

## **SIN AND HUMAN NATURE: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

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**T**he book of Genesis begins with the account of Creation and a short statement that sums up God's work: "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (Gen. 1:31).<sup>1</sup> Included in this was the creation of Adam and Eve as perfect, free, moral beings who were to rule over Creation. Subsequently, through the actions of the first couple, sin entered the human world and changed the dynamics of God's relationship with humanity. In a mysterious and inexplicable way, the entry of sin also affected the inner workings of human nature. While the Creation account found in Genesis presents human beings as the crown and climax of Creation, clothed in glory and possessing freedom of choice, the subsequent narratives of both the Old and New Testaments depict humanity as apparently unable to change their sin-affected nature and in desperate need of salvation. Although acknowledging human freedom, the Old Testament writers view humans as mired in sin in its various forms and unable to break away.<sup>2</sup> Thus David writes: "Surely I was sinful at birth" (Ps. 51:5) and "Even from birth the wicked go astray;

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2. For an excellent treatise on sin and the variety of ways in which it touches humanity, see John M. Fowler, "Sin," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2000), 244–255.

from the womb they are wayward, spreading lies” (Ps. 58:3); Isaiah laments: “your whole heart [is] afflicted” (1:5); and Jeremiah chimes in: “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or a leopard its spots? . . . The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure” (13:23; 17:9). In the midst of the ocean of human sin, God is presented as the only Savior of humanity (Isa. 43:11; 45:21).

The New Testament also presents a rather dim view of human nature, while at the same time acknowledging the possibility of genuine freedom of choice. In the book of Romans, for example, the Apostle Paul is emphatic when he describes the sinful state of all human beings (3–8); because of the sin of one man, *all* sinned, are subject to death, and are in need of repentance (5:12–6:4). In Ephesians 2:3 he refers to humanity as being “by nature deserving of wrath.” Likewise, the apostles John and James despair of the state of humanity. In 1 John 1:8, 10, John states this to his readers: “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” and again “If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.” James agrees that: “We all stumble in many ways” (3:2). Speaking of corrupted human nature, he lays the symbolic blame on the human tongue: “No human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (3:8). At the same time, like the Old Testament prophets, the New Testament writers proclaim God, Jesus Christ, as the only Savior of humanity (Acts 4:12; 1 Tim. 2:5; 4:10). Despite such a dismal assessment of human nature, much of the New Testament appears to affirm the existence of a grace-endowed human freedom of choice (e.g., Acts 17:30; Rom. 6:16).<sup>3</sup>

While the Scriptures clearly present the wretched state of humanity and its desperate need of the Savior’s grace, they do not include a systematic explanation of sin and its nature. Moreover, the inspired authors do not provide theological explanations for questions such as: What was the impact of Adam’s sin (the original human sin) on human nature? What are the inner workings of its apparent transmission from parent to child, for countless generations of humanity? Are sinful actions a result of a free moral choice of an unspoiled human will, or they are a result of

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3. There are some passages that seem to deny this assertion. See, for example, Romans 9:11 or 2 Timothy 1:9. Passages such as these are dealt with in other parts of this book.

a deep-seated perversion of human nature? When born, are humans innocent and good, or are they, by nature, evil and depraved?

Faced with various heretical teachings, post-Apostolic Christianity took upon itself the task of clarifying these issues, resulting in many, often contradictory, perspectives. Over the centuries, Christian understandings of the impact of original sin upon human nature and the level of God's grace needed to rescue sinners tended to oscillate between two extremes of a high (optimistic) and a low (pessimistic) anthropology; the former signified a minimal impact of Adamic sin upon the human nature and the existence of a relatively unspoiled human free will, and the latter represented a significant impact upon human nature, rendering it unable to choose good.

The purpose of this chapter is to briefly introduce Christian interpretations with regard to original sin and its influence upon human nature. The anthropological questions that have troubled Christian thinkers throughout the centuries also lie at the center of the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of sin, atonement, and salvation. A historical review of these developments might thus be helpful in providing a context for the current Adventist discussions on salvation.

## PRE-FIFTH CENTURY VIEWS ON ORIGINAL SIN AND HUMAN NATURE

The discussion of the nature of original sin and its impact on human nature did not begin in earnest until the early fifth century and is known today as the Pelagian controversy.<sup>4</sup> This debate was significantly influenced by a slow re-discovery of Christ's full divinity during the pre- and post-Nicaean period and a growing understanding of His role in the process of salvation. All this does not mean, however, that the pre-Nicaean Christian writers had nothing to say about sin and its impact on human nature.

References to Adam's sin and its relationship to human nature do not feature prominently in the writings of the earliest post-Apostolic Christian writers, known as the Apostolic Fathers, although most recognize the

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4. Parts of what follow have already appeared in print. See Darius and Edyta Jankiewicz, "Let the Little Children Come: Toward a Seventh-day Adventist Theology of Childhood," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 49 (2011): 213–242.

universality of sin.<sup>5</sup> This group of writers appeared to be more concerned with the moral living of believers than with developing coherent theological systems.<sup>6</sup> In the writings of such authors as Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch and in the first Christian Catechism, *Didache*, therefore, one finds scant allusions to sin, and none to its origin and influence upon human nature.<sup>7</sup> In general, however, it may be stated that because of their moralistic emphases directed at Christian believers, the Apostolic Fathers appeared to hold an optimistic view of human nature and its natural abilities. Bernhard Lohse thus commented that “the generally prevailing conviction among the early fathers is that man is equipped with a free will, and that no sin can effectively keep him from deciding for the good and from avoiding the bad.”<sup>8</sup> This understanding of sin, notes J. N. D. Kelly, decidedly weakened the atonement idea so prevalent in the New Testament.<sup>9</sup>

A more sophisticated group of theologians, known as the Apologists, emerged during the second part of the second century and preoccupied themselves with the defense of Christianity and a struggle against a number of heretical teachings of the day.<sup>10</sup> It is in their writings that one begins to witness the gradual emergence of various theories regarding sin and its impact upon humanity. In general, however, it may be stated that the Apologists appear to follow in the footsteps of the Apostolic Fathers in their optimism with regard to sin’s influence upon human nature and the ability of humanity to contribute to the process of

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5. The Apostolic Fathers is the name given to those authors writing immediately after the New Testament period and include Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Hermas, Polycarp, Papias, and the authors of the *Epistle of Barnabas*, 2 *Clement*, and *Didache*. For more on this topic, see *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (1997), s.v. “Apostolic Fathers.”

6. Bernhard Lohse, *A Short History of Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 102.

7. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (1997), s.v. “Original Sin”; Thomas A. Smith, “Original Sin,” *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (1995), 943.

8. Lohse, *A Short History of Christian Doctrine*, 104.

9. “Although satisfied that Christ died for us . . . they assign a relatively minor place to the atoning value of [Christ’s] death,” J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 165.

