

INFORMAL REMARKS ON THE HISTORICITY OF ADAM

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Question: If we are to be faithful to the Smalcald Articles, Part III, must we not confess along with Luther that sin originated in the historical person of Adam? In other words, does not Luther here express the doctrinal belief that sin entered the world through one man—Adam?

Answer: These two questions, at least in the form in which they are sometimes being asked nowadays, are assumed to be one and the same question. But really the two questions are not asking the same thing. The second question asks whether “sin entered the world through one man, ‘Adam’”. The answer to that is Yes. But the first question asks whether “sin originated in the historical person of Adam.” That the Smalcald Articles do not say. What is the difference between Adam, the “one man”, and what our questioners call a “historical person”?

If all we mean by a “historical person” is an individual human being like you or me, then that will hardly do to describe Adam. “One man”? Yes, that he is. But not merely “one man” as you or I am “one man”. No, Adam is “one man” the way Christ is one man”. And how is that? He is not just one man among “the many” the way you and I are. Rather, somewhat like Christ, Adam is one man for the many. He is the one through whom the many are made what they are, sinful and mortal. (Romans :19)

That does not mean merely that Adam was chronologically the first individual in a long series of individuals. True, that is part of his story, too. After all, some sinner had to be the first one. But that hardly explains why you and I and his other descendants should have to die, much less why we should have had to become sinners in the first place, just because of another individual’s earlier disobedience—unless Adam is something different from just another individual, something of us all. Adam is that, too. He is, shall we say, our fallen human nature. He is universal man. Therefore Adam is at the same time all of us.

Yet that is no abstraction, no mere theological idea. That is as real as any “historical person,” but it is more by far that a historical person. Adam, as Paul says elsewhere, is the one “in [whom] all are dying”, (notice: the one in whom all men still are dying) as Christ is the one in whom “all shall be made alive”. (I Cor. 15:22) But it would be meaningless to talk that way about Adam if he were just a “historical person” in the distant past, over and done with. He is also, as the Lutheran Confessions say over and over, “der alte Adam,” “the old Adam”. What is that? “He is what is born in us from Adam.” (LC, Baptism, 65) Adam, in other words, is already very “old,” still surviving, still very much alive and active—“in us”. He is a being still very much present and mortally powerful.

Perhaps many of us moderns have come to think of “our old Adam” rather casually as nothing more serious than our own private means streaks or our bad personal habits. Really, he is human being itself in all its fallenness, as that weighs upon us and drags us down to death. That Adam, in which we all go on sinning and dying, can be defeated by nothing less than our dying and rising with Christ, beginning with our baptisms.

But that dimension of Adam, which the Gospel is all about, gets badly short-changed by much of the present preoccupation with Adam as a “historical person.” That preoccupation is an effective way to distract sinners from their real problem and leave them terribly vulnerable. By confining our attention to Adam as past and gone, we lose sight of him as he is still terribly and fatally we ourselves. Then our defenses are down, we forget the need of Christ, and it is Christ whom we lose—even though we might still go on believing in Adam as a “historical person.”

There are many other things which could be said in answer to the above question but which will have to wait for another time. For example, in speaking of Adam as a “historical person” wouldn’t we have to use the word “historical” in something different from a strictly literal sense? For the only “history” we know is by definition literally a history of sinfulness and death and pain and the Law. But the pre-fall Adam cannot be understood literally in any of those historical terms. If history is the history of sin and death (and it is), then Adam did not fall in history. He fell into history. Whatever “history” he lived in before the fall, a history without sin or death or even any need of God’s law and judgment, is something we fallen sinners cannot call by our own word “history,” at least not literally.

Moreover, if what is all-important is to trace original sin back to just the right “historical person,” then why doesn’t Paul trace it instead to Eve who, as he is careful to point out elsewhere, really was the one originally deceived? (I Tim. 2:14; Gen. 3:6)

Or finally, if we are going to cite Part III, I, of the Smalcald Articles, ought we not do so for the purpose for which that was written: namely, to so understand original sin as to necessitate, not Adam, but Christ Jesus? (11) It is the latter thing which the Roman Catholic opponents were violating, namely, the need of Christ, despite the fact that they had no trouble accepting Adam. Mightn’t we too run the risk of using Adam for a non-confessional purpose, for example, the way the Reformed do, to shore up the authority of Scripture? If our concern is truly the confessional concern with original sin, then we might check our current practices against something like Article XII of the Formula of Concord. (SD, 9-27) In that Article XII the confessors inveigh ever so sharply, more sharply than ever we Lutherans in America do today, against those sects which, by denying infant baptism, deny original sin. But if our Lutheran critics nowadays are so concerned for the “historicity of Adam” out of a deeper concern about original sin, why then are some of them—for example, in their evangelism crusades—so casual about their alliances with those sects who really do publicly and officially deny original sin? How serious are we really about the real confessional concern about Adam?

