise him, but when they saw that he was getting well, they delayed the baptism until he grew to be an adult:

Thou sawest, O Lord, how at one time, while yet a boy, being suddenly seized with pains in the stomach, and being at the point of death – Thou sawest, O my God, for even then Thou wast my keeper, with what emotion of mind and with what faith I solicited from the piety of my mother, and of Thy Church, the mother of us all, the baptism of Thy Christ, my Lord and my God. On which, the mother of my flesh being much troubled – since she, with a heart pure in Thy faith, travailed in birth more lovingly for my eternal salvation – would, had I not quickly recovered, have without delay provided for my initiation and washing by Thy life-giving sacraments, confessing Thee, O Lord Jesus, for the remission of sins. So my cleansing was deferred.³³

What shall we say about this? This could not have been the only case. Before us is a deep moral problem that the early church faced: How to

respond to parents asking for baptism for their dying child? It is difficult to answer this question. And even after a formal-dogmatic solution, there will always inevitably be the spiritual-moral side that may completely contradict the dogmatic conclusion. Later Augustine would dedicate a significant part of his life to answering this kind of question, to forming a Christian dogmatic.

Augustine's way to Christ was not smooth and even. When he went to Carthage to study, the energetic young man gave himself up to various earthly pleasures. For nine years he was a member of the Manichean sect (a mixture of Christianity and Zoroastrianism). Spiritual emptiness and disappointment because of the impossibility of knowing the truth were the result of his Manicheanism. He had an unhappy union with a woman for whom he burned with passion at first, and then never once mentioned by name in his books. He had a son. He departed for Rome. He attempted to establish himself in secular work and even got the post of court orator. All these life wanderings emptied the passionate African, bringing his soul to chaos and his life to destruction. Only in unlimited scepticism did Augustine find an illusion of peace.

But in the fall of 384, a meeting with the great Christian preacher, Ambrose of Milan, changed his life. Augustine ecstatically listened to the bishop's speeches, but he was not in a hurry to join the church; he was checking everything, finding out, thinking.

³³ Ibid.

There are two basic categories of people who come to Christ. The first group, like the shepherds in the gospel who heard the joyful news, are ready to leave everything and arrive at the infant Jesus' feet in a matter of minutes (Lk 2). Not understanding the whole truth, unwashed, ragged, empty-handed, but at the same time unlimitedly sincere, they came to Christ. Other people are like the magi (Mt 2). There are not many of them. They will study the stars for years, compare the signs, think about prophecies, find proofs in books, and only after they are convinced will they travel a long way to the Saviour, bringing rich gifts.

Augustine belonged to the second category. After several years of thinking he finally decided. Probably on Easter Eve in 387 AD Augustine was baptised by Ambrose. After staying in Italy for awhile, Augustine returned to Africa and immediately took up a pen to write about the thoughts he had had during these years. Soon Augustine was ordained presbyter, then bishop. But he became famous not because of his active participation in the church (for example, the Donatist schism) but because of his theological legacy. His ideas defined the development of Christian theology, and especially the theology of the Western church.

The question of original sin was one of the central themes in Augustine's theology. It took shape during the controversy against Pelagius' teaching. The British monk Pelagius taught that our current condition, both physical and spiritual, is no different from Adam's condition in paradise. Adam's only advantage is that

he did not have any "example of sin" to observe that has since so influenced the human personality. The sin of the first person did not have any influence on his offspring, except that it brought the destructive "example" into the world. That is why we cannot say anything about the inherited flaw in human nature. Death and sickness were part of human nature, but Adam, by keeping himself from sin could also have kept himself from death. People have been given absolute freedom of will, and therefore the result of death (as a result of sin) or eternal life (as a result of freedom from sin through God's Son) is the free and genuine choice of each person. In other words, reaching salvation is a human responsibility, and only a human responsibility. Without rejecting God's help in the work of salvation, Pelagius made the teaching on the freedom of the human will absolute. Christ for him was first of all an example of absolute holiness that could be attained by everyone (because God does not set unreachable goals).