10. These theologians flourished throughout the Roman Empire between c. 140 and c. 250 AD.

salvation. Justin Martyr (d. ca. 165) is probably the first Christian thinker to speak of the universal problem of sin. He thus taught that while the human race found itself under the curse of sin, this curse was nothing else but a physical death. "The human race . . . from Adam had fallen under the power of death."<sup>11</sup> Although humans struggle with evil tendencies,<sup>12</sup> these were apparently the result of demonic action and the bad example of other people.<sup>13</sup> Having affirmed the existence of human free will, Justin believed that obedience to the law of God provided the universal remedy for sin.<sup>14</sup> Justin's contemporary, Theophilus of Antioch (d. ca. 181), believed that human beings were originally created neutral, although in an unfinished state, with the capacity for both mortality and immortality. Becoming immortal depended on an individual's ability to remain obedient to the commandments of God. From the time of the first sin, human beings are subjected to the weakening power of the evil spirit, which they must conquer through the exercise of their will.<sup>15</sup>

The writings Irenaeus of Lyons (d. ca. 202), which eventually became normative for early Christian theology, represent the first theological discussion on sin and its nature. Irenaeus appears to be the first of the early theologians to develop the incipient doctrine of original sin.<sup>16</sup> As did his predecessors, however, he continued to adhere to a strongly optimistic anthropology. Like Theophilus, Irenaeus believed that God created human beings with a capacity to reach perfection through obedience. They were created in God's image, he believed, but not in His likeness. Adam and Eve had a chance to attain to the rich fullness of perfection in the Garden of Eden. However, through their disobedience they lost the original opportunity<sup>17</sup> and death came into the world "as an act of mercy

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11. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 95, 88, ANF 1:247, 243; cf. Linwood Urban, *A Short History of Christian Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 137–138.

12. Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 10, ANF 1:165–166.

13. Justin Martyr, *Second Apology* 5; *First Apology* 61, ANF 1:190, 183.

14. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 88, 95, 116, 124, 134, ANF 1:243, 247, 257, 262, 267.

15. Rick Rogers, *Theophilus of Antioch: The Life and Thought of a Second-Century Bishop* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2000), 44.

16. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.23; 4.37, ANF 1:455–458, 518–521.

17. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.38, ANF 1:521.

towards Adam and Eve, especially in view of their immaturity and inexperience, and to prevent their remaining forever disobedient adolescents.”<sup>18</sup> All was not lost, however, as through their obedience and despite the presence of sin in the world, God could continue working with human beings and bring them to the state of perfection originally designed for humanity.<sup>19</sup> All they needed to do was to be obedient to God for one day and they could become incorruptible again.<sup>20</sup> Sin, in the writings of Irenaeus, is thus understood as disobedience. Sinful nature is the state of immaturity, compounded by the sin of the first couple, and which is passed on to their posterity. It was up to those who followed Irenaeus to explain the mechanics of this transmission, since he does not address the issue. The ultimate goal of the plan of salvation is the restoration of human beings, who, while continuing as creatures, may eventually share in the glory of God through their obedience.<sup>21</sup> The incarnated Christ serves as a model of the final perfection that can be achieved by the human race.<sup>22</sup> “Through His transcendent love,” Irenaeus writes, “[Christ became] what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.”<sup>23</sup>

While Irenaeus was the first to speculate on sin and its nature, it was his younger contemporary, Tertullian (ca. 160–ca. 225), who was the first Christian thinker to develop the notion of what later became designated as original sin.<sup>24</sup> Believing that the soul is transferred from human to human by the act of physical procreation,<sup>25</sup> he taught that when Adam fell, all

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18. Denis Minns, *Irenaeus* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994), 65.

19. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.39, ANF 1:522–523; cf., Minns, *Irenaeus*, 63–64.

20. Ibid., 3.20, ANF 1:450.

21. Minns, *Irenaeus*, 62–66.

22. Matthew Craig Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation: The Cosmic Christ and the Saga of Redemption* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 9.

23. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5, ANF 1:526; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.38, ANF 1:521–522; cf. R. A. Norris, *God and World in Early Christian Theology* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1965), 94; Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 172–174; Otto W. Heick, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 109.

24. J. L. Neve, *A History of Christian Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1946), 139.

25. This view is also known as Traducianism (from Latin *tradux*, which means “shoot” or “sprout”), a theory that goes back directly to Tertullian. For more on this topic, see *The*

humans fell with him. The soul was sinful, therefore, simply because it was related to its first “sprout,” Adam. Through his sin, the human race, thus, became infected not only with its result, death, but his fallen nature became part of his posterity.<sup>26</sup> Such an understanding of the human situation, however, did not prevent Tertullian from also strongly emphasizing complete freedom of will<sup>27</sup> and the ability of humans to free themselves from sin by obedience, works of self-humiliation, asceticism, and even martyrdom. Once God was satisfied with human self-humiliation, He would then infuse the soul of the offender with His re-creative grace.<sup>28</sup>

The Eastern Christian thinkers of the early third century, Clement of Alexandria and Origen, did not share Tertullian’s views that the entire human race was present in Adam when he sinned.<sup>29</sup> They agreed, however, with the universal sinfulness of humanity, which they attributed to the bad influence of parents upon their children rather than to any inherited weaknesses. Adam, they believed, was created in God’s image but not in His likeness (i.e., in a state of perfectibility). God created Adam with the ability to sin and Adam chose that path. As a result, he came under Satan’s influence and became subjected to death and corruption.<sup>30</sup> This did not extend, however, to Adam’s free will but only affected his intellect. Through the exercise of their unaided free will, humans could choose to embark on a way of salvation known as *theosis*, or divinization.<sup>31</sup> Within this context, it

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*Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (1997), s.v., “Traducianism.”

26. Neve, *History of Christian Thought*, 139.

27. In fact, as James Morgan notes, Tertullian was responsible for coining the Latin term for “free will,” *The Importance of Tertullian on the Development of Christian Dogma* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1928), 52.

28. Neve, *History of Christian Thought*, 140.

29. It must be noted that while Clement and Origen differed in the details of their anthropological views, they were, in substance, in agreement. Their views may thus be presented together.

30. Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1937), 128–129.

31. Clement, *The Stromata* 6.9, 14, ANF 2:497, 506. Clement was one of the earliest Christian theologians to use the term *theopoieo*, “being made like God.” This term is closely associated with the concept of *theosis* (usually translated as “divinization,” “deification,” “being made divine”), which became the hallmark of pre-Nicaean Eastern Christian theology. G. W. Butterworth notes that while there are slight differences among early Christian

must be noted that, like their predecessors, Clement and Origen were subordinationists<sup>32</sup> and believed that Jesus Christ provided the clearest way for humans to achieve a state of perfect unification with the divine.<sup>33</sup>

It was not until the third century, within the context of the debate over infant baptism, that Christian thinkers began to pay more careful attention to human anthropology and the way sin is passed from human to human. While the practice of infant baptism was still divisive and subject to debate in the second century, third-century thinkers appear to accept the practice as more or less universal.<sup>34</sup> The first unambiguous reference to infant baptism appeared in the third century in writings attributed to Hippolytus (d. ca. 235).<sup>35</sup> The thinkers of later decades begin to prescribe the practice universally. Cyprian (d. ca. 258), for example, was supportive of infant baptism, arguing that although children were not guilty of their own sin, they were “born after the flesh according to Adam,” and thus in need of remission for

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theologians who wrote in Greek, all (and this includes Origen) are essentially in agreement with Clement’s views on deification, “The Deification of Man in Clement of Alexandria,” *JTS* 17 (1916): 162; cf. Eric Osborn, *Clement of Alexandria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 234–235; cf. Origen, *Against Celsus* 3.28.41, ANF 4:475, 480.

