

How Do We Know That We Are Born Sinners?

What follows is an attempt to answer the fourth part of question 1 on page 20 of the Essentials packet in greater detail. The question asks, "Why are we sinners? Is it simply because we do sinful things or is it a state we are born into?" We believe the latter is true – we are sinners because we are born into a state of sin inherited from Adam. But how do we prove that this is true?

Let's start with Romans 5:12-21.

Rom 5:12ff is clearer than it may first appear. Notice Paul's point in vv12-21. He parallels death that came through Adam with life that came through Christ in order to help us understand the basis of the justification we now enjoy. The logical point of this parallel is that something passively came to us through the actions of our representative head, death through Adam and life through Christ. To say that death came to us because we committed acts of sin is to miss the whole point of Paul's comparison, for justification certainly did not come to us because we committed acts of righteous. No, death came passively through Adam as our first federal head just as the grace of justification comes passively to us through the death of Christ (the clear point of v18, the summary verse of the section). I think Paul's point at the end of v12 is not that "death spread to all men because each of them committed acts of sin in their lifetimes." This doesn't fit the context. Instead, Paul's point is that "death spread to all men because all future humans were represented in Adam when he ate the apple." It's similar to Heb 7:9-10 which says that Levi, who wasn't yet born, paid tithes to Melchizedek through Abraham's loins. In other words, Abraham, the great-grandfather of a yet-to-be-born man named Levi, represented his entire race of descendents in this act of tithing such that it is accurate to say that the entire bloodline of Abraham tithed to Melchizedek. This concept of "representative headship" doesn't make much sense to us in our modern, individualistic culture, but it was natural and expected in Biblical times. Remember that when Achan sinned by keeping some of the spoils of Jericho, God had the leaders of Israel kill him and all his descendents for the whole family was represented through their forefather in his sin. Anyways, feel free to call me on this one because I know it can be hard to grasp. The point is we passively inherit the nature or state of sin through Adam in birth JUST AS we passively inherit the nature or state of justification through Christ in faith.

Before leaving this passage let me make one final point. Don't forget the historical events following the fall. Adam sinned and the result was that he "surely died" (Gen 2:17). Yes, this did include physical death for Adam and Eve and, indeed, for the whole human race. Yet it also included immediate separation from the presence of God in the garden of Eden for Adam and his entire race. When a child is born, he or she does not just inherit eventual physical death from Adam, he or she also inherits spiritual separation from God. Notice also that immediately after the fall, Adam's race begins inventing sin. Cain did not learn to murder as murder had never occurred before. No, when anger arose he invented the act of murder. So while sin certainly can be learned it can also flow out of humanity as a creative expression of our natural bent away from God. The point of this is to say that the flow of biblical history after the fall illustrates the reality of inherited depravity in the entire human race (excepting Christ).

Now how about Ephesians 2:1-3? Take the phrase "by nature children of wrath" - the Greek word translated "by nature" here means "condition or circumstance as determined by birth" as in Gal 2:15 (by nature they are Jews - descendents of Israel by birth) and Rom 11:21ff (again, Israelites "by nature" meaning by genetics, by birth). So, just as in Rom 5:12ff, it is an explicit affirmation of our depravity from birth.

Furthermore, there are many other passages that, though not speaking of sin inherited from Adam, do prove that we are by nature depraved - that we are born separated from God and in deep, deep trouble. Here are a few:

- Gen 8:21 - from youth up the natural intent of a human heart is toward evil.
- Jer 17:9-10 - the human heart is desperately wicked and sick. The problem is not that we sin; it's that we are naturally bent at our deepest level fully towards sin.
- 1 Cor 1:18; 2:14 - man in his natural state finds the gospel foolish and incomprehensible. Notice, it is all of humanity, Jew and Gentile alike, in their "natural" state. They are not blind because of their sin (though sin leads to further blindness - Rom 1:18ff), they are blind by nature.
- 2 Cor 4:3-4 - unbelieving mankind is under the blinding power of Satan. Again, this does not seem to be because they have sinned but something that is a natural part of the state they are in.

Finally, we have logical arguments:

- If we are not born sinners but are born innocent, able to choose between right and wrong, then why has every single human except Christ chosen to sin (Rom 3:10-18,23)? It seems that human nature is bent towards sin, and this is best explained by saying that we were born sinners. We were born spiritually dead and loving to sin.
- Few of us would doubt that even the smallest child sins. Toddlers frequently disobey parental instruction and even infants scream out in selfishness. Where does this sin come from? These children aren't yet old enough to even understand the concepts of right and wrong yet already act in sin. In fact, observation suggests that when a child is very young his natural choice will always be sin (selfishness, disobedience) unless the parents create sufficient negative consequences that train him/her otherwise. A child does not have to be trained to be selfish and disobedient, that comes naturally!

So, we have significant scriptural and experiential evidence that we are indeed born sinners and that as a result, we sin.