The teaching on human free will was never rejected by the church. Even Augustine, who was more inclined to predestination, did not take the position that everything is foreordained. However, when the teaching on the freedom of the human will became absolute, the idea that salvation is achieved by human efforts, it evoked legitimate protest. That is why Augustine, convinced by his own personal experience of the deep moral corruption of human nature (in its present fallen condition), and having lived through his own struggle between the good and evil inclinations

of his soul, zealously battled against Pelagius' beliefs.

What was the essence of original sin that brought about such destructive results, and what was the influence of Adam's sin on the human will?

According to Augustine, God created Adam in total harmony and perfection. The first human did not have a body dominated by lust and had a morally free will. Adam's spirit dominated over the flesh without burdening it. The flesh, in its turn, was not burdened, and did not strain to free itself from the bondage of the spirit. Adam was free from fleshly desires, passions, fears, and instincts. He had total freedom of the spirit and did not depend on the desires of the flesh:

In the nature of the first person there was no struggle between spirit and flesh; the human being did not struggle against any deficiencies and weaknesses (lusts) of his nature, not because he gave way to deficiencies and weaknesses (lusts), but because there were none.³⁴

Perfection and harmony provided immortality to the being created in God's image and likeness. But there are different kinds of immortality. Augustine distinguished sharply between two possible kinds of eternity: *non possi mori*, "impossible to die," that is, immortality as a quality that belongs exclusively to God, and *possi non mori*, "possible not to die," which is what Adam had:

If we understand immortality in the sense of the positive impossibility of death, that is, that only the one who never under any circumstances could die is immortal, then it is clear that it was possible for Adam to die before the fall – he could die because he could sin.

But if we accept eternity in the possible and conditional sense, that is, that the immortal is the one who has the possibility of not dying – then, in this sense, Adam was immortal; he had the possibility of not dying because it was possible for him not to sin.³⁵

Disobedience to God turned into catastrophe for the first man. After eating the forbidden fruit, man irretrievably lost the original state of harmony. His will became weak and his flesh was injured; lust and passion entered into it, instincts that exist in an animal's nature.

Augustine believed that man felt the injury to his nature already in Eden. Before they sinned Adam and Eve were not ashamed of their nakedness, but after the Fall, "their eyes were opened and they knew they were naked." Here for the first time we see the disharmony that brought chaos. Lustful feelings, in which Augustine saw perhaps the main evidence of original sin, began to dominate Adam. Sensing his internal discord and the struggle of his desires, Adam was ashamed of the powerlessness of his highest and wisest forces before his lower instincts and desires. This injury to his nature, his "dividedness," was transmitted naturally to the

³⁴ D. Gusev, «Антропологические воззрения блаженного Августина в связи с учением пелагианства» ("The anthropological view of the blessed Augustine in connection with the teaching of Pelagius"), in *Святоотеческая*

христология и антропология: Сборник статей (The christology and anthropology of the church fathers: Collected articles) (Perm: ПО Панагия [Panagiia], 2002), 28.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

whole of humankind that came from Adam's seed:

A child is born from fleshly intercourse, and this child has original sin, for sinful injury creates sinful injury just like it, but the child's nature itself is created by God through its parents. The parents, although they made use of what was shameful and lustful in itself in a lawful way, cannot have a child without sinful injury, which can be cleansed from newborn children only by the One Who was born without sin and sinful injury.³⁶

Original sin brought about the destruction of the first humans. Destruction became the lot of Adam's descendants, inherited from their first parents. From the moment of birth, a human being bears the mark of internal disorder that Paul mentioned: "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find" (Ro 7:18). Having a weakened will since the Fall, a human being is unable to withstand the lusts in the world by means of good intentions. Moreover, the deadly desires that overwhelm the soul are not only not repulsive, but are often appealing to human nature. The reason for this is the inherited flaw in our nature that makes us powerless against sin. The awareness of this weakness is the reason for the sad hopelessness of Ecclesiastes: "For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin" (Ecc 7:20).