32. Although early Christian subordinationism manifested itself in various forms, the common underlying theme was that the Son and the Holy Spirit are subordinate to the Father. According to various thinkers, the Son and the Holy Spirit were either created or generated at some point in eternity past, or eternally generated, as in the teaching of Clement and Origen. As I have documented elsewhere, any form of subordinationism in history has often led to aberrant soteriological views where salvation is viewed in legalistic, and even perfectionistic, terms. Subordinationism and especially the doctrine of eternal generation have strong roots in pagan Greek philosophy. See Darius Jankiewicz, “Lessons from Alexandria: The Trinity, The Soteriological Problem, and the Rise of Modern Adventist Anti-Trinitarianism,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 50 (2012): 5–24.

33. Origen, *Against Celsus* 3.28, ANF 4:475.

34. In the second century, for example, Tertullian argued for a “delay of baptism.” “Why does the innocent period of life hasten to the ‘remission of sins?’” he asked. Children, he believed, should know what they are asking for as far as salvation is concerned. “Let them know how to ‘ask’ for salvation, that you may seem (at least) to have given ‘to him that asketh,’” Tertullian, *On Baptism* 18, ANF 3:678.

35. “And they shall baptize the little children first. And if they can answer for themselves, let them answer. But if they cannot, let their parents answer or someone from their family,” Hippolytus, *The Apostolic Tradition* 21.4, ed. Gregory Dix (London: SPCK, 1968), 33.



“the sins of another.”<sup>36</sup> Cyprian’s views constitute the foundation upon which Augustine, one of the most important early church fathers, developed his views on infants and original sin, which became a watershed for the Christian understanding of the nature of human beings.<sup>37</sup>

In summary, it appears that, for the most part, the earliest post-Apostolic thinkers adhered to a rather optimistic anthropology.<sup>38</sup> They all strongly affirmed human freedom which, while weakened by sin, was strong enough, with the assistance of God’s grace, to lift the human being from the degradation of sin. According to many, “freedom and grace [stood] side by side in producing the acts of goodness; or more correctly, man’s free will begins and grace follows in a supplementary manner. . . . Faith is man’s own work.”<sup>39</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that, in Bernhard Lohse’s words, their writings were characterized by “a confirmed moralism which really amounted to nothing more than a pure righteousness by works.”<sup>40</sup>

## THE PELAGIAN CONTROVERSY

The fifth-century controversy between Pelagius (ca. 390–418 AD)<sup>41</sup> and Augustine (354–430 AD) is the most important early discussion on

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36. Cyprian, *Epistle* 58.5, ANF 5:353–354.

37. Brinley Roderick Rees, *Pelagius: Life and Letters* (Rochester: The Boydell Press, 1991), 58; cf. Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 18–19.

38. Scholars generally agree that the presence of such optimistic anthropology in these early Christian writings can be ascribed to their authors’ opposition to Gnostic fatalism. Heick, *History of Christian Thought*, vol. 1, 191; Neve, *History of Christian Thought*, 137. On the basis of my study, I would add two more reasons. First, the influence of various Greek philosophies, most of which (with the notable exception of Stoicism) espoused an optimistic view of the human nature; second, the inability of these early Christian thinkers to come to terms with the full divinity of Christ. As noted previously, all were subordinationists and unable to reconcile the relationships within the Trinity if Jesus was to be considered as fully divine and co-equal to God the Father. Only during the fourth century did the church begin to come to terms with the full, co-equal divinity of Christ and the implications of such view on human salvation. See my “Lessons from Alexandria.”

39. Heick, *History of Christian Thought*, vol. 1, 193–194.

40. Lohse, *Short History of Christian Doctrine*, 102.

41. It is assumed that Pelagius was a British monk who came to Rome around 405 AD and then moved to Carthage about 411 AD, where he met Augustine.

Christian anthropology and the first systematic effort to settle the issues relating to the original sin, its impact upon human nature, and the way it is passed on. The views of these two thinkers<sup>42</sup> constitute two opposite extremes that created the framework within which all future theological controversies relating to sin and its influence were fought.

Pelagius was a Christian ascetic who, like many of the second- and third-century Christian thinkers, held a highly optimistic view of human nature. Pelagius goes beyond the earlier Christians by asserting that the human person was essentially good and endowed with an undetermined free will. Nothing that could be classified as a sinful nature or a bent toward sinning was passed on from Adam to his children. As such, a person was endowed with the ability to choose between sinning and not sinning equally. Sin is the personal choice of a person rather than something passed on from generation to generation. People become sinners by following the bad example given by their parents and friends and by wrong educational methods. Pelagius appears to have believed that since people are born sinless, they can eventually return to the state of sinlessness if they choose to. God, in His mercy and grace, provided humanity with a set of guidelines, the Ten Commandments, which every human being is capable of obeying perfectly. They also have the example of Christ's perfect obedience, as witnessed by the New Testament. And the very fact that God expects obedience is a positive proof that humans are capable of obeying God's commandments perfectly. God, thus, did everything possible to show humans the correct path of living. The possibility of human perfection was, according to Pelagius, hinted at in Jesus's words: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). In this system of thought, the salvation of a person was, in its entirety,

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42. It must be noted at this point that very little is known about Pelagius and his life and none of his writings survive. His views, however, may be gleaned from the writings of others, most importantly, Augustine and Julian of Aecclanum (c. 386–c. 455), the latter eventually becoming known as the "architect of Pelagian dogma." For this reason, it is impossible to reconstruct the actual beliefs of Pelagius himself. When using the name "Pelagius," therefore, I actually refer to a theological position rather than to what the man Pelagius actually believed. For a detailed discussion, see Jairzinho Lopes Pereira, *Augustine of Hippo and Martin Luther on Original Sin and Justification of the Sinner* (Bristol: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 129–140.

dependent upon his or her obedience to the commandments of God.<sup>43</sup> It is for this reason that, for subsequent generations of Christians, Pelagianism became synonymous with salvation by works. This fundamental assumption that human beings are essentially good and unhindered in their choice for good eventually drew the ire of Augustine, who pushed Christian anthropology into the opposite extreme.

