

All Mankind, Descending from Him ... ?

By [Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.](#)

The title above, as many readers will recognize, is from answer 16 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism (and Larger Catechism 22). It expresses a central truth of Scripture and reflects the universal confession of the church about Adam.

Why then the added question mark? Not because non-Christians widely reject this truth, as they have for a long time, but because more recently it has been increasingly called into question by scientists, biblical scholars, and others who consider themselves evangelical or even Reformed Christians. Moreover, they are persuaded that their doubts about this truth should be accepted as compatible with their Christian commitment.

Every Christian who is truly submitted to the Bible's authority needs to be alert to this recent development and clear about the consequences of these doubts and denials. No matter how well intended, they undermine the gospel and will lead to its eventual loss. If it is not true that all human beings descend from Adam, then the entire history of redemption, as taught in Scripture, unravels. The result is no redemptive *history* in any credible or coherent sense, and so the loss of *redemptive* history in any meaningful sense.

The reasons given for this recent questioning of the church's historic confession concerning the origin and descent of humanity are of two sorts: scientific and exegetical. Accumulating results in several fields—primarily paleontology, archaeology, anthropology, and, especially in the past couple of decades, genetics—allegedly make it virtually certain that all human beings have not descended from an original pair. The claim that everyone living today has the same “first parents” is deemed no longer credible.

These scientific findings, in turn, have prompted reconsideration of Scripture, principally Genesis 2–4. Science is perceived as forcing us to acknowledge that, on a literal reading of this passage, some details simply do not cohere with the view that all human beings descend from Adam and Eve. For example, often cited is the long-recognized problem of where wives for Adam's sons came from.

The rest of this article will not deal directly with these scientific claims, but rather with the biblical and theological views usually associated with them, including implications and conclusions drawn for interpreting Scripture. This focus doesn't mean to suggest that these claims can be easily dismissed or simply ignored. But

evaluating them in a scientifically responsible fashion is beyond my competence, as it is for most Christians. I highly regard those who are knowledgeable and have expertise in scientific areas like those mentioned above. And there is an urgent need, as never before, for Christians qualified in these and other fields.

The Relationship between Scripture and Science

Where I am confident is that the biblical and theological considerations sketched here briefly are mandatory for any constructive Christian interest or direct involvement in scientific inquiry into matters like the origin of humanity. Those with the doubts we are considering often plead for a cooperative effort between scientists and theologians in honestly considering the available scientific evidence in a way that also maintains requisite biblical doctrine. That is surely a laudable goal. But when I ask myself what such collaboration looks like for theologians, I'm left with the answer that I make not only my best, but also my necessary, contribution by being resolutely insistent on the comments that follow, subject of course to being corrected where I may be in error. I'm also bound to ask these scientists whether they shouldn't reconsider at least aspects of the divinely guided ("theistic") macroevolutionary model of human origins to which most, if not all, of them appear to be committed.

The view that questions whether Adam is the first human being from whom all others descend is itself questionable in its general approach to Scripture in at least two respects. Both reflect adversely on the clarity of Scripture. First, scientific findings are being given priority in the sense that they are seen as necessitating a rejection and consequent reinterpretation of what has heretofore been considered certain, as well as basic, biblical teaching. In that regard, let's not suppose that we are faced here with yet one more "Galileo moment," where Christians need to adjust their thinking and get on board with science. Plainly at issue here is not an aspect of our ever-changing understanding of the physical workings of our environment and the universe at large, but perennial and unchanging matters that are basic to who we are as human beings—what it means to be created in God's image and the kind of relationship with him that that entails.

Certainly, God's saving revelation culminating in Christ, sufficiently and authoritatively inscripturated for us, cannot be understood by itself, apart from his self-revelation in nature. Both creation, "a most beautiful book" (Belgic Confession, article 2), and Scripture are necessary for knowing and living before God and with others. But the reciprocal relationship that marks these two "books" and their study is asymmetrical. Scripture, not nature, always has priority in the sense that in it God reveals himself, as the Belgic Confession also says, "more clearly and openly," particularly on matters basic to our identity as human beings and our relationship to him.