Let us stop for a moment and consider whether Augustine was mistaken in considering human nature so corrupt and the human will so weak?

Maybe our condition is only the result of living the wrong kind of life – the wrong training, the bad example, the sinful experience, the misunderstanding of all the consequences of transgression? Perhaps a human being is born pure, and lust and corruption are acquired in the course of life experience? During many years of disputation with Pelagius' teaching, Augustine had to answer these kinds of questions.

Pelagius' supporters believed in the purity of human nature, in its flawlessness. Evil is merely introduced into a person who was pure in the beginning. But a human being, having an absolutely free and strong will, can withstand sin. Christ merely showed the way, revealing the way of salvation. The human being does all the rest: By his own efforts he attains holiness; by his own efforts he follows the way that Christ showed.

It was not easy to overturn such statements. It was still harder, amidst a sea of human passions and sins accumulated through a lifetime, to show that the main root of all sin is original sin. In order to see it more clearly, the bishop of Hippo turned his attention to children, to infants who did not have any life experience and who had not yet learned anything evil:

Infants are innocent in their bodily weakness, but not in their souls. I myself have seen and known an infant to be jealous though it could not speak. It became pale and cast bitter looks on its foster-brother. Who doesn't know of similar examples? Mothers and nurses tell us that they appease these things by I know not what remedies; and may this be taken for innocence, that when the

³⁶ Ibid., 95.

fountain of milk is flowing fresh and abundant, one who has need should not be allowed to share it, though needing that nourishment to sustain life?³⁷

Every one of us can observe what Augustine wrote about. Twins, the closest of relatives, are jealous of each other. Many children of an innocent age, noticing that their parents hurry to hush their crying, quickly learn to have hysterics in order to get what they want. Any parent knows what happens when a little one is forbidden to touch something (such as an electric socket or a hot teapot); one tells them how painful it will be, how hot, etc. But a child who has some beginning experience of knowledge, who knows what is hot and what causes pain, nevertheless will stubbornly try what is forbidden. The child understands that pain or punishments will follow. The child senses that disobedience is not good, but all the same tries to attain the goal. Something internal inexorably motivates him to go against the ban. Some kind of blind rebellion moves him to his own understanding. This kind of unconscious desire for striving and self-assertion is called *irrational subconscious reaction* by twentieth-century psychology. Augustine saw in this irrational desire the first buds of original sin:

Who bringeth this to my remembrance? Doth not each little one, in whom I behold that which I do not remember of myself? In what, then, did I sin? Is it that I cried for the breast? If I should now so cry, – not indeed for the breast, but for the food suitable to my years, – I should be most justly laughed at and rebuked. What I then did deserved rebuke; but as I could not understand those who rebuked me, neither custom nor

reason suffered me to be rebuked. For as we grow we root out and cast from us such habits. I have not seen any one who is wise, when “purging” anything cast away the good. Or was it good, even for a time, to strive to get by crying that which, if given, would be hurtful – to be bitterly indignant that those who were free and its elders, and those to whom it owed its being, besides many others wiser than it, who would not give way to the nod of its good pleasure, were not subject unto it – to endeavour to harm, by struggling as much as it could, because those commands were not obeyed which only could have been obeyed to its hurt?³⁸

As he grows, a human being learns to control himself more and more. But all the same the human will, Augustine asserts, cannot completely overcome its storming desires. The reason for this is the grain of irrationality that is rooted in each of us. The desire to command, oppress, commit violence on the one side, and blind rebellion seeking self-assertion and unlimited space for its instincts on the other, exist in the soul of every person. Many ascetics have tried, through disciplining the flesh and the spirit, to achieve mastery of the passions. But it is very seldom that a person can reach this goal. Even subjected to the rule of reason, the germ of original sin nevertheless sleeps in each one of us. But more often original sin does not sleep, but rules over us. It rules invisibly, secretly, strengthening our deadly desires, weakening the will, and increasing the deadly imbalance between spiritual desires and fleshly impulses.

³⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

The weakening of the will is one of the main results of original sin that was noted by Augustine. If Adam's will had not been damaged, then his descendants would not have inherited a will weakened by the Fall. With the help of the human will alone, people are not able to be faithful to the Most High. To achieve salvation, the *striving of the human will* is as essential as the *outpouring of God's grace*. That is why salvation is neither human nor divine, but a *divine-human* action. (Over time, Augustine was more and more inclined to view salvation as an exclusively divine action. But Augustine did not take this idea to its ultimate conclusion. Only later did medieval theologians, especially Thomas Aquinas, bring Augustine's ideas to their logical and absurd conclusion – the teaching on predestination.)

The main feature of Augustine's teaching on original sin was the presence of the idea of *original guilt*. Adam's disobedience injured not only his nature, but also made him guilty before the Creator. Having free will, the first human sinned against God by means of his freedom, and as a result received the just punishment for his sin.

But the whole of humankind was in Adam at the fall. All people are interconnected because of their common heritage, the source of which can be traced to Adam, who is the founder of the whole human race:

In the person of Adam was concentrated the inborn power from which people are born; and there were those

in Adam who were born from him later so that, *at the time when Adam sinned, all were there in his person, and all were one person.*³⁹

The first disobedience became not only Adam's transgression, but that of all humankind. That the moral guilt in Adam's sin was not only his, but that of his descendants, Augustine explained by the *ancestral union*, the internal connection that penetrates all humankind. Consequently, being in Adam, all people, even in the womb, participated in the first human's sin and thus must share his punishment. That is why Adam's guilt is not just his personal tragedy but is charged to the whole of humankind.

In this way, every newly born child (as a juridical member of human society) inherits from his parents not only a nature marred by mortality, and not only a weakened will, but also *his own* guilt before the Most High.

That one sin that received such power in the place and condition of great happiness (in Eden), that in one person in the beginning and, as I would say, in its very root *condemned the whole human race*, this sin cannot be redeemed or washed away by anything except through the only Mediator of God and men, the Man Jesus Christ.⁴⁰

It is natural, on the grounds of understanding the first sin as *personal guilt* before God, that Augustine, himself purposely not baptised in his infancy by his mother, advocated infant baptism:

From the new born baby to the old man, nobody should be kept from baptism, just as there is no one who does

³⁹ Augustine, *De peccat merit et remiss*, III.7, quoted by D. Gusev, «Антропологические воззрения».

⁴⁰ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, ch. 48.

not die to sin at baptism, only babies die to original sin alone, while adults [die to all the sin] added to them the evil life they have led from birth.⁴¹

The innocence of infants is a myth of the ignorant. The myth is dangerous and destructive because the soul of each child as a juridical member of Adam's race is already under condemnation, even if it did not have time to commit any personal sins:

That one sin that was transmitted from generation to generation, *even if it remains the only one, is subject to condemnation*; grace justifies a person for many transgressions, when he, besides this one original sin, common to all, has committed many of his own.⁴²

Here is another detail: Every thinking Christian knows that after repentance and baptism the inclination to evil does not disappear immediately. Death for sin in the baptismal font does not mean the full restoration of the original harmony. Baptism is indeed the main stage of human transformation, but is only the initial one. Of course, a person is given special power in baptism (grace, or *charisma* in Greek), strengthening and correcting him, but the mark of sin is still on him. The law of sin, although weakened, still continues to work in the body. Augustine knew this and, looking at baptism through the lens of guilt wrote:

In the sacrament of baptism only the guilt of sensual sins is released; it is no longer charged to a person as punishment for the sin of his ancestors, and of itself ceases to be sin; but

the action of sensual sin remains in the person even after baptism.⁴³

That is why, in Augustine's opinion, children of baptised parents, although born of forgiven people, nevertheless continue to bear the mark of original sin. In this way, baptism cannot break the chain of original sin. It continues and will continue through the centuries, through the offspring born from the old Adam.