While, prior to his involvement with Pelagius, Augustine appeared to affirm the innocence of infants,<sup>44</sup> later in his life, after reflecting on his own infancy and in response to Pelagius, he firmly rejected any form of innate innocence of newborn human beings. Against Pelagius's argument that infants were born in the same state as Adam before the fall, thus possessing perfect free will, and that sin was the result of forming a habit of sinning as a result of "evil examples" of sinning individuals such as parents,<sup>45</sup> Augustine argued that "the sin of Adam was the sin of the whole human race."<sup>46</sup> The entire human race is, thus, *massa damnata* (a condemned crowd), with their natures completely depraved and unable to do any good or respond to God's offer of salvation; the free will is thus denied by Augustine. From this sin-cursed race God chooses some individuals for salvation. This is an act of pure grace by God, uninfluenced by any form of human behavior, and that includes choice. While it is God's desire to save all, only those who are chosen will experience salvation.<sup>47</sup> Because of his insistence on the absolute nature of God's grace, Augustine was the first early thinker to systematically develop the doctrine of divine predestination. Human beings could not choose God, he believed; therefore, God had to choose them.<sup>48</sup>

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43. Berkhof, *History of Christian Doctrines*, 132–133; Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 29–32. See also Pelagius, quoted in Augustine's *De gratia Christi*, in Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 56.

44. In his treatise *On the Freedom of the Will*, for example, and with reference to the children "slain by Herod," he suggested that, even though they had died unbaptized, these children were to be considered "martyrs" for whom God had some "good compensation," Augustine, *Free Will* 3.23.67–69, in S. Aurelii Augustine, *De libero arbitrio*, trans. Carroll Mason Sparrow (Richmond: Dietz, 1947), 141–142.

45. Neve, *History of Christian Thought*, 142.

46. *Ibid.*, 144.

47. Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), 187.

48. Augustine, "On Predestination of the Saints," in *Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*, trans.

The Augustinian version of *original sin* (a term coined by Augustine himself), thus, teaches that infants are born carrying Adam's personal moral guilt and cannot be considered "innocent."<sup>49</sup> Although they lacked the physical ability to do harm, infants were sinful from birth. Baptism was then needed to remove the guilt of sin and to cement the infant's status as belonging to the family of God (i.e., the church).<sup>50</sup> In addition to inheriting Adam's guilt, their natures are totally depraved, bent toward evil, and unable to respond to God's mercy. Augustine believed that original sin is transmitted from human to human via sexual desire and intercourse, which arouses disordered (sinful) passions in humans.<sup>51</sup> In simplified terms, it could be said that the traditional Augustinian doctrine of original sin embraces three basic consequences for Adam and his posterity: guilt, complete depravation (or total corruption), and a bent or tendency to evil.<sup>52</sup>

As stated previously, the theological interaction between Pelagianism and Augustine constitutes the two opposite ends of the theological spectrum of human anthropology.<sup>53</sup> Throughout the rest of Christian history, all thinkers found themselves somewhere in between Pelagius and Augustine, more often closer to Pelagius than they would be willing to admit.

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John A. Mourant and William J. Collinge, in *Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 86:259–60.

49. *Augustine Conf.* 1.7, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1953), 12. Augustine thus states: "The injustice of the first man is imputed to little ones when they are born so that they are subject to punishment, just as the righteousness of the second man," *Answer to Pelagians III: Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian* (New York: New City Press, 1999), 85.

50. Augustine, *On Marriage and Concupiscence* 1.22, 1.28, *NPNF* 5:273, 275; Augustine, *Reply to Faustus the Manichean* 12.17, *NPNF* 4:189; cf., Roger Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 270–274.

51. McBrien, *Catholicism*, 187; cf., Justo L. González, *Heretics for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 116–118.

52. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939), 245; Greg R. Allison, *Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 342; cf., McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 364–365.

53. For a deeper study of Augustine's response to Pelagianism, see Augustine, *Four Anti-Pelagian Writings: On Nature and Grace, On the Proceedings of Pelagius, On the Predestination of the Saints, On the Gift of Perseverance*.

## THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

The Pelagian controversy left Christian anthropology in flux. For the most part, however, medieval theologians were not willing to commit themselves to either Augustinianism or Pelagianism. The first attempt to reconcile these opposing views on sin, free will, and salvation resulted in a system that became known as Semi-Pelagianism.<sup>54</sup> On the one hand, Semi-Pelagianism denied Augustinian *monergism* (from Greek *monos*—one, *ergos*—work); this is the doctrine that God alone is responsible for all the work of salvation since humans are so damaged by sin that they cannot possibly respond to God's offer. On the other hand, they also denied Pelagian anthropology, which taught that humans are born morally perfect, just as Adam before the Fall. In contrast, Semi-Pelagian theologians postulated that while infants are born morally weak and sinful, they somehow retained a natural capacity to take the first step toward God in the process of salvation. By His grace, God joins in the process and helps the willing humans along their journey toward heaven. Salvation was thus conceived as a result of synergistic (Greek *syn*—with, *ergos*—work) co-operation between God and humans.<sup>55</sup> To simplify things, William Shedd compares the three systems in this way: "Augustinianism asserts that man is morally *dead*; Semi-Pelagianism maintains that he is morally *sick*; Pelagianism holds that he is morally *well*."<sup>56</sup> Ultimately, Semi-Pelagianism proved unviable to many Catholic theologians because too much was claimed for human beings.<sup>57</sup> Two of these theologians, Pope Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604 AD) and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274 AD), became instrumental in creating what later became the official Catholic doctrine of salvation.

Gregory the Great, one of the most important pope-theologians of the Middle Ages, proposed an alternative that was closer to Augustine than

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54. The leading proponents of Semi-Pelagianism, which had many shades during the post-Augustinian era, were fifth-century theologians John Cassian (ca. 360–435 AD) and Faustus of Riez (ca. 410–495 AD). For a detailed description of Semi-Pelagianism and its shades, see Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 278–285.

55. Marcia L. Colish, *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 116.

56. William G. T. Shedd, *A History of Christian Doctrine*, vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner and Co., 1871), 110.

57. Semi-Pelagianism was eventually condemned by the Council of Orange in 529 AD.

that offered by Semi-Pelagianism. Like Augustine, he believed that, upon their birth, infants are in the chains of original sin and cannot rescue themselves. God, thus, must initiate the process of salvation. This chain is broken by God's grace, given through the work of Christ, with baptism being an essential part of this process because it removes the guilt of condemnation. The baptized infant or adult receives an infusion of God's grace, which enables him or her to cooperate with God's grace in the process of salvation. Since it is expected that most people will continue to sin after their baptism, some form of repayment is necessary. This repayment may be completed through the works of merit which believers are expected to complete with the assistance of God.<sup>58</sup> Participating in church-prescribed rituals, such as the Lord's Supper, praying to the saints, as well as various good works of charity, were considered by Gregory as the means to atone for any post-baptismal sin, and ultimately, the reception of eternal life.<sup>59</sup> It thus appears that the only way in which Gregory's system differed from that of Semi-Pelagians was that the beginning of Christian life was ascribed to God's grace alone. With Semi-Pelagians and against Augustine, however, he affirmed the existence of the natural, albeit weakened, free will and the ability of humans to cooperate with God in the process of salvation through accumulation of merits prescribed by the church.<sup>60</sup> If this sounds somewhat confusing, it is. While Gregory's writings form the foundation upon which the Catholic doctrine of sin and salvation was built, he did not develop his views systematically and consistently, and many questions were left unanswered. The final refinement of the medieval doctrines of sin, free will, and salvation was left to the greatest of all Catholic systematicians, Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1214–1274).

