

## B. Hope by Virtue of an Imputed Righteousness (5:12-21)

This passage is rightly regarded by many as one of the most important contexts in the entire Roman epistle. Its crucial importance can be seen in the following considerations:

- It addresses the doctrine of *imputation* in a way that is unparalleled in the New Testament. For it establishes the direct link between Adam's disobedience in the garden and the condemnation and death that have come upon all people.
- Second, it establishes and defines the *typological relation* between Adam and Christ; it effectively introduces Jesus Christ as the "last Adam," but more importantly shows the significance of Him being the typological "fulfillment" of Adam. The first Adam is associated with the man of the *flesh* and the principle of *death*; the last Adam is associated with the man of the *Spirit* and the principle of *life* (1 Corinthians 15:35-49).
- Most importantly, and overarching the previous two considerations, this passage provides a succinct sweep of the *history of redemption*. Specifically, it further supports Paul's "two-age" perspective on salvation history, the point of demarcation between the two ages being the resurrection of Christ (ref. 1:1-5, 3:21-26; also Galatians 3:1-4:7; Hebrews 11:1-40). In this context, however, Paul's vantage point is Adam's determining headship with respect to the former age compared with Christ's headship in the present age. Adam represents man in the age that was; Christ represents man in the era of redemption that is now and forevermore (thus the contextual emphasis upon the *one* in relation to the *many*).

These considerations also provide insight into the purpose for 5:12-21. Among Reformed theologians, this passage is most often the biblical focal point for proving the doctrine of the *imputation of Adam's sin*: that is, the truth that every human being bears the guilt and condemnation arising from Adam's first act of disobedience in Eden. But when it is viewed in terms of Paul's redemptive-historical perspective and its relation to the larger context, these verses are seen to have a different emphasis.

Rather than being the passage's *point of instruction*, the imputation of Adam's sin is the *assumed premise* by which Paul proves something else altogether.

- It has been seen that the central theme of chapters 5-8 is the believer's hope. That hope was first introduced in his consideration of Abraham (4:18), and was revealed to be a "hope *against hope*."
- Chapter 5, then, takes this principle of hoping in the promise of God in spite of all that argues against it, and shows that such hope is not foolish or unfounded: *it does not disappoint*. The overarching reason for this is that the believer's hope of future glory is secured by the love of God for him - the love that was expressed in the death of Christ and is evidenced by the indwelling Spirit (5:1-11).
- So Paul's intention in 5:12-21 is to further substantiate his claim that the Christian's hope does not disappoint: it cannot do so because it stands upon Christ's righteousness alone.

The entire passage stands as a cohesive thematic whole that builds upon the preceding section (“*on account of this*” - 5:12), making partitioning difficult. Nevertheless, it does follow a certain logical and structural pattern. The context begins with an opening comparison in verse 5:12, which Paul abruptly interrupted in order to address a central issue raised in his comparison, namely the relation between Adam’s sin and the spread of death to all men (5:13-14). That address, in turn, provides the basis for understanding the typological relation between Adam and Christ, which relation Paul presented in terms of a series of contrasts (5:15-19). Finally, Paul’s two-age salvation-historical perspective centered in two “Adams” raises the obvious question of the role of the Law in this two-age scheme, which he briefly considered in 5:20-21.

### 1. **Condemnation and Death in Adam** (5:12-14)

As noted, Paul transitioned into this context with an introductory point of comparison that already hints at the correlation he was soon to draw between Adam and Christ: “*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...*” (5:12). Although he broke off his statement at this point, his use of the comparative expression, “just as,” indicates that Paul’s intention was to introduce a comparison between Adam and the sin he brought into the world and the person and work of Christ.

- a. His argumentation advances through the following sequence: one man (Adam) brought sin into the world; sin brought death; death spread to all men. This immediately raises the important question as to how Adam’s sin and its necessary consequence of death could extend beyond him to all men. Adam is the one who sinned; why do all others die along with him? The simple reason given by Paul for the death of all men is that *all sinned*.

It is at this point that theologians have departed down separate paths of understanding, with each path being determined by a particular conviction concerning Adam’s sin and its relation to his descendents.

- Those who deny the imputation of Adam’s sin and its consequent guilt to those descended from him understand Paul to have been simply affirming that death has come upon all men because all men personally sin. The Bible is unequivocal that death is the “wages” of sin, and because all people commit sin, all people die.
- Others - and certainly those within the Reformed tradition - maintain that Paul was indeed referring to the imputation of Adam’s sin to his descendents. Therefore, his statement that “all sinned” is to be understood in terms of all men having somehow participated in Adam’s sin rather than Paul simply acknowledging the universality of personal sin. But if this is in fact the case, then it raises the issue of the *nature* of this participation. In other words, in what sense does every human being share in the sin and guilt of the first man? What is the nature of the representation between Adam and his descendents, and how is his sin reckoned to them?