This is a brief summary of Augustine's teaching on original sin. His thoughts and ideas in time became the "flesh and blood" of Christian dogma, giving much of the direction to the theological development of the church.

Only in the twentieth century, after Augustine's position on original sin as flawed human nature plus personal guilt for Adam's transgression, dominated for sixteen centuries, did the Catholic church officially proclaim *the absence of personal guilt of the offspring* in Adam's sin:

After the apostle Paul, the church always taught that the unlimited problems of people and their inclination to sin and death cannot be explained without connection to Adam's sin and that he transmitted his sin to us, so that we all are born injured by sin, which is the "death of the soul." Because of this firm belief, the church gives baptism for the forgiveness of sins even to small children who have no personal sin..

How did Adam's sin became the sin of his offspring? The whole human race in Adam is "as one body of one person." Because of this "unity of the

⁴¹ Ibid., 43.

⁴² Ibid., 51.

⁴³ Augustine, *De peccat merit et remiss*, II.4,

quoted by D. Gusev, «Антропологические воззрения.»

human race,” all people are participants in Adam’s sin, just as all are participants in Christ’s righteousness. But the transmission of original sin is a mystery that we cannot completely understand....

Although it belongs to everybody, *none of Adam’s offspring carry original sin as personal guilt*. It is the lack of the original holiness and righteousness, but human nature is not corrupted totally, it is injured in its natural forces, subject to ignorance, suffering, and the power of death and inclined to sin (this inclination to evil is called “lust”). Baptism, giving the life of Christ’s grace, washes away original sin and returns a person to God, but the consequences for this weak, evilly-inclined nature remains and requires spiritual struggle.⁴⁴

7. Differing views on the essence of original sin in the Western and Eastern parts of the church

Augustine’s ideas were not accepted widely without argument. If the theology of the Catholic church and later the Protestant church is based on Augustine’s teaching in some degree, in the East the thoughts of the bishop of Hippo were accepted less warmly. Many Eastern (Orthodox) theologians still reject the teaching on the personal guilt of infants, seeing in original sin, like the ancient teachers, only the inherited flaw in human nature.

The reason for not accepting it, the root of dogmatic arguments between Western (Latin in nature) and

Eastern (Greek) Christianity is based, however strange it may seem, on a different reading of the same biblical texts.

The key text that speaks about original sin is considered to be a verse from Romans (5:12): “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.”

In Greek this text reads as follows:

δια τουτου ωσπερ δι ενος ανθρωπου η αμαρτια εισ τον κοσμον εισηλθεν
Therefore just as through one man sin into the world entered

και δια της αμαρτιας ο θανατος
and through sin death,.

και ουτως εισ παντας ανθρωπους ο θανῶτος διηλθεν
and so to all men death spread

εφ ω παντες ημαρτον
because (in which) all sinned

Today it is impossible to state absolutely what Paul intended to say, nor was there a single opinion in ancient times. Paul was addressing the Romans in a lively sermon, not a dogmatic tract, and here is the difficulty. If we look for the dogmatic side of his sayings, we inevitably come up with a problem: The idea of the last four words changes depending on what subject they refer to. Depending on the subject, the general dogmatic sense of the verse may change. There are three possible readings of the text:

1) The phrase εφ ω παντες ημαρτον (*in which all sinned*) relates to the words “of one person,” that is, Adam. The Vulgate translates it thus (*in quo*

⁴⁴ Катехизис Католической Церкви (*Catechism of the catholic church*), 4th ed. (Moscow: Духовная библиотека [Dukhovnaia biblioteka] 2001), 813.

omnes peccaverunt) and Augustine based his teaching on that reading. The idea is that all sinned in Adam, and therefore all inherited Adam's death and guilt.