Thomas endeavored to reconcile the Augustinian doctrine of original sin with a more optimistic, Aristotelian vision of humanity, which tended

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58. Gregory, *The Books of the Morals* 33.40, <http://www.lectionarycentral.com/GregoryMoralia/Book33.html> (accessed on February 1, 2018); cf., Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 174.

59. Walker, *History of the Christian Church*, 174; cf. Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, 140–141.

60. Carole Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 140–141.

to view human infants as essentially innocent but immature.<sup>61</sup> Thus, although Aquinas accepted the official Augustinian position of the fundamental sinfulness of human beings, he viewed them as having “potential for spiritual growth, with the aid of grace.”<sup>62</sup> The greatest challenge to Aquinas’s thinking was the apparent contradiction between his acceptance of an Augustinian understanding of original sin as an impediment to salvation<sup>63</sup> and his Aristotelian belief in the actual innocence of unbaptized children.<sup>64</sup> As his solution to this theological quandary, Aquinas embraced the doctrine of *limbus infantium*, or limbo,<sup>65</sup> a state between heaven and hell where unbaptized infants were consigned.<sup>66</sup> As bearers of original sin, Aquinas asserted, the souls of unbaptized infants know that they do not deserve heaven; thus they do not “grieve though being deprived of what is beyond [their] power to obtain,”<sup>67</sup> but rather “enjoy full natural happiness.”<sup>68</sup> Infant baptism, according to Aquinas, cancels out the guilt but leaves the tendencies to sinful behavior. God has to reach to humans with His grace first to awaken the natural tendencies toward goodness and to provide

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61. Christina L. H. Traina, “A Person in the Making: Thomas Aquinas on Children and Childhood,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 106; cf. Joseph James Chambliss, *Educational Theory as a Theory of Conduct: From Aristotle to Dewey* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), 34–35, and A. Scott Loveless and Thomas Holman, *The Family in the New Millennium: Strengthening the Family* (Santa Barbara: Praeger Publications, 2006), 6–9.

62. Traina, “A Person in the Making,” *The Child in Christian Thought*, 106.

63. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III, Q68. Art.2 in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1981), 4:2393–2394; cf. Aquinas, Appendix 1, Q1, Art.2 in *Summa Theologica* 5:3002.

64. Eileen Sweeney, “Vice and Sin,” in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 158–159.

65. Christopher Beiting, “Limbo in Thomas Aquinas,” *Thomist* 62 (1998): 238–239.

66. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Suppl. Q69, Art.6, in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 5:2822–2823; cf. Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1990), 45.

67. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Appendix 1, Q1, Art. 2, in *Summa Theologica*, 5:3004.

68. *The Oxford Dictionary of Christian Faith* (1997), s.v. “Limbo.” Cf. Beiting, “Limbo,” *Thomist*, 238. In recent centuries, Aquinas’s doctrine of limbo has created much theological difficulty for Roman Catholic theologians. See George J. Dyer, “Limbo: A Theological Evaluation,” *Theological Studies* 19 (1958): 32–49.

continual healing for the effects of original sin. As a result, Richard McBrien perceptively notes in his description of Aquinas's teaching, "the theological counterpart to grace is not sin, but human nature. Original Sin is presented as an 'illness' which, though it weakens and injures human nature, does not render human nature ugly or radically perverse," as is found in Augustinian theology.<sup>69</sup> With Thomas Aquinas placing the capstone on medieval anthropology, therefore, Catholicism departed from Augustinian anthropological pessimism and turned to a softer view that rendered a human being sick or wounded (in contrast to being dead) and with an innate ability to respond to God's offer of salvation.<sup>70</sup>

In the end, Catholic soteriology offered a view of salvation as a type of transaction between God and humans involving the church as the intermediary. Ecclesiology thus became enmeshed with soteriology.<sup>71</sup> Through His grace, God does His part by providing the initial grace, which awakens natural goodness in humans and assists them in the process of sanctification, accomplished mainly by participating in the rituals and works approved by the church. In return, believers are required to fulfill their part of the transaction by doing what God and the church requires of them. If, through their diligent obedience, they are able to prove to God that they are worthy of heaven, they will be saved. In this system, justification becomes enmeshed with sanctification, thus resulting in what is sometimes referred to as "ontological righteousness"<sup>72</sup> and encouragement of human merit in the process of salvation.<sup>73</sup>

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69. McBrien, *Catholicism*, 188.

70. Tatha Wiley, *Original Sin* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002), 94–100.

71. The early signs of amalgamation between soteriology and ecclesiology were already evident in the writings of second-century thinkers, such as Ignatius, Irenaeus, and Tertullian, and it found its classic expression in Cyprian's famous dictum *Quiasalus extra ecclesiam non est!* ("Outside of the Church there is no salvation"), Cyprian, *Epistle* 72.21, ANF 5:384.

72. Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 353.

73. *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, chaps. VII, X, XI in *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, ed. John H. Leith (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1982), 411–416; cf., Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 446; John W. O'Malley, *Trent: What Happened at the Council* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2013), 115.



Catholic Christianity that emerged from the Middle Ages thus possessed a fine-tuned soteriologico-ecclesiological system, which attempted to balance God's grace with human merit. This system, unfortunately, resulted in many soteriological abuses that plagued the medieval church and was eventually challenged by the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. The Reformation, however, did not significantly affect the Catholic understanding of human nature. During the Council of Trent (1545–1563), a more optimistic view of human nature prevailed and was codified in its canons. The Council thus stated that while, as a result of the Fall, human beings “immediately lost the holiness and justice in which [they] had been constituted,” “the free will was [not] lost and destroyed.”<sup>74</sup> “Trent,” therefore, writes Roger Olson, “clearly denied salvation by grace through faith alone and made justification a process involving human cooperation of the will and meritorious good works. . . . The righteousness of justification is not a sheer gift. The ability to merit and possess it may be a gift, but it is itself partly earned.”<sup>75</sup> It could thus be once again stated that too much is claimed for human beings. This understanding of humanity, sin, and salvation eventually found its way into modern official Catholic documents, such as *Catechism of the Catholic Church* issued in 1994.<sup>76</sup>

## THE MAGISTERIAL REFORMATION

In many ways, the Protestant Reformers' views on sin and human nature constitute a reversal of Catholic medieval anthropology and a return to Augustinian anthropology. What in 1517 began as a small-scale reaction against various sacramental abuses eventually evolved into a massive rebellion against any form of synergistic understanding of salvation. It seemed natural for Martin Luther (1483–1546), an Augustinian monk, to reach deeply into the writings of his ancient mentor to fight against various sacramental abuses of the medieval Catholic Church. In the process,

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74. Leith, *Creeds of the Churches*, 406, 420. The actual statement is as follows: “If anyone says that after the sin of Adam man's free will was lost and destroyed . . . let him be anathema.” cf. O'Malley, *Trent*, 115.

75. Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 447.

76. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori: Liguori Publications, 1994), 102, 483.