With respect to the matter of representation, there are two possibilities:

- 1) The first is *natural representation*. This view understands men sharing in the guilt of Adam's sin in the sense that they are related to him by natural descent. Most often this is expressed by the notion of the sum total of humanity having been *germinally* resident in Adam at the time he brought sin into the world. This position is known as *realism*, and is supported by such statements as Hebrews 7:1-10.

The obvious advantage of this position is that it allows for men to share in Adam's guilt because of their own participation in his sin. The way in which this works is articulated well by John Murray: "*In brief, the position [realism] is that human nature in its unindividualized unity existed in its entirety in Adam, that, when Adam sinned, not only did he sin but also the common nature which existed in its unity in him, and that, since each person who comes into the world is an individualization of this one human nature, each person as an 'individualized portion' of that common nature is both culpable and punishable for the sin committed by that unity.*" (The Imputation of Adam's Sin)

It is undeniable that Adam is the natural head of the human race, for every human being has his origin in the first man. Further, both Paul and the Scripture as a whole trace the universality of human sinfulness to a common ancestry in Adam. The question, however, remains as to whether this *natural* representation constitutes the sole or sufficient basis upon which the guilt of Adam's sin is imputed to his progeny. Stated differently, can one rightly reach Paul's understanding of the imputation of Adam's sin simply by means of natural representation?

In the end, it is the context of Romans 5:12-21 that must provide the necessary content for establishing the nature of Adam's representation. As the result of contextual exegesis of this passage, the following arguments against the sufficiency of natural representation arise:

The first thing to note is that the Scripture does not clearly and unequivocally present natural relation as the basis for the imputation of Adam's guilt. At issue is not whether the entire human race can be conceived of as originally existing in its "unindividualized unity" in Adam; certainly in some sense it can. The issue is whether men's biological union with Adam can be shown biblically to account for the reckoning of his sin and guilt to them. At the same time, this is not to deny the doctrine of *original sin*, which acknowledges that human beings have inherited a sin nature from Adam. But the mere fact of inherited corruption does not prove that it is the basis for the reckoning of Adam's *own* sin and guilt to his descendents. This relationship must be established through careful biblical exegesis, particularly of the passage at hand.

Such exegesis reveals first of all that natural representation does violence to the analogy Paul was establishing between Adam and Christ. If the *mode* of representation between Adam and his progeny is purely natural, then it cannot stand as a component of the analogy presented in this context, for such is clearly not the *mode* of Christ's representation of His people. Moreover, if the mechanism for the imputing of Adam's sin to all people is the fact that they are physically descended from him, then what explains the imputation of Christ's righteousness to men, since they share no such relation with Him? Inasmuch as this issue of imputation, or *reckoning*, is central to Paul's argument, and is the very heart of the analogy he is drawing between Christ and Adam, it cannot be otherwise than that he intended only one mechanism for this reckoning.

Second, Paul attributes the death of all men to the *one* transgression of the *one* man Adam five times in this context (5:15-19). Is it to be supposed that these repeated, identical assertions contradict what he affirmed in verse 12, that "*death spread to all men because all sinned*"? How could Paul attribute the death of all men to individual, personal sin in 5:12, and then attribute it to the one sin of Adam in verses 15-19? There is no option but to conclude that the "sin" of the "all" in verse 12 - "*all sinned*" - is the same sin that is referred to as the "one sin of the one man" in verses 15-19.

*The implication is that, for the sake of Paul's present argument, Adam's one sin was the sin of all men, and upon the basis of that one sin death spread to all men. This interpretation is further necessitated by Paul's statement in verse 14 in which he insists that death reigned over those who "had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam." His meaning was that death is seen to reign over those who have not personally disobeyed God or transgressed His commandment as Adam did.*

In the end, the attractiveness of natural representation is its apparent solution to the problem of holding innocent parties guilty for the sin of another. It also is said to eliminate the so-called "arbitrary sovereignty" associated with God designating Adam the federal head of the race and then holding all of his descendents guilty for his sin simply because of that arbitrary assignment of headship. But though this view is appealing, the context gives no basis for deriving or supporting it, and it violates the fundamental point of analogy that is the emphasis of the entire passage.

- 2) The second, and only other, option is ***federal representation***. For if the *natural* representation of Adam is biblically insufficient to provide the basis for the imputation of the guilt of his sin to his descendents, then there must have existed an *appointed* form of representation which made that provision. Furthermore, and most importantly, in order to maintain the analogy of Romans 5:12-21 it is necessary that Adam's representation be of same nature or *kind* as Christ's representation of His people.