2) The words $\epsilon\phi\ \omega$ relate to the whole sentence and must be read as "because." In this case the phrase sounds as follows: "death spread in all the people because all have sinned." Like Adam we die because we sin as individuals. By overcoming sin we can heal the flesh and reach immortality. This interpretation is characteristic of Pelagius' teaching; not only Pelagius' followers used it, but also some Eastern theologians (without making it absolute). The Russian Synodal translation here demonstrates a compromise, mixing two possible readings: *because in him*.

3) The words $\epsilon\phi\ \omega$ relate to the subject of the main sentence, "death." Then the phrase will sound differently: "in all people death (*thanatos*) was spread in which (because of which) all sinned." In this way death, which came through Adam, spread as deadly injury to all his descendants. It does not carry any guilt with it, but mortality that came through the first man became the reason it is impossible to get rid of personal sin and, as a result, there is personal death for each of his offspring.⁴⁵

It should be added that while Western (Catholic and Protestant) theologians stand firmly on the first reading of the text, Eastern (Orthodox) theologians freely use any of the three possible readings and sometimes mix

them. For example, John Chrysostom in his speeches on Romans wrote:

How did death enter and dominate the world? Through the sin of one. What does it mean, "in whom all sinned"? It means that as soon as one fell, through him all became mortal, even those who did not taste the forbidden fruit.⁴⁶

At first glance, John Chrysostom follows the thoughts of Augustine. However, if we look more closely, we will see more and bigger differences between the understandings of John Chrysostom and Augustine, the Eastern and Western parts of Church. For Chrysostom the fall of the first man is a universal catastrophe harming the whole world: "What armed death against the whole universe? Only that one person ate from the tree."⁴⁷

The human being is damaged: "Adam for his offspring, even though they did not eat from the tree, became guilty of death that was brought into the world through Adam's eating."⁴⁸ However, Chrysostom does not say anything about the "personal" guilt of each person transmitted through Adam. Human mortality itself is "personal punishment" for each of Adam's descendants. The tragedy of death is not so much in God's wrath (although this thought is present in Chrysostom's teaching) as it is in rejection, the division between human beings and the Creator who gives the gift of eternity. Chrysostom speaks of death, but at the same time he does not share Augustine's fatalism. Moreover, he even attempts

⁴⁵ John Meyendorff, «Введение в Святоотеческое Богословие» (*Introduction to patristic theology*) (Minsk: Лучи Софии [Luchi Sofii], 2001).

⁴⁶ John Chrysostom, *On the Letter to the Romans*, 10.1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.2.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.1.

to see positive features of mortality! Death puts limits on human unrighteousness and forces people to think about eternity:

I will say that we not only did not come to any harm from this death and condemnation (if we will only stay alert) but we also have benefits from becoming mortal. The first benefit is that we do not commit sin in an immortal body, and the second is that it gives us a thousand motivations to be chaste.⁴⁹

Human beings are certainly guilty before God. However, their guilt is not transmitted from Adam, but rather “earned” by each one personally. True, it is earned through the direct influence of Adam’s sin. Original sin distorted human nature to the extent that a human being *cannot* live a holy life. The desires of this world overcome man, make him a slave of sin, powerless to change anything. Chrysostom compares the life of a fallen man with an unrestrained horse charging through the barriers of God’s commands to wild freedom:

For after death (allegory – Adam’s sins) a great many passions came into it and therefore it (the body, flesh) became unable to follow the way of good. There was as yet no helping Spirit, no baptism powerful to put [desires] to death, but it ran like an unrestrained horse and sinned often because the law, although it prescribes what you must and must not do, did not give anything but words of comfort to people trying to act.⁵⁰

Thus, in Chrysostom’s opinion, the result of original sin is inherited death and the flaw that, dwelling within man, gives birth to sin. Death and sin, mutually giving birth to each other, create a circle of depravity that surrounds human beings. It is impossible to escape by one’s own strength. Only God’s Son by his death and resurrection destroys the circle, bringing people out of slavery to sin and death.