As Calvin has memorably put it, Scripture provides the “spectacles” that enable human beings to read aright the whole of created reality, including themselves as his image-bearers, as a self-revelation of God. As a general rule, then, human scientific disciplines, in their study of general revelation, must always defer to inscripturated special revelation. The view that holds that we can no longer confess that Scripture teaches the descent of all human beings from Adam has effectively reversed this rule. Scripture is being made to yield to science.

This leads, secondly, to the observation that this view is also defective because it maintains that Scripture is unclear and less than certain about the origin and descent of humanity. To focus primarily on problems in Genesis 2–4 is myopic. Since Scripture is self-interpreting, this passage, like any other, is to be understood in light of the Bible as a whole, and any passage with difficulties, like this one, is to be interpreted in light of other passages that speak more clearly (WCF 1.9).

As a general rule, within the unfolding history of God’s special revelation consummated in Christ and recorded for the church in the completed canon of Scripture, the Old Testament is to be read in light of the New. Every passage is to be read from the vantage point of God’s speaking “by his Son” in “these last days” (Heb. 1:2). Specifically, in the overall profile of biblical revelation, it has been given to Paul, as an apostle of Christ, to speak about the origin of humanity in a way that has a clear and decisive bearing on the matters we are considering. That happens principally in two places: Romans 5:12–19 and 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, 45–49.

Adam as the “First” man, and Christ as the “Second”

The central interest of both passages is plainly the person and work of Christ. Equally plain in both passages are (1) the sweeping *historical* outlook on Christ and the salvation he has accomplished and (2) within this historical outlook and fundamental to it, a contrast with Adam. In 1 Corinthians 15:44b–49, this perspective is the most comprehensive possible, covering nothing less than the whole of human history from its beginning to its end, from the original creation to its consummation. Accordingly, in verse 45, Adam as he was by virtue of his creation and before the Fall (Adam in Genesis 2) is contrasted with Christ, “the last Adam,” as he is by virtue of his resurrection. In Romans 5 and the earlier verses in 1 Corinthians 15, the scope of the historical outlook is only slightly less comprehensive; on the one side, Adam is in view as he was after the Fall, as a sinner (Adam in Genesis 3). For Paul, redemptive history has its clear and consummate ending with Christ only as it has a definite and identifiable beginning with Adam.

In both passages, Adam and Christ are clearly in view as individual persons. But as individuals they no less clearly have a significance that is more than

individual. They are contrasted as each represents others, as each is a head in a way that is decisive for those “in him.” This union-based contrast exhibits the representative or federal principle that is at the root of the Bible’s covenant theology taught, for instance, in the Westminster standards. This teaching may be summarized like this: as Adam by his disobedience has brought sin with all its consequences into the originally good creation for himself and all those “in him,” so Christ by his obedience has brought salvation from sin and all its consequences for those “in him.”

The significance of the identifying terms in the contrast must not be missed. Christ in his saving work is “second” and “last”; Adam is “first” (1 Cor. 15:45, 47). The uniquely pivotal place of each in the unfolding of redemptive history, at its beginning and end, is such that no one else “counts.” Only Adam, in his representative role in union or solidarity with “all,” is the “type of the one who was to come” (Rom. 5:14). As Christ is the omega-point of redemptive history, so Adam is its alpha-point.

It cannot be stressed too emphatically that these passages teach that essential to Christ’s work of saving sinful human beings is his full solidarity with them, personal sin excepted, as he is “second” and “last,” and that he has, and can only have, this identity as Adam is “first.” If Adam was not the first man, who fell into sin, then the work of Christ loses its meaning. Without the “first” man, Adam, there is no place for Christ as either “second” or “last.” The integrity and coherence of redemptive history in its entirety depends on this contrast. It is simply not true, as some claim, that whether or not Adam was the first human being is a question that leaves the gospel unaffected, at least if we accept the clear teaching of these passages. Paul is elsewhere similarly clear: Christ’s resurrection, the final judgment, and the attendant call for all people everywhere to repent, all stand or fall with the fact that God has made from one man every nation of mankind (Acts 17:26–30).