In other words, *Adam must be regarded as the federal, appointed head of those whom he represents in the same way that Christ is the federal head of those whom He represents*. Otherwise, Paul's analogy evaporates and his argumentation in this context is rendered incoherent.

This representation, though itself not natural, does assume the natural relation that Adam bears with his progeny. He stands literally and physically at the head of the human race, and his humanity provides the proper basis for his federal representation of the entire race. Likewise, the full humanity of Christ is the proper basis of His designated representation of His people (1 Corinthians 15:20-22, 45-49; Hebrews 2:9-17). And so, while natural representation is not the mechanism of imputation, the sharing of a common nature is essential to a *suitable* representation. Although the mere fact of their natural relation does not itself account for the *reckoning* of Adam's sin to other men, their shared humanity makes him a suitable *representative* for them. This dynamic will become more clear when it is considered in the light of Christ's representation for men and the mechanism by which His righteousness is imputed to them.

Having established federal headship as the *mode* of Adam's representation, it is worthwhile to consider briefly the *manner* in which Adam's sin and guilt were imputed to the race that he fathered. Historically, theologians have held to one of two possibilities referred to as *mediate imputation* and *immediate imputation*.

- 3) The former proceeds upon the conviction that personal guilt must somehow be tied to personal complicity in sin. As such, mediate imputation maintains that Adam's sin was imputed (reckoned) to his descendents through the *mediating*, intermediate "vehicle" of original sin. That is to say, Adam's sin brought about the corruption of his own nature, which he then passed on to his offspring and, through them, to all people. It is argued that it is that hereditary, inherent corruption - original sin - that is the *effective* basis for the imputation to all men of Adam's sin.

In this way men are preserved from being condemned as guilty of sin apart from any personal defect, failing, or offense. Adam's sin and guilt are imputed to his descendents upon the basis of their own actual sinful condition; all charges of injustice on God's part for condemning the innocent are thereby removed. Though the doctrine of mediate imputation may appear biblically correct at first consideration, it has several problems, some of which are as follows:

First of all, it appears to argue against Paul's instruction concerning the imputation of Adam's sin. Taken at face value, Romans 5:15-19 teaches that all men were rendered sinners directly by the *one* disobedience of the *one* man. Mediate imputation teaches that all men are rendered sinners by virtue of their inherited corruption through natural generation.

Second, Adam's disobedience and the corruption that resulted from it demonstrate that the depraving of his nature was a *consequence* of his sin, so that it constituted one component of the all-encompassing punishment of "death." To make the imputation of Adam's sin the consequence of the reality of a corrupt nature (mediate imputation) makes this understanding of depravity impossible. *The depraving of human nature cannot be both the consequential punishment for Adam's sin and the basis for the reckoning of that sin at the same time.* If the depraving of Adam's nature was a consequence of his sin and guilt, then the inherent depravity of his descendents must likewise testify of their present guilt before God, rather than be the basis of that guilt.

A third problem is that mediate imputation violates the analogy of Romans 5:12-21. The righteousness of Christ is imputed to those He represents directly and not through any intermediating agency or causality (ref. esp. 5:18-19). So also Adam's sin must be imputed to those he represents in the same way or else Paul's analogy is meaningless.

- 4) If the sin of Adam is not imputed indirectly to his offspring through some mediating agency, instrumentality, or causality, then it must have been imputed *immediately*. It is important to note that the idea of immediacy in relation to imputation is not expressive of *time*, but of *mediation*. Thus, when it is argued that Adam's sin was imputed immediately it is meant that it was imputed directly rather than through inherited corruption associated with a depraved nature, or through any other intermediary step.

What this means is that the sin of Adam was imputed to men and made chargeable to them *prior to the inception of their own sinful state*. This understanding is crucial, for it supports the biblical truth that the depraving of Adam's nature was a consequence of his guilt before God; his depravity was a component of the punishment of "death." As observed above, this same sequence must also apply to his descendents, so that the basis of their inherent depravity must be their antecedent guilt. Again, mediate imputation reverses this order, making guilt derive from depravity.

It is also important to note that the imputation of Adam's sin includes not merely the *liability to punishment* incurred by his guilt, but the guilt *itself*, and so also the *sin* which is the righteous basis for the guilt. Some have sought to argue that imputation involves only such liability, but this insistence raises an important question, namely how it is that a person can be righteously liable to satisfy the justice due because of the sin of another without having any share in the sin itself or the guilt it imposes. Even if there were an instance in which an innocent person satisfied the demands of justice on behalf of another, it could only occur by *mutual consent*; the obligation for the payment of the debt of a guilty party could not righteously be *imposed* upon an altogether innocent third party.