Chrysostom’s teaching on original sin was not unique. It expressed the general trend of Eastern (Greek) theologians who did not accept Augustine’s idea about “personal guilt” transmitted with original sin. A newborn baby does not carry personal guilt for Adam’s transgression, but carries all the results of Adam’s sin, which are deadly. They do not merely contain physical death but also spiritual danger, motivating people to commit personal sins and, as a result, lead to greater falling away from God. (To be fair, it should be added that Orthodox literature sometimes takes the Western point of view on Adam’s transgression.)⁵¹

Only in church sacraments and especially in baptism is this saving grace of Christ given, grace that is able to restore the fallen. This understanding is the reason the Eastern church states the necessity of infant baptism: “We baptize infants not because they are sinful,” says contemporary Orthodox theologian John Meyendorff, “but because they are mortal.”⁵²

⁴⁹ Ibid., 10,3.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 11,3.

⁵¹ Platon, Archbishop of Kostroma and Galicia, «Сокращенное изложение Догматов веры. По учению православной церкви» (*A brief synopsis of the dogmas of faith according to the orthodox church*) (Moscow: Лествиница [Lestvinitsa], 1999).

⁵² John Meyendorff, «Введение,» part 2, ch. 6.

CONCLUSION

In summary, we see that the teaching on original sin had a long and complex development. Being rooted in the Jewish understanding of *yetser ha-ra* (inclination to evil) the Christian understanding of original sin was first shown in Paul's epistles.

However, the apostle to the Gentiles was an evangelist; probably he did not intend his thoughts to be brought to dogmatic depth and development. That is why it fell to the Christian teachers of the second to fifth centuries to think through and develop the apostolic heritage. In the beginning they saw in original sin only injury to human nature. This understanding deepened more and more with time. The depth and importance of original sin was understood more and more. Sometimes, as in the case of Origen, the teaching was adapted to the requirements of existing theological systems.

By the fourth and fifth centuries the teaching on original sin divided. In the West original sin was understood both as inherited injury (to soul and body) and as the personal guilt of each member of the human race. The East maintained a more conservative position, with most not accepting the teaching on personal guilt, while deepening the understanding of the seriousness of human depravity.

The teaching on original sin has had a huge influence on the understanding of the meaning of baptism. In fact, by its development it laid the dogmatic foundation for the absolute necessity of infant baptism. By destroying the myth of the original

purity and wholeness of infants, the teaching on original sin forced the church to define the question of infant baptism once and for all. In the only council definition concerning this question (the 124th ruling of a local Carthage council) infant baptism is declared to be independent of circumcision (as a sign), and is not mentioned as a ritual of Christian initiation (a way of entering the church), or anything similar. However, it is stated unequivocally that infants are baptized for the forgiveness of sins and cleansing from that which they *received from the old birth*:

It is also defined that whoever rejects the need for the baptism of little ones and children newly born from the mother's womb, or says that although they are baptized for the forgiveness of sins they have not received anything from Adam's sin that must be washed away in the font of new life (which means that the image of baptism for the forgiveness of sins is used for them not in a true, but in a false sense), then let that one be *anathema*.

For the apostle's saying, "because sin came into the world through one person and death together with sin, and death came to all the people for all sinned in him," should not be understood differently than it has always been understood by the catholic church that has spread everywhere. Because by this rule of faith, infants too, who cannot yet commit any sins, are truly baptized for the forgiveness of sins, and through the new birth are cleansed from that which they received from the old birth.⁵³

⁵³ Правила святого поместного Собора Карфагенского. Правило 124 (Ruling of the holy local council of Carthage. Ruling 124).

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