Other Interpretations of Adam

How do those who deny that all human beings descend from Adam and yet wish to remain committed to the authority of Scripture as in some sense God’s word, understand the references to Adam in these passage (and others, like Luke 3:38, 1 Timothy 2:13–14, and Jude 14)? It appears that two approaches are being taken: one denies the historicity of Adam; the other affirms his historicity, but denies that he was the first human being and father of the entire human race.

On the former view, Paul, like the other New Testament writers, may well have believed that Adam was a real, historical person, but that belief is immaterial for his teaching and can be jettisoned without detriment to the gospel or faith in Christ. In our passages, “Adam” is supposedly a personification either of humanity in general or of Israel as nation for all humanity; Adam is everyone. He

serves Paul's purposes as a "teaching model," as it has been put, to highlight the universality of human sinfulness. Suffice it here to note that this view flatly contradicts the sustained emphasis in Romans 5 on Adam's sin as the one sin of the one man, *distinct from* the sinning of "many" or "all." To conclude that the historicity of Adam is irrelevant for Paul is in fact to make responsible exegesis irrelevant.

Another view affirms Adam's historicity, but denies that he is the first human being. At least some who take this view assert that Adam is "first" in the sense that at some point in human history God set him apart as a representative from among a considerable number of already existing human beings for the dealings with humanity that he initiated at that point. But this view is faced with an insuperable difficulty: Adam is not simply the "first"; he is the "first" in relation to those who "have borne [his] image" (1 Cor. 15:49). People can hardly be described as image-bearers of Adam if they either existed before him or subsequently have not descended from him. Adam is the representative of *all* who, by descending from him, are in natural union or solidarity with him, and he represents *only* them. It is not enough today for Christians simply to affirm the historicity of Adam.

This is not a minor point. Paul is clear in verse 49. Believers will bear Christ's heavenly image, the redeemed and glorified image of God, as they have borne Adam's earthly image, the original image of God subsequently defaced by sin. It is quite foreign to this passage, especially given its comprehensive outlook noted above, to suppose that some who do not bear the image of Adam will bear the glory-image of Christ. There is no hope of salvation for sinners who do not bear the image of Adam by ordinary generation. Christ cannot and does not redeem what he has not assumed, and what he has assumed is the nature of those who bear the image of Adam, and as they do so by natural descent.

The Implications of Denying Adam's Priority

By now it should be clear that questioning or denying the descent of all humanity from Adam as the first human being has far-reaching implications for the Christian faith. It radically alters the understanding of *sin*, particularly concerning the origin and nature of human depravity, with the corresponding abandonment of any meaningful notion of the *guilt* of sin. It radically alters the understanding of *salvation*, especially in eclipsing or even denying Christ's death as a substitutionary atonement that propitiates God's just and holy wrath against sin. And it radically alters the understanding of the *Savior*, by stressing his humanity, especially the exemplary aspects of his person and work, to the extent of minimizing or even denying his deity.

I don't have room here to detail these implications, so instead I commend the following more extensive treatments, among others, as particularly helpful: *Is*

Adam a “Teaching Model” in the New Testament? by J. P. Versteeg; Robert B. Strimple’s chapter, “Was Adam Historical?” in *Confident of Better Things*; and Michael Reeves’s chapter, “Adam and Eve,” in *Should Christians Embrace Evolution?* I conclude with the closing words of Versteeg’s study:

As the first historical man and head of humanity, Adam is not mentioned merely in passing in the New Testament. The redemptive-historical correlation between Adam and Christ determines the framework in which—particularly for Paul—the redemptive work of Christ has its place. That work of redemption can no longer be confessed according to the meaning of Scripture, if it is divorced from the framework in which it stands there. Whoever divorces the work of redemption from the framework in which it stands in Scripture no longer allows the Word to function as the norm that determines everything. There has been no temptation down through the centuries that theology has been more exposed to than this temptation. There is no danger that theology has more to fear than this danger.

The author, an OP minister, is a professor emeritus at Westminster Theological Seminary. He quotes the ESV. New Horizons, March 2012.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [RPM Forum](#).

Subscribe to RPM

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [RPM](#), please select this [link](#).