Once again, my intention is not to deny that there was a first sinner, “Adam”, who was every bit as much a “historical individual” as anyone of us. What I am concerned about is our current preoccupation with that one feature of Adam which Paul is emphasizing in Romans 5 and which the Smalcald Articles in turn rediscover from Romans 5, namely, that Adam is a very special kind of “one man.” The way he is “one man” is not the way a “historical individual” is. Adam is “one man” the way Christ is “one man.” He is one-for-many. That cannot be said about just any “historical individual.” But that does have to be said about Christ and about Adam, else the whole evangelical and confessional point about Adam is lost.

Ultimately what is at stake is the Gospel, but more immediately the Gospel’s whole emphasis upon original sin. Granted, those who concentrate on the historicity of Adam claim to do so out of a concern with original sin. But that is exactly the doctrinal point we cannot do justice to by fixing upon what is called Adam’s historicity. For all that says is that Adam is the first in a series of sinners. However, to say only that is to ignore what it is about that “one man” which causes all his descendants to fall with him. It ignores the real thrust of original sin, namely, that Adam is also an ongoing, present reality in whom, as Paul writes to the Corinthians, we “are dying” (present tense) still today. That is why the Lutheran Confessions too speak of “the old Adam,” which is that universal fallen human nature which we all inherit, into which we are born through no choice of our own, and from which we are helpless to extricate ourselves. It isn’t even enough to say that Adam is like the first in a series of dominoes which starts all the subsequent dominoes falling. He is those dominoes as well. That is why they likewise, you and I, share the same responsibility and guilt as he does.

“The old Adam” is Adam as he is now present. Otherwise there is no explaining why, just because that first individual fell, the rest of us should be made to fall with him, let alone why we should have to die for his falling—unless he is at the same time our own moribund humanity. Those who claim to safeguard the biblical teaching concerning original sin by safeguarding the idea of Adam as a “historical individual” are in fact jeopardizing the teaching by that one-sided accent. Is their preoccupation with Adam’s historicity really concern about original sin? Or is it rather a concern to safeguard the authority of Scripture? And if it is the latter, is that really the right way, the scriptural way, to go about it? Really not. The scriptural way to “safeguard” Scripture is so to use Adam as the origin of our sin, not just the past origin but the present origin, that there is finally no match for him—except that other “one Man”, who also is one-for-the-many, Christ Jesus.

This prompts an observation about the old practitioners of the historical-critical method and about some of their biblicist critics today, how alike they can all be. In its earlier, more destructive days that method was often distorted by an unbiblical view of history, namely, that history is a piecemeal, one-event-at-a-time succession of separate happenings. But that same view of history still seems to afflict biblicists today, when their chief historical interest in Adam is that he lived and fell and died once upon a time. Those old historical-biblical critics, on the one hand, and their biblicist opponents today,

on the other hand, are often thought to be diametric opposites when in fact they are all too often operating from the same mistaken, unbiblical premises about biblical history.

On the opposite side, the biblical side, a reference to the Confessions comes to mind. In the Large Catechism Luther narrates the story of our own “fall”, nowadays, as if that still happens the way the first sinner’s fall did, after an initial period of innocence in our lives. Actually, as Luther well knew, we don’t “fall” at all. We are born fallen. Yet notice how intent Luther is to “contemporize” us with Adam.

What a parallel tragedy it would be if we were to reduce Christ to merely a “historical individual.” True, what we are faced with in this whole christological idea of one-for-many is a mystery. So far as I know, even this dimension of Adam was relatively late in being recognized by Judaism, but at any rate it was common enough knowledge by the inter-testamental period that Paul could appeal to it when he wrote his letter to the Christians at Rome. But Paul’s purpose in doing so was christological. Paul could take for granted that his Roman readers, at least the Jews among them, did already accept the notion that one man could be for the many, that is, so far as Adam was concerned. So now Paul takes advantage of the fact and then proceeds to build upon that his further argument concerning the vicariousness of Christ: “how much more,” says he, must what is true of Adam be true about Christ.