Luther embraced the deeply pessimistic anthropological views of Augustine and his understanding of original sin. Like Augustine, he believed that humans enter the world not merely inclined to evil, but as fallen sinners, evil from birth and infected with “irreversible egoism,” which he saw as the “all-pervading symptom of human perversion.”<sup>77</sup> While, following an experience of conversion, a believer may exhibit external signs of improvement, the internal corruption lingers in him or her even after the sin is forgiven. This is the basis for Luther’s famous dictum *simul peccator et iustus*, or “at the same time both a sinner and a righteous man.”<sup>78</sup> In tandem with his views on human nature, and in a proper Augustinian manner, Luther proclaimed the utter inability of human beings to contribute to their salvation. His views are best explained in *On the Bondage of the Will*, where in strong language he rejected Erasmus’s tepid approach to human depravation.<sup>79</sup> As a result of his anthropological views, and in agreement with Augustine, Luther embraced election and predestination as the only mode of human salvation. God’s righteousness is thus a pure gift that cannot be refused by the believer.<sup>80</sup>

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77. Gerald Strauss, *Luther’s House of Learning: Indoctrination of the Young in the German Reformation* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 33–34. Luther wrote of the human will that it is “innately and inevitably evil and corrupt,” *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*, in *Luther’s Works* 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 10.

78. Martin Luther, *Romans*, in *Luther’s Works* 25 (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 260.

79. Luther thus writes: “So you see that free choice is completely abolished by this passage [Romans 3], and nothing good or virtuous is left in man, since he is flatly stated to be unrighteous, ignorant of God, a despiser of God, turned aside from him, and worthless in the sight of God,” *On the Bondage of the Will*, in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, ed. E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1969), 300.

80. While it is not widely known, Luther was just as staunchly predestinarian as John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli. For Luther on predestination, see Martin Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1957); cf., Harry Buis, *Historic Protestantism and Predestination* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1958), 2, 48; Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 846; Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 388; Jairzinho Lopes Pereira, *Augustine of Hippo and Martin Luther on Original Sin and Justification of the Sinner*, 362, 453. Influenced by Philip Melancthon, Luther’s successor, later

In the same vein as Luther, John Calvin (1509–1564) also espoused a deeply pessimistic anthropology, spawned by the Augustinian concept of original sin. In fact, his position on the nature of humanity is often seen as even “more pessimistic than that of any of his predecessors or contemporaries.”<sup>81</sup> Adam’s sin, Calvin taught, “enkindled God’s fearful vengeance against the whole of mankind.”<sup>82</sup> Because the “heavenly image was obliterated” in Adam, all who come after him also suffer his punishment by inheriting complete corruption of their natures.<sup>83</sup> He thus wrote, “Even infants bear their condemnation with them from their mother’s womb; for, though they have not yet brought forth the fruits of their own iniquity, they have the seed enclosed within themselves. Indeed, their whole nature is a seed of sin; thus it cannot be but hateful and abominable to God.”<sup>84</sup> Calvin’s affirmation of Augustinian original sin resulted in his becoming the most visible proponent of God’s election and predestination. Since humans are totally depraved and have a proclivity only toward evil, salvation is left up to God alone, who can only save them through the decree of election that was accomplished in eternity past. God’s grace, thus, is absolute, with no human input into the event of salvation. In the mind of Calvin, thus, even a simple human “yes” in response to God’s offer of salvation would constitute “human work,” thus chipping away from the glory of God and negating the Reformation’s slogan: *Soli Deo Gloria*.<sup>85</sup> This is the very reason why the Reformers, in their desire to preserve God’s sovereignty over human beings and their salvation, chose the predestinarian solution.

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Lutheranism rejected the predestinarian doctrines as incompatible with the Gospel.

81. Barbara Pitkin, “The Heritage of the Lord: Children the Theology of Calvin,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 167.

82. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.1.4 in *The Library of Christian Classics* (LCC), vol. 20, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1:244, 245.

83. Calvin, *Institutes* 2.1.5 and 9, LCC 20, 1:246, 252–253.

84. Calvin, *Institutes* 4.15.9, LCC 21, 2:1311. Like Augustine, Calvin taught that baptism is necessary to remove the guilt and condemnation inherited by humans. See *Institutes* 4.15.10, LCC 21, 2:1311.

85. See, for example, Calvin’s commentary on Luke 18:9–14. John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 2:201–207.

The monergism of the Magisterial Reformation was clearly the strongest possible response to the Catholic synergism of the Middle Ages and a powerful reminder that salvation is only from God (*Soli Deo Gloria*). The doctrine of total depravity, thus, became a hallmark of the Protestant Magisterial Reformation, and it was left up to future theological traditions to provide a correction of the predestinarian soteriology of the Magisterial Reformers.

## THE POST REFORMATION ERA

The first serious challenge to the Augustinian/Magisterial Reformation doctrine of original sin did not occur, primarily, within a discussion of the nature of humanity, but rather transpired within the debate over baptism. The Anabaptists, the “step-children” of the Protestant Reformation,<sup>86</sup> agreed with much of the teachings of other Reformers; however, they also departed in some ways from the Magisterial Reformation’s anthropology. One issue that became of central importance to the Anabaptists was baptism, which, they believed, should be voluntary and based on an understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>87</sup> Menno Simons<sup>88</sup> (1492–1559), a former Catholic priest and a prominent Anabaptist leader, asserted that since infants “have no faith by which they can realize what God is and that he is a rewarder of both good and evil, as they plainly show by their fruits—therefore they have not the fear of God, and consequently they have nothing upon which they should be

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86. For a detailed study of Anabaptism, see Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 1964).

87. Williston Walker notes that the Anabaptists’ opposition to infant baptism stemmed from the larger issue of “their opposition to the use of force in matters of faith and their abandonment of the age-old requirement of religious uniformity,” *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), 327; cf. Menno Simons, “Christian Baptism,” in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, trans. Leonard Verduin, ed. J. C. Wenger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 257; Keith Graber Miller, “Complex Innocence, Obligatory Nurturance, and Parental Vigilance: ‘The Child’ in the Work of Menno Simons,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, 195.

88. While a variety of perspectives existed among the Anabaptists, Menno Simons is considered the quintessential theologian of the Anabaptist tradition. The nature of this paper prevents a thorough and comprehensive treatment of the Anabaptist perspective on the issues of sin and its impact upon human nature.

baptized.”<sup>89</sup> Instead of baptizing infants, “who cannot be taught, admonished, or instructed,” Simons exhorted Christian parents to nurture their children’s faith until they had reached the “years of discretion,”<sup>90</sup> when they could make the decision to be baptized.<sup>91</sup> Implicit in Simons’s rejection of infant baptism was his understanding of human nature. Although he acknowledged that humans are born with an innate tendency to sin, “inherited at birth by all descendants and children of corrupt, sinful Adam,” a tendency that “is not inaptly called original sin,”<sup>92</sup> he appears to differentiate “between a *nature* predisposed toward sin and actual *sinning*, disallowing the former to obliterate childhood innocence.”<sup>93</sup> Thus, according to Simons, although children inherit corruption from Adam, their natures are damaged by sin, they are innocent, “as long as they live in their innocence,” and “through the merits, death, and blood of Christ, in grace,” they are “partakers of the promise.”<sup>94</sup> Children who die “before coming to the years of discretion,” declares Simons, “die under the promise of God.”<sup>95</sup> The Anabaptist perspective, which affirmed the depraved and sinful nature of children and the need for God’s grace for salvation, while at the same time rejecting the deterministic understanding of salvation, impacted some Christian traditions that continue to this day.<sup>96</sup>

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89. Simons, “Christian Baptism,” in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 240. Baptizing infants, Simons asserted, gave parents a false sense of security about their children’s salvation, resulting in the possibility of children being “raised without the fear of God,” and thus living “without faith and new birth, without Spirit, Word and Christ,” “Reply to False Accusations,” in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 570.

90. Simons, “Christian Baptism,” in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 241.

91. Ibid.

92. Simons, “Reply to False Accusations,” *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 563.

93. Miller, “Complex Innocence, Obligatory Nurturance, and Parental Vigilance,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, 201, emphasis in original.

94. Simons, “Reply to Gellius,” in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 708; Menno Simmons, *A Foundation and Plain Instruction of the Saving Doctrine of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (Lancaster: Boswell and M’Cleery, 1835), 415.

95. Simons, “Christian Baptism,” in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 241; Furthermore, Simons suggests that children of both believing and unbelieving parents remain innocent through the grace of Christ. See, for example, “Christian Baptism,” in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 280 and “Reply to Gellius,” in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 707.

96. Today, the Amish, some Baptists, the Brethren, Hutterites, Mennonites, Bruderhof

Another theological challenge to the Calvinistic doctrine of salvation came from within the Reformed tradition itself. A Dutch Reformed theologian, Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609), took exception to Calvinistic determinism and its overemphasis on the sovereignty of God. Fiercely accused of departing from traditional Protestantism, Arminius considered himself a thoroughbred Protestant who strongly affirmed the traditional Protestant teachings of *Sola Scriptura* and *Sola Gratia et Fides*<sup>97</sup> but who chose not to affirm the Calvinistic teaching on election and predestination. In classical Protestant fashion, however, he did affirm the total depravity doctrine. How could he do that without also affirming the doctrine of predestination? Consider this statement from Arminius:

In his lapsed and sinful state, man is not capable, of and by himself, either to think, to will or to do that which is really good; but it is necessary for him to be regenerated and renewed in his intellect, affections or will and in all his powers, by God in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, that he may be qualified rightly to understand, esteem, consider, will and perform whatever is truly good. I ascribe to Divine grace—the commencement, the continuance, and the consummation of *all good*—and to such an extent do I carry its influence, that a man, though already regenerated, can neither conceive, will, nor do any good at all, nor resist any evil temptation, without this preventing and exciting, this following and co-operating grace.<sup>98</sup>

It is evident, from this statement, that Arminius embraced the Protestant doctrine of the total depravity of human nature, while at the same time steering clear of the trap of predestinarianism. For him *total depravity* meant that all aspects of human nature have become corrupted by the Fall of the first couple. As a result their descendants are incapable of

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Communities, and Quakers are considered successors of the Continental Anabaptists. See Holly Catterton Allen, “Theological Perspectives on Children in the Church: Anabaptist/Believer Churches,” in *Nurturing Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices*, ed. Holly Catterton Allen (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 115. Seventh-day Adventists also consider themselves within the Anabaptist theological tradition. George Knight, *Search for Identity* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000) 30, 177.

97. Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 464–465.

98. James Arminius, in *The Works of James Arminius, D.D.*, vol. 1, trans. James Nichols (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green, 1825), xxxi, emphasis in original.

initiating the process of salvation without the assistance of God's supernatural, enabling grace. It is indisputable, thus, that for Arminius the entire work of salvation, including sanctification, is ascribed to God's grace. It is that grace, known in history as "preventing," "prevenient," or the grace that "comes before," that awakens the "lifeless faculties of the soul" and attracts humanity to God.<sup>99</sup> Restored humanity now has a choice to reject the salvific grace—or accept it and lead a sanctified life. This grace, however, and in contrast to Calvinism, is resistible. Arminius was thus, in Roger Olson's words, "optimistic about grace but not about human nature!"<sup>100</sup> With the Magisterial Reformers, thus, Arminius could cry out *Soli Deo Gloria* as far as human salvation was concerned. At the same time, Arminius further adjusted the Protestant idea of original sin by rejecting the notion that the guilt of Adam's sin was imputed to humans upon their conception. Because of the atoning work of Christ, Arminius asserted, newly born humans were innocent, and if they died in infancy, their salvation was secure.<sup>101</sup> Arminius's contemporaries, particularly those influenced by Calvinism, vehemently opposed his views. This situation continues to this day. His thinking, however, ultimately influenced the beliefs of John Wesley (1703–1791) and the Methodist movement.<sup>102</sup> According to Wesley scholar Herbert B. McGonigle, it is indisputable that Wesley was a careful student of Arminius.<sup>103</sup>

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99. It is striking that Ellen G. White in her *Steps to Christ* would follow the same lines of reasoning (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1956), 18. It is to be noted that Arminius was not the first theologian to use the term *prevenient grace*. It is he, however, who appears to be the first to frame this concept within a uniquely Protestant context.

100. Roger Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 150.

101. Jacobus Arminius, *Apology or Defence* 13 and 14, in *The Works of James Arminius*, trans. and ed. James Nichols (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996), 10–14; cf. *Works of James Arminius* (Buffalo, NY: Derby, Miller and Orton, 1853), 1:479–531.

102. Late in his life, Wesley began publishing a periodical entitled *The Arminian Magazine* as a protest against the predestinarian tendencies of his Calvinistic contemporaries. In 1822 it was renamed *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*.

103. Herbert B. McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace: John Wesley's Evangelical Arminianism* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2001), 12, 71–105.

Scholars often consider Wesley's anthropology as eclectic,<sup>104</sup> neither "fully consistent" nor "complete."<sup>105</sup> Most of Wesley's interpreters agree, however, that Wesley accepted the notion of original sin,<sup>106</sup> which he seemed to have understood as an inherited "corruption of nature" that affects "all mankind," and requires "even infants [to be] born again."<sup>107</sup> Wesley saw this corruption as so pervasive that even the "holiest parents beg[a]t unholy children, and [could] not communicate their grace to them as they [did] their nature."<sup>108</sup> Thus he wrote: "Is man by nature filled with all manner of evil? Is he void of all good? Is he wholly fallen? Is his soul totally corrupted? Or, to come back to the text, is 'every imagination of the thoughts of his heart evil continually?' Allow this, and you are so far a Christian. Deny it, and you are but a Heathen still."<sup>109</sup> In his views on human nature, Wesley thus emphatically declared, he was not a "hair's-breadth" away from Calvin.<sup>110</sup> Even though Wesley appeared to be in agreement with the Reformed Tradition on the natural evil state (total depravity) of every human being, he nevertheless asserted that God's grace was also at work from the beginning of life. God extended this grace, which, like Arminius, Wesley termed "preventing grace" (or "prevenient grace"), to every human being, without waiting "for the call of man."<sup>111</sup> It was because of God's love and His

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104. See Susan Etheridge Willhauck, "John Wesley's View of Children: Foundations for Contemporary Christian Education" (PhD diss., Catholic University of America, 1992), 123.