Despite this problem, another consideration used to support this sort of limitation is the biblical analogy between the imputation of Christ's righteousness to His people and the imputation of their sin to Him. Inasmuch as the imputation of sin to Christ does not imply that He actually committed those sins, or had any share in their commission, so it is contended that the imputation of Adam's sin to his posterity does not mean they actually shared in any way in the commission of his sin.

But in the end, whether or not limiting imputation in this way provides a solution to legal or logical problems is irrelevant. *What is important is whether such a limitation does justice to the biblical account.* In the present Romans passage Paul insisted that the one sin of the one man rendered all men *sinner*s, not simply liable to God for the justice due Adam's sin. It has also been seen that Paul assigns the "sin" of the "all" (5:12) to the "one sin of the one man" (5:15-19), so that it is clear that Adam's *sin* was the sin of every man.

Nonetheless, the fact that Adam's sin was imputed immediately without any intermediary agency or cause does not imply that men were *personally* and *voluntarily* involved in his sin. At the time of his disobedience no other human being except Eve was alive, so that it is absurd to assert that any of his progeny were involved in his sin in a personal way. It is precisely their absolute, personal *non-involvement* in Adam's disobedience that is foundational to Paul's argument in this context, for it serves as the premise by which he will establish the same personal non-involvement with respect to the obedience of Christ. *As Adam's sin and guilt are reckoned to men apart from their personal participation in them, so also is Christ's righteousness reckoned to men entirely apart from their own obedience and innocence.*

- b. As noted, verses 5:13ff represent Paul's interruption of the comparison he initiated in 5:12. The context of these verses makes it clear that he interrupted himself to clarify his assertion that "*death spread to all men because all sinned.*" His intention was to explain to his Roman readers how Adam's sin and the death it brought implicate the sin and death of all his progeny. In other words, how does Adam's one offense translate into the truth that "all sinned"? In the preceding section it was shown that 5:15-19 prove that he was not referring to personal sin, but the reckoning to all men of the one transgression of the one man Adam. So also 5:13-14 serve the same end, specifically by showing the relation of sin and its consequence of death to the principle of law.

In these two verses Paul's specific concern was the period of redemptive history between the Fall and the giving of the Old Covenant law at Sinai. *His reason for doing so - and this must not be overlooked - is his underlying premise that this era in the movement of salvation history was characterized by the absence of law as a governing principle.*

To characterize this period in this way challenges historic Covenant Theology, for it holds as a fundamental tenet that *law* has always been the foundation of man's existence and the basis of his interaction with God. Nevertheless, Paul viewed the era of salvation history prior to Sinai as a time of "lawlessness": it was a time in which there was no law (5:13b). Obviously this is not to say that the principle of righteousness did not exist before the Old Covenant, or that during that period God never required anything of anyone. *Once again, it is vital to understand that Paul was arguing from a salvation-historical perspective.*

- 1) Paul's point is that the giving of the Law at Sinai represented a significant development in the upward movement of redemptive history in that it brought a comprehensive definition to disobedience and established formal sanctions regarding it. In this way the Law of Moses translated *sin* into *transgression*. What had previously been the sinful living out of the unrighteousness of human self-idolatry became the violation of direct commandment (cf. Exodus 20:1-7, 23:13-33, 34:1-17; etc.).
- 2) Far from denying the presence of sin previous to the Law, the perpetuity of sin is central to his argument: "*for until the Law sin was in the world*" (cf. 1:18-23). But though sin was present from the point of Adam's offense, "*sin is not imputed when there is no law.*" Thus Paul's point: sin is not formally chargeable to a person until it is defined and characterized as transgression through the vehicle of direct commandment (ref. 4:15).
- 3) Nevertheless, *death* reigned during this period (5:14a). But if death is the *wages* of sin, and sin is not reckoned where there is no law, and there was no law during the era from Adam to Moses, how is the fact of the death of all men to be understood? Paul's response is that the universal reign of death - which is God's punishment for the violation of *commandment* - must find its point of reference in Adam's transgression in Eden.
- 4) This alone can explain how the punishment of death reigned "*over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam*" (5:14b). Paul acknowledged that sin was in the world before the Law, but such sin was not transgression of commandment. And, according to Paul, only transgression can be punished: "*sin is not imputed when there is no law.*" Thus the punishment of death implies *transgression*, which in turn implies *direct commandment* associated with the presence of law. This means that, in the absence of law - and therefore the absence of personal transgression - death's universal reign as punishment for transgression indicates the guilt of all men in connection with Adam's violation of God's commandment.

And so, with a marvelous insight Paul showed how it is that "*in Adam all die,*" thereby laying the foundation for the great gospel truth that "*in Christ all shall be made alive*" (1 Corinthians 15:21-22). Adam brought the curse of sin and death, but according to God's eternal plan, he was but "*a type of Him who was to come*" (5:14c).