

Augustine's View of Adam

By Kenneth Samples

Arguably the greatest of the church fathers, Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-430) is widely considered one of the most influential theologians in Christian history. He is especially recognized as having a profound impact on how Christian orthodoxy defined and formulated essential Christian doctrine. Since the crucial doctrine of original sin has presently fallen somewhat out of favor (pardon the pun) in some quarters of the Christian church, I thought it would be instructive to briefly explore some of St. Augustine's provocative thinking on Adam's catastrophic fall into sin. According to Augustine, Adam in his original state of creation was free, but he was nevertheless still dependent upon divine grace. Augustine saw human beings as utterly dependent upon God's unmerited favor at every stage of their life and being. Though Adam was created immortal, he was not impervious to death, but he had the capacity for bodily immortality. In fact, Augustine thought that if Adam had remained obedient and not sinned, he would have been confirmed in divine holiness.

Augustine's Three States of Adam

1. Adam's *original state* is characterized by the Latin phrase, "*posse non peccare et mori*" ("able not to sin and die"). That is, in Adam's original state of righteousness- he had the capacity and was responsible to avoid sin and the subsequent spiritual and physical death that resulted from it.
2. Adam's *potential state* is expressed in the Latin phrase, "*non posse peccare et mori*" ("not able to sin and die"). That is, if Adam had remained obedient to God then God would have transformed him to where he would be forever confirmed in holiness and therefore apart from sin and the resulting death that necessarily follows it. However, one should not think that Augustine was in any way implying that God was taken by surprise when Adam sinned.
3. Adam's *actual state* is reflected in the Latin phrase, "*non posse non peccare et mori*" ("not able not to sin and die"). Because of Adam's *willful* act of rebellion- he has become utterly enslaved by sin and cannot of his own will avoid its power and lethal consequence. Augustine viewed Adam's fallen state as pitiful and damnable before God.

Augustine argued that all humanity was connected to Adam in an *organic* sense and that his sin nature (including both guilt and corruption) had been transmitted to his progeny. For Augustine- the whole human race was *germinally* present in Adam and therefore actually sinned in/with him.

Augustine also argued eloquently that the only hope for fallen and enslaved humanity is the Grace of God that comes in the Life, Death, and Resurrection of the God-Man Jesus Christ.

While many Protestant Evangelical theologians view Adam as being the “federal representative/head” of all humanity (**Romans 5:12, 18-19**), a sizable segment of Evangelical theological thought nevertheless sees themselves as being “Augustinian” in their basic view of sin and in affirming the absolute *necessity* of Grace in Salvation.

The Doctrine of Original Sin is a critical Biblical teaching and Christians should reflect upon the great Divine Grace that rescues us from our enslavement to sin.

For more on an Evangelical assessment of Augustine’s views concerning Adam’s Fall, see: Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1937), 131-39; Harold O.J. Brown, *Heresies* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 200-07; Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology* (England: Blackwell, 1998), 79-85.