105. See Richard P. Heitzenrater, "John Wesley and Children," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, 298, 286.

106. Willhauck, "John Wesley's View of Children," 123.

107. John Wesley, *The Doctrine of Original Sin According to Scripture, Reason and Experience In Answer to Dr. Taylor* (New York: The Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States, 1817), 340–341.

108. *Ibid.*, 340.

109. John Wesley, *Original Sin, Sermon 38.3.2*, in *Wesley's Standard Sermons*, vol. 2, ed. Edward H. Sugden (London: The Epworth Press, 1951), 223.

110. John Wesley, "To John Newton," in *John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 78.

111. John Wesley, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation" in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 3:207. Roger Olson defines *prevenient grace* as follows: "it is simply the convicting, calling, enlightening and enabling grace of God that goes before conversion and makes repentance and faith possible," *Arminian Theology*, 35.



prevenient grace that all human beings had the ability to respond to God.<sup>112</sup> Although Wesley's understanding of the nature of humanity has been interpreted in many ways,<sup>113</sup> it appears that he held a belief in original sin "in dynamic tension" with a conviction that God's grace was at work in the life of every human.<sup>114</sup>

Thus while agreeing with the Protestant belief that salvation is *sola gratia et fide*, Arminian theology and, by extension Wesleyan theology, provided a necessary correction to the Calvinistic anthropological pessimism that led the Magisterial Reformers to embrace predestinarianism. While on the one hand both Arminius and Wesley strongly aligned themselves with the Protestant principle of total depravity, they also emphasized God's love and believed in the power of God they labeled as "prevenient grace." This Holy Spirit-driven power first enables genuine human freedom; second, it leads to Christ those who would not resist its appeal to experience His justifying grace; and third, it prompts the justified believers to lead a sanctified life.<sup>115</sup> Thanks to the concept of

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112. Michael J. Scanlon, "The Christian Anthropology of John Wesley" (PhD diss., Catholic University of America, 1969), 100–101; cf. Wesley, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," in *The Works of John Wesley*, 207–209.

113. For a detailed examination of Wesley's Christian anthropology, as well as an overview of the many ways it has been interpreted by commentators, see Willhauck, "John Wesley's View of Children," 102–173.

114. Catherine Stonehouse, "Children in Wesleyan Thought," in *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research and Application*, ed. Donald Ratcliffe (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2004), 140. This same tension is inherent in Wesley's views on baptism and conversion. Although scholars disagree on Wesley's understanding of infant baptism, Wesley himself affirmed and practiced the baptizing of infants. He did not, however, view baptism as necessary for salvation. Rather, Wesley's position was that baptism was the "initiatory sacrament which [sic] enters us into covenant with God;" but being part of the covenant did not automatically secure salvation. Each individual still needed to experience conversion or new birth through justifying faith, Willhauck, "John Wesley's View of Children," 164 and John Wesley, "On Baptism," in *John Wesley*, 319. For Wesley, infant baptism was clearly equivalent to the Jewish rite of circumcision; both required a converted heart, or "inward circumcision," for salvation, Wesley, "On Baptism," *John Wesley*, 322–323. For a detailed discussion of Wesley's views on infant baptism and conversion, see Willhauck, "John Wesley's View of Children," 125–173.

115. While the term *prevenient grace* itself is not found in the New Testament, it is present there conceptually. See, for example, Romans 2:4; 1 Corinthians 15:10; Ephesians 2:4–5; John 1:9; and Titus 2:11.

prevenient grace, therefore, two otherwise seemingly mutually exclusive concepts (according to the Reformed Tradition) could be harmonized: that salvation is *Soli Deo Gloria*, with all of its aspects depending on God's grace (Heb. 12:2), and that humans have genuine freedom of choice and responsibility with regard to their salvation. The Protestant principle of total depravity can therefore be embraced without accepting predestinarianism or denying a possibility of genuine, freewill-driven sanctification.

It is an incontestable fact that, while coming from a variety of Christian denominations, early Sabbatarian Adventists were strongly influenced by Wesleyanism.<sup>116</sup> The most prominent founder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Ellen G. White, grew up as a Methodist, and to a significant extent her writings reflect the Arminian/Methodist understanding of sin's impact upon human nature and salvation. While the phrase *prevenient grace* is not found in her writings, the idea clearly permeated her thinking. She thus wrote of total depravity and God's prevenient grace:

It is impossible for us, of ourselves, to escape from the pit of sin in which we are sunken. Our hearts are evil, and we cannot change them. . . . Education, culture, the exercise of the will, human effort, all have their proper sphere, but here they are powerless. They may produce an outward correctness of behavior, but they cannot change the heart; they cannot purify the springs of life. There must be a power working from within, a new life from above before men can be changed from sin to holiness. That power is Christ. *His grace alone* can quicken the *lifeless faculties of the soul*, and attract it to God, to holiness.<sup>117</sup>

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116. George Knight, *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 33–34.

117. Ellen White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1956), 18, emphasis added. In another place White writes of total depravity and prevenient grace: "There is in [every man's] nature a bent to evil, a force which, *unaided*, he cannot resist"; "As through Christ every human being has life, so also through Him every soul receives *some ray of divine light*. Not only intellectual but spiritual power, a perception of right a desire or goodness, exists in every heart," *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Association, 1952), 29, emphasis added. The following excerpt is very specific: the exercise of free will is a gift of God: "Because of their transgression they [Adam and Eve] were sentenced to suffer death, the penalty of sin. But Christ, the propitiation for our sins, declared: 'I will stand in Adam's place. I will take upon myself the penalty of his sin, He shall have another trial. I will secure for him a probation. He shall have the privileges and opportunities of a free man, and be allowed to exercise his God-given power

Note the word “lifeless,” which clearly implies “total depravity.” On another occasion she wrote of prevenient grace: “The very first step to Christ is taken through the drawing of the Spirit of God; as man responds to this drawing, he advances toward Christ in order that he may repent.”<sup>118</sup>

Thus, Ellen White’s writings, while firmly grounded in the classical Protestant soteriology with its understanding of sin and its effect on human nature, exhibit an unmistakable affinity with the evangelical Arminianism that she appears to have assimilated through the teachings of her own Wesleyan theological tradition. In agreement with classical Protestant soteriological tradition, she could thus emphatically exclaim *Soli Deo Gloria!* for our salvation in Christ.

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of choice. I will postpone the day of his arraignment for trial. He shall be bound over to appear at the bar of God in the judgment,” White, “Christ the Propitiation for Our Sins,” *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, August 19, 1903.

118. Ellen G. White, “Justified by Faith,” in *Selected Messages*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1958